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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

60s

# A QUESTION OF MARRIAGE



Richard Lindzey

# **A QUESTION OF MARRIAGE**

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Beth was broken-hearted when Danny Harding let her down, and she vowed that it would be a long time before she fell in love again. It seemed particularly unfair then, that when she decided to take a job as far away from the scene of her romance as possible - in the middle of Arizona - it was only to learn that Danny was a near neighbour, together with his new fiancée Cindy. But happily, and more unexpectedly. Beth fell in love again, this time with Danny's cousin Dean, a very different kind of man, and one who really loved her. Or did he? Surely fate wouldn't be so cruel as to strike Beth in the same way again?

## CHAPTER ONE

COMB in hand, Beth Morrison paused by the dressing-table and wished she did not have to leave the safety and quiet of her bedroom for the noisy bonhomie of the living-room on the other side of the door. Not that her cousin Lois had forced her into agreeing to be present for the party she was giving to celebrate her new job with one of New York's most famous interior decorators; rather had conscience made Beth's acceptance inevitable; one could not share a flat with someone and then refuse to participate in toasting their success. No, going to Lois's party tonight was the very least she could do to show her appreciation for the magnificent way in which her cousin had come to the rescue at a time when life had been at its bleakest and most horrifying.

Beth shivered. Even now she could hardly bear to think of that tragic moment, barely six months ago, when she had learned of the car crash which had robbed her of both mother and father. The only good thing - during those weeks of heartache - was that her cousin Lois, in England for a holiday when the tragedy had occurred, had immediately taken care of her.

'Sometimes I feel sixty years older than you, not just six,' Lois had commented one evening when she had been helping Beth to pack, prior to their leaving for the United States. 'Beats me how you've managed to remain so innocent!'

'You make it sound like a sin.'

'It almost is.' A faint smile touched Lois's gamin face, with its pointed features and dark, short cut hair. 'Didn't Uncle Jack think you should have trained for a job so that you could earn your living?'

'I was just starting to learn shorthand and typing,' Beth said. 'I won a place at university, but it would have meant leaving home and only

getting back for the occasional weekend.' She turned away and picked up another pile of books, forcing herself to continue speaking. 'I suppose you'll say *that* was very old-fashioned of me - not wanting to leave my parents - but Mother was only given a few years ... the doctors thought it would be three at the most.'

'I knew that.' Lois's voice was deep with sympathy. 'I would have done the same in your circumstances. All I *was* saying is that it beats me how you've managed to stay so innocent!'

'I know babies aren't brought by storks,' Beth answered.

'That's something, at least!'

'Will I really be such a problem to you?' Beth had flung down the things she was holding and leaned towards her cousin. 'If you'd rather call the whole thing off, I can easily stay here. I've got Dad's insurance and—'

'Don't be crazy! Your parents looked after *me* when mine died. The very least I can do is—'

'They looked after you because they *wanted* to,' Beth interrupted. 'Not because they ever expected you to repay them in any way.'

'I know that. Your parents were the kindest, sweetest...'

Lois put her arms around Beth's shoulders. 'I *want* you to come and live with me. We're all the family that's left, and families should stick together.'

Now, six months later, Beth realized how wonderfully Lois had carried out this statement, insisting she finish her secretarial course, even though it had meant going to a far more expensive one in New

York, and then refusing to let her take any job the college had found for her.

'I know their kind of jobs,' Lois had said, shaking her head. 'Attorneys, accountants and doctors. All over fifty, and all wanting a devoted and dedicated secretary.'

'But that's exactly what I've been trained for,' Beth had protested; 'I've got excellent speeds and—'

'Under thirty-five,' Lois intervened.

Sixty and a hundred and twenty,' came the indignant response.

'Not your speeds,' Lois had laughed. 'The age of your boss! You've got to find one under thirty-five.'

'I'm looking for a job, not a husband.'

'You're looking for a job *and* a husband. And the best way of finding one is to find a young boss. In that way you will at least stand a sporting chance of being in an office with other young people. If you take one of the jobs the college finds for you, you'll end up a spinster.'

'Look who's talking,' Beth had retorted. 'How many nights have *you* worked late this week? *And* your boss is married!'

The unexpected pallor of Lois's face told Beth she had committed a *faux pas*; also telling her why her cousin - so popular with the opposite sex - was still unmarried and free of attachment. Except that Lois was not free. Unmarried, yes, but certainly not unattached.

'I'm sorry,' Beth stammered. 'I didn't mean ... I had no idea ...'

'No one has,' Lois said dryly. 'Least of all my boss.'

'He must be blind!'

'Or else I'm a very good actress.' Lois had moved over to the window, parting the curtains to show the tall glass and concrete buildings that made the skyline of New York at once the most beautiful and terrifying sight on earth. 'As a matter of fact I'm thinking of changing my job. There's one going with Hal Detringer. He's an interior decorator. Very fancy and *very* high-powered. The pay's terrific and about a hundred other girls have also applied.'

'I hope you get it,' Beth had said earnestly.

'So do I. I've known for the last year that I had to do something to get away from.... Anyway, if I do get the job I'll give a party to celebrate my freedom. And I'll even invite Bill Saunders. The best boss and the blindest man on earth!' Lois's voice was bright, but it was belied by the over- brightness in her dark eyes. 'I've got to get that job,' she muttered. 'I've got to.'

And get it she did, at the same time keeping her promise to give a celebration party. The party which was now beginning and to which Beth so desperately did not want to go.

The door opened and Beth, still by the dressing-table, swung round to see her cousin, dramatic in black velvet trousers and silver lame top.

'Aren't you ready yet? The party will be over if you don't get a move on.'

'Sorry, Lois. I was - I was just thinking.'

'Well, stop thinking and start doing!' Not giving Beth any further chance of arguing, Lois caught her by the hand and pulled her into the living-room. 'Hey, everyone,' she called, 'this is my cousin from England. How about making her welcome?'

There was a chorus of assent, and Beth found herself surrounded by friendly smiling faces, while a host of questions was hurtled at her. How long had she been in America? Was she living here permanently? Did she like it and why was she hiding?

With a laughing murmur of protest Beth avoided as many questions as she could, only saying that she had not been in hiding - merely busy learning how to be a secretary.

'Are you in a job yet?' The question came from a tall, thin girl with dyed red hair.

'No. I've just started to look.'

'There's one going in my office. The pay's good and so are the hours.'

Before Beth could make any comment, the girl drifted away, and Beth surreptitiously edged towards her bedroom. She had nearly reached its safety when she heard the insistent ringing of the door bell. She paused, hoping someone would answer it, but the music was too loud, the dancing too frenetic, and with a sigh she moved across the hallway and opened the door.

A tall, lanky young man was leaning negligently against the wall. He was so tanned that for an instant she thought he must be foreign, but as he moved his head she glimpsed the startling blue of his narrow eyes and saw that his hair which she had thought prematurely grey - was in fact the palest ash-blond.

'You're not Lois Morrison,' he said, his voice so languid and drawling that at first it was hard to understand what he was saying.

'No. I mean, that's right. I'm not Lois. I'm her cousin.' Beth opened the door wider. 'I suppose you've come to the party?'



'Yes.' He stepped into the hall. 'Is Janice here yet?'

'I'm afraid I don't know who Janice is. This is the first time I've met any of Lois's friends.'

'That goes for me too. Janice is my date for tonight and she told me to come on here.'

'Then you'd better see if you can find her.' Aware of the blue eyes staring intently into hers, she coloured faintly. 'Do go into the living-room.'

'Where are you off to? You look all poised for flight!'

'I'm going to my room.' She hesitated. 'I'm not used to parties.'

'You should get used to them. You could be an asset!'

'Never. I'm far too shy.' She backed away from him. 'Please go in. I'm sure you'll find your friend.'

Quickly she scurried past him, and though she did not look back she was certain he was staring after her.

Not until she was curled up on the bed, making a pretence of reading a book, did she chide herself for giving way to nerves. How cross Lois would be when she discovered it, and how justified in being so! Unless she made an effort to overcome her shyness she would find life passing her by.

With an exclamation of annoyance she went over to the dressing-table again. She could not spend the rest of the evening in hiding. She owed it to her cousin, if not to herself, to try and come to terms with her own generation.

She ran a comb through her hair again, tidying the few blonde tendrils that had escaped from the carefully bound chignon at the nape of her neck. It was a style which Lois had begged her to change, but Beth had adamantly refused. Her hair was too soft and fine to be worn loose; keeping it confined by pins was the simplest and cheapest solution. It might make her look like a schoolteacher, but it was preferable to looking like a 'hippy'. The very thought made her smile, and as always when she saw herself animated, she was struck by the difference it made to her appearance, banishing as it did the austere impression given by a delicate cut mouth and finely chiselled nose. Even her eyes looked different when she smiled; their upward slant emphasized, so that she appeared more provocative, their grey-green depths more marked, giving her a sensuality belied by the over-slender figure, whose fragile bones and translucent skin made it difficult to believe that it housed a spirit at once fierce with pride and stiff with independence.

And it was time this independence asserted itself, she decided, and crossed to the door again.

But even as she re-entered the living-room her courage nearly deserted her. The room seemed more crowded than ever, with everyone absorbed in themselves and taking no notice of the pale blonde girl watching them with large, frightened eyes. The man to whom she had opened the door earlier was in the midst of a laughing group of girls, all glamorous and all vying for his attention. He seemed to be loving it too, Beth decided with some amusement, and watched fascinated as he swung from one to the other, bestowing here a smile and there a touch, behaving, she thought, like a bee surrounded by a plethora of beautiful scented flowers.

'What's amusing you?' a soft voice asked, and Beth turned to see a man of medium height looking at her.

'Nothing,' she said quickly. 'Just the - just the general way in which everyone seems to be flirting with everyone else!'

'You're not,' he said. 'That's what made me notice you.'

'Neither are you,' she half smiled. 'Or is that what you're trying to do now?'

The colour came so suddenly into his face that she was astonished. She had never believed it possible to embarrass an American male. She looked at him more closely. Though obviously a friend of Lois - otherwise he would not be here - he seemed different from the other men, not only older but also more reserved.

'You're Lois's cousin,' he said suddenly. 'I should have guessed. You're just the way she described.'

'I'm afraid I don't know *you*.'

'No reason why you should. I'm Bill Saunders, Lois's ex- boss.'

'You!' Beth gasped.

'The very ogre,' he smiled, misinterpreting her exclamation. 'I must have been a terrible boss, I guess, because no extra money will induce her to change her mind and stay on with me.'

'I don't think she's leaving because of money,' Beth said before she could stop herself.

'Then why is she going?' Though the words were casual, the look on his face was serious.

'Why do most people change their jobs?' Beth replied carefully. 'Because they want a change of scene, of atmosphere ... things like that.'

'You mean Lois was bored? Then why didn't she say so? I could have given her different work - less responsibility, shorter hours even.'

'You sound an ideal boss!' Beth smiled. 'You shouldn't have trouble getting someone else.'

'No one can take Lois's place,' he said soberly. 'She means a great deal to me.'

He fell silent, and following his gaze Beth saw it was resting on her cousin who was in animated conversation with two men.

'She's so popular and beautiful,' Bill Saunders went on, 'that it beats me why she even bothers with a job. She could have been married a hundred times over.'

'I suppose you told her so?' Beth asked dryly.

'Many times.'

'Perhaps she thought you were trying to get rid of her?'

'She couldn't have thought that!'

He looked so concerned that Beth hastily tried to dispel the idea. 'I'm sure she didn't. I know she was always very happy with you.'

'I'll miss her,' he said by way of answer. 'I hadn't realized how much until I learned she was going.' He lowered his head, his eyes almost level with Beth's own. 'Why don't you come and take her place? Lois said you were looking for a job.'

'Me ... take Lois's place? You must be joking! I've only just qualified.'

'I'm sure you'll be more than adequate. Come on, Miss Morrison, say yes, I've been dreading the thought of someone new around the office, and if you'll agree to come—'

'I'll still be new,' Beth warned.

'But you're Lois's cousin - that makes it different!'

Beth hesitated. Though one part of her wanted to accept the job immediately, the other part warned her that it might be better to refuse. After all, Lois was leaving this man in order to put him out of her mind. If she herself started to work for him she might be undoing all that her cousin was hoping to achieve.

'Well?' he said again. 'Will you accept?'

'May I think about it? I'll let you know in a few days.'

He gave a slight smile and moved away, realizing that to try and make her change her mind might have the opposite effect of what he wanted.

Beth watched him broodingly, surprised that Lois should have fallen in love with him, yet able to understand why she had done so. Not handsome in the obvious sense of the word, he nevertheless had an aura of stolidity and strength which would make him especially attractive to someone as volatile as her cousin. If one added to this the man's intelligence, it was easy to see why admiration had given way to love.

Could she herself fall for a man like that? she wondered. Even as she asked the question her eyes rested on the tall thin man she had met earlier, and she looked away hastily. No, Bill Saunders was too gentle a personality for her. She needed someone more dominant, more ruthless.

'I must be crazy!' she thought wryly. A ruthless man was the last thing in the world she wanted. Annoyed by the inconsequence of her thoughts, she went over to the impromptu bar and poured herself a Dubonnet.

'Hey there,' a man's voice said. 'That's not blackcurrant juice you're pouring! That's pretty potent stuff.'

Hastily setting down the bottle, Beth looked up to see the tall thin man of her earlier meeting. 'I don't normally drink,' she confessed. 'And this seemed the most innocuous.'

'How about milk?'

She reddened. 'Did you find your date?'

'Yes. But she'd found someone else in the meantime. So now "I'm free!"

'There are lots of other girls here.'

'I know. I've just found the one I want.'

Beth picked up her glass. Her hands were shaking and some of the liquid spilled. She set the glass down again and searched for a handkerchief.

'Looks like I've embarrassed you,' the young man said.

'I'm not used to flirting.'

The words, so bluntly outspoken, took him by surprise. Blue eyes searched her face and, satisfied by what they saw, became unexpectedly gentle.

'You're just a kid - and foreign too!'

'I'm English.'

'No kidding. Your accent would never have given you away!'

She smiled. 'I don't suppose I'll ever lose it completely.'

'I hope not. It's beautiful.'

'Now you're flirting again.'

'Is that so awful?'

'Not awful. Just meaningless.'

He digested this remark. 'Does *everything* have to have meaning?'

'Not everything. Just when it's concerned with your emotions.'

He grinned, 'You talk like a little old lady!'

'I mean what I say.'

'I'm sure you do!'

Unable to stop herself, she laughed, and hearing it, he nodded approvingly. 'At least you're not devoid of humour. That would have made the whole thing impossible.'

'Made what impossible?'

'My falling for you. I could never love a girl who didn't have a sense of humour.'

Beth looked down at the glass on the table. It was still full, which at least meant she wasn't drunk and imagining things.

'You're quite sober,' the young man said as though divining her thoughts.

'Are *you*?' she asked sweetly.

'Only drunk with your beauty, my little English rose! Rose wouldn't be your name, by any happy chance, would it?'

'No, it wouldn't.' Feeling the joke was wearing thin, she made her voice frigid. 'I'm Lois's cousin and my name is Beth. Now if you'll excuse me...'

She went to move past him, but he blocked her way. 'You can't leave me now I've just found you.'

'There are lots of girls here who'd be delighted to make your acquaintance Mr....'

'Harding,' he interrupted. 'Danny Harding. And I'm not interested in any other girl. Just you.' He caught her arm. 'Believe me, I'm serious. Please, Beth.'

Half puzzled, half angry, she did not know what to do, and sensing it he took advantage of her hesitancy to lead her to a more secluded part of the room, where he set her on a chair and installed himself beside her.

'Now then,' he continued. 'Let's get to know one another. Tell me everything about yourself. Everything.'

'Everything?'

'Yes,' he said firmly.'

Taking him at his word - it would at least be one way of putting him in his place - she gave him a detailed account of her life, and only as she



came to the time when she was sixteen did she decide that the joke had gone on long enough.

'You can't really want to hear all this twaddle?'

'I've enjoyed every minute of it! I'm really getting to know what makes you tick. Go on, honey. You've just celebrated your birthday and you still haven't had a date!'

'I didn't till I was seventeen.'

He whistled. 'You *were* backward!'

'My parents were old-fashioned.'

'How come they let you stay with Lois? She's a real swinger, from all accounts.'

'Accounts are wrong, Mr. Harding. And my parents are ... my parents died six months ago.'

'I'm sorry,' the young man said gently, and rested a tanned hand on her own. 'Tell me about your folks, honey. If they produced a girl like you, they must have been wonderful.'

'They were,' she said huskily. 'But I can't talk about them. Not now... not here.'

'This isn't exactly the place for serious conversation,' he agreed. 'Which gives me the cue I've been looking for.' He stood up and pulled Beth to her feet. 'I know a quiet place where we can have dinner and talk properly.'

'I can't talk any more,' she protested. 'I'm exhausted!'

'Then I'll take over. Go get your coat.'

'But Lois-'

'Won't even know we've gone,' he said firmly. 'Come on, my English rose, stop arguing!'

It was not until she was sitting beside him in a taxi that Beth realized this was the first time she had gone out with a man since coming to America. She gave a sigh, aware that she had come to a threshold and had crossed it successfully.

'Where are we going?' she asked.

'The Cote Basque.'

'Hardly a quiet little place,' she retorted. 'It's one of the most expensive restaurants in New York!'

'I never said I was taking you somewhere cheap!' He caught her hand and squeezed it. 'I'm not asking you to go Dutch!'

She turned scarlet. 'But it *is* frightfully dear.'

'And you're frightfully sweet! Now quit worrying about money.'

Another wave of colour warmed her face, and turning her head she stared out of the window at the rain-washed streets, empty except for a few hardy souls struggling against the wind and the downpour. A row of lighted shop windows threw back her reflection from the window of the taxi, and she turned round to her companion again.

'I'm not dressed for the Cote Basque. Couldn't we go somewhere else?'

'You look perfect,' came the firm answer. 'The only thing missing is a row of pearls. Then you'd really look like an English princess!'

Amused but not convinced, she gave in to him and sat quietly for the rest of the journey.

The restaurant was everything she had believed it to be, and eating her way through chilled melon and figs, fillet steak - soft as butter and served with fresh peas and new potatoes, despite the fact that it was barely spring - she had to admit that whoever had said American restaurants could not compare with the best French ones had obviously not had the pleasure of dining here.

'Should we order the sweet now, or wait a while?' Danny Harding asked as the main course was whisked away from them.

'I couldn't eat another thing,' she said. 'It was fabulous. Do you come here often?'

'Whenever I'm in New York.' He caught her hand across the table. 'That's the first sign of curiosity you've shown about me all evening. I was beginning to think you didn't care if I turned into a dormouse at midnight and disappeared!' --,

She giggled. 'I'm *very* curious about you. But I was brought up to believe that—'

'Nice girls don't ask questions,' he concluded. 'Okay then, lean back and I'll tell you about my life without your asking!'

In brief but humorous sentences he sketched a picture of his background. How different it was from her own. Brought up on a ranch in Arizona, where he still lived with his brother Dean, his entire life had been spent being groomed to take over a vast inheritance of land and cattle and copper mines.

'After I left college I thought of settling in New York,' he concluded, 'but Dean wouldn't let me. The ranch is his world. He can't believe any other exists.'

'And he wants you with him?'

'All the time. Sometimes it's difficult... even a few thousand acres can seem mighty claustrophobic when you keep riding them day after day! That's when I usually take a trip up here.'

'Does your brother come with you?'

'You'd never get Dean away from the Bar T-L. It's his whole world.'

'He must be very narrow-minded, then,' she observed.

""If you mean does he stick to an idea once he gets hold of it, then the answer is yes. In that respect we're alike. Which brings me back to the other things I said to you.' Oblivious of the waiter watching them, he drew her hand to his lips and kept it there for an instant. 'I hope you're going to let me see you all the time I'm here?'

'I don't see why not,' she said lightly. 'You'll be going back to the ranch soon anyway.'

'Dean can take care of it. Now I've met you, I'm staying here as long as I can.'

His voice was so tender that she thrilled to it, yet managed to hide her pleasure behind a prim shake of her head.

'You're the first man I've gone out with since I came to America.'

'My aim is to be the last.' She gave a tremulous smile, and seeing it as one of disbelief, Danny leaned closer. 'I'm not joking, Beth. I meant every word I said to you tonight. I fell for you the minute we met.'

'But - but why? I'm so ordinary.'

'So extraordinary,' he corrected. 'Like something out of a Victorian romance with your prissy hair-style and your colourless little face.'

Scarlet, she stared down at the table. 'I've never worn much make-up.'

'You don't need it. A little perhaps, but I'll get someone to show you how.'

'And turn me into a glamour girl?'

'Heaven forbid! I've been running away from those for years.' --'

Remembering Janice, she frowned, and realizing what was in her mind he made a face. 'Janice was just for fun,' he said.

'And me?'

'You're for keeps. Remember that, doll-face. For keeps.'

## CHAPTER TWO

To Beth's surprise Lois did not seem to like Danny.

'It isn't that I have anything specific against him,' Lois tried to explain. 'It's just that I feel he's going to hurt you.'

'You mean because I'm seeing him so often?'

'And so exclusively. He's monopolizing your time.'

'No one else has been rushing to do so!'

'You haven't given anyone else the chance! My party was the first time any of my friends met you, and then you ran off with Danny!'

'He's only here till the end of the month,' Beth said. 'I'll be free after that.'

'Will you?'

Beth knew better than to pretend she did not know what her cousin meant. 'I do like Danny,' she admitted, 'but I'm not stupid enough to believe he means everything he's been saying.'

'Like he loves and wants to marry you, I suppose?'

Beth turned her head away. 'He ... he hasn't mentioned anything about marriage.'

'That's something at least!' Lois got up from the stool beside the electric fire and made a pretence of busying herself with the record player. 'Danny's a playboy, Beth. He comes to New York once a year and lives it up with as many pretty girls as he can. When he waves them good-bye he doesn't expect any consequences: they've all been playing the same game and no one's been hurt.'

'You make it sound very cold-blooded,' Beth said heavily.

'If being truthful sounds cold-blooded ...' Lois perched back on the stool. 'I told you you'd object to my interfering.'

'Oh, Lois, I'm sorry.' Beth flung out her hands contritely. 'I don't mind you telling me what you think of Danny. You may well be right, but I don't care! I can't go on living in a cocoon, and even if I get hurt... well, that's part of growing up.'

'I wish I could be as philosophical as you,' Lois said dryly, the hint in her voice so obvious that Beth could not ignore it.

'Hasn't changing your job helped you to forget Bill Saunders?'

Lois shook her head. 'I suppose it's early days yet. Maybe in another few months. ...' She stood up again and walked restlessly around the room.

Watching her, Beth saw how much thinner she was, how drawn her face. It was incredible that she should still be pining for a man who did not even know she existed - except as a competent secretary!

'What's his wife like?' she asked bluntly.

'She's everything I'm not! Tiny, blonde, gentle and weak. Clinging ivy - and just as destructive!'

'Are they happy?'

'They have two children. Because of them, Bill will put up with anything. Even if he was the most unhappy man on earth, he'd never break up his marriage.' Lois sat on the arm of the settee. 'He's only talked about Margery once, but I got the impression that he stopped loving her a long while ago. She has the house and her bridge and her garden. I gather she just sees Bill as a meal ticket - someone to keep

her in Dior tweeds.' Lois gave a bleak smile. 'She's the type who'd consider mink too vulgar!'

It was easy for Beth to gather an impression of the woman, and she realized how wise Lois had been to find another job. Except that she had only left Bill Saunders physically. Mentally she was still tied to him.

'What's your new boss like?' she asked.

'I won't fall for *him*, if that's what's worrying you. He's another Danny. Believes there's safety in numbers! Not that your young Galahad is playing the field on this trip ... that's what's bothering me.'

Digesting this remark, Beth said: 'Maybe Danny feels different this time. I'm not much to look at, but is it so impossible for him to have fallen for me?'

'Beth!' In one leap Lois was at Beth's side. 'Of all the stupid things to say! Don't you have any idea how pretty you are? Why, if you gave yourself a chance you could be out with a different guy every night! Danny isn't doing you a favour you know!'

Before Beth could reply there was a ring at the door. 'That's Danny now,' she exclaimed. 'He's taking me to Arden's.'

'How come?' Lois was startled.

'To have me made over,' Beth grinned. '*You* may think me pretty enough, but obviously he doesn't.'

Lois was still spluttering indignantly when Beth opened the door on Danny, and as he came into the living-room she rounded on him in her usual spirited fashion.



'What do you mean by taking Beth to a beauty parlour? If you don't like the way she looks, find someone else!'

Danny laughed, amused by the attack. 'I know Beth wouldn't accept diamonds from me, so I'm giving her the next best thing. Confidence in the way she looks!'

Lois was momentarily speechless, and seeing it, Danny nodded wisely. 'I bet you two girls have been talking about me? You've got that sort of look on your faces.'

'Of course we were talking about you,' Lois answered. 'I was warning Beth not to believe a word you said to her!'

'Thanks for helping me, Lois. I must remember to put your name in a separate book!'

'Don't mention it. I'll be happy to malign you any time!'

Sensing that the humour was only surface deep, Beth hurriedly went for her coat, and not until they reached the sidewalk did she breathe a sigh of relief.

'You mustn't blame Lois,' she said apologetically. 'She feels responsible for me and doesn't want me to get hurt.'

'Do *you* think I'll hurt you?'

'Not willingly.'

'Thanks,' he said scathingly. 'At least you've given me the benefit of the doubt.' He peered into her face. 'But why should you assume you're *going* to be hurt?'

Beth looked away from him, wishing he had asked the question at another time. Standing on a crowded street was not the ideal place to

disclose her innermost feelings. Yet she did not want to lie to him, and bracing herself, she tilted her head and met his eyes.

'I'm in love with you, Danny. It's not your fault, so you needn't feel guilty about it. But that's why Lois thinks I'll be hurt. I've tried to make her see I don't mind, that it's worth my feeling miserable after you've gone, so long as I can remember the fun we had and - and ...' She blinked back the tears. 'Let's not talk about it any more. I don't want to spoil things between us.'

'Spoil things!' he burst out, and catching her by the shoulders, signalled a passing cab. 'Get in,' he said in the same rough voice, and pushed her into the back seat. 'Arden's,' he told the driver, 'but go round Central Park first.'

Not until the cab was moving through the traffic did Beth dare look at the man by her side. Never had she seen him so serious, and with a pang of fear she wondered if her frankness had frightened him.

'Don't worry about me, Danny,' she said clearly. 'I'm having fun with you.'

'Fun?' he echoed, and with an exclamation pulled her into his arms.

He had kissed her several times before, but always his touch 'had been light and casual, telling her without words that the emotion was a surface one, despite anything else he might have said to the contrary. But now his kisses were different; deep, searching, forcing her to a response that at first thrilled and then frightened her.

'No,' she cried, and pulled away from him. 'Danny, don't!'

For a moment he looked at her blankly, desire still swamping reason. Then he grew contrite, catching hold of her hand and stroking the skin.

'I'm sorry, honey, but if you *will* persist in talking like a woman, a man is gonna treat you like one!' He looked at her directly. 'I'd planned a more romantic time to tell you how I feel about you, but thanks to your cousin it looks like I'll have to tell you now. What started as a game - yes, I'll grant you it was only that to begin with - has become the most serious thing in my life. I love you, Beth. I love you more than I believed it possible to love a woman.'

Beth closed her eyes, unable to believe she was really hearing these words.

'Darling,' Danny was speaking again, his voice urgent, 'you do understand what I'm saying, don't you? I love you. I want to marry you.'

With a cry she flung herself into his arms, hiding her face against his coat 'Why me?' she mumbled. 'It doesn't seem possible.'

'It would be impossible *not* to love you,' he said fiercely. 'You're so innocent - so sweet. I want to take care of you... cherish you. ...'

For several moments neither of them was conscious of time, and not until the taxi drew to a stop outside the Fifth Avenue entrance of Elizabeth Arden's Beauty Salon did they return to the prosaic present.

'Sorry to bring you back to earth,' the driver said, grinning, 'but we've been three times round the Park already!'

Laughing, Beth and Danny left the taxi and hand in hand entered the salon.

'I wish I hadn't fixed the appointment,' Danny grumbled. 'Right now I want you to myself.'

'Can't we cancel it?'

'It's too late.'

From a door on their left a young girl stepped forward to greet Beth. She was in her early twenties but looked years older in experience, her eyes bright yet brittle, her smile wide yet false.

'I'm Helga,' she said brightly. 'If you'd like to come this way.'

For an instant Danny watched them go, then he strode forward, barring their way. 'Don't be too lavish with the make-up. I like my women natural.'

'Naturally,' came the reply. 'All men say the same!' Helga looked at her watch. 'If you would care to return in about two hours....'

'Meet me at the flat,' Beth intervened. 'I'd like to change first.'

'Sure.' Danny looked at his watch. 'I'll pick you up around seven.'

For the next few hours Beth gave herself over to Helga's able hands. For the most part the girl worked silently, and only when she came to Beth's hair did she make her first open criticism, holding one heavy strand and shaking her head. 'You really should have it cut. It's a pity to wear it the way you do.'

'It's too fine for me to wear it any other way. I've tried.'

'I'm sure if it were properly cut and shaped. ... Do let our Monsieur Freddy look at it for you. He won't do a thing to it unless you agree.'

Feeling it would be churlish to refuse, Beth nodded, and waited anxiously for the stylist to appear.

His arrival, heralded by two assistants who twittered around him like doves, put an end to her fears, for he was - of all wonderful things - an Englishman.

'Blimey,' he exclaimed, 'another Limey!'

Talking the whole time, Monsieur Freddy, 'but call me Fred, for that's my real monicker', set about experimenting with Beth's hair, trying first one style and men another before he finally picked up his razor and set to work.

'I won't cut much,' he confided. 'Just enough to make it manageable. You should-play up your little girl looks, it always gets the big he-man type!'

'I wish everyone wouldn't think me a baby,' Beth said crossly.

'There's a difference between looking like one and being one!' Busily the razor moved. 'Think of the advantage in looking like an angel and behaving like a devil! I mean to say, you can end up a Vanderbilt or Rothschild!'

'I just want to end up being me! Please don't cut off all my hair!'

'Finished now!' Freddy minced triumphantly. 'Take a look.'

Beth did so. While Freddy had been working on her hair Helga had removed the facial and applied some make-up, promising to explain what she had done when Beth had approved the result. But now all that Beth could do was to stare at her reflection and marvel at the transformation, unable to credit that she was the same girl who had entered the salon a few hours earlier.

Soft green shadow gave her eyes a luminous quality that was emphasized by her carefully arched brows which, tilting higher than normal, served to heighten the attractive slant of her eyelids. Mascara, black and thick and makin no concession to her blonde hair, made her lashes seem false, so preposterously long did they now

appear, while pale lipstick followed the exact curve of her mouth, its delicacy needing no improvement.

Apart from a faint application of rouge to point up her high cheekbones, no additional make-up had been used, and Beth could not fault anything that Helga had done. But it was her hair which had created the greatest transformation, changing her from a pretty girl into a startlingly beautiful one. For that she now looked beautiful it would have been childish not to have admitted it.

'Freddy, you're a magician!'

'You were a lovely rabbit to work with!'

Smiling, she continued to look at herself. True to his word, the stylist had cut very little of her hair, but so skilfully had he shaped it that it clung to her skull like a cap, shimmering like dark honey and bursting into flecks of deeper amber as it reflected the light. Only as it touched her shoulders did her hair spring into movement, swaying like a fall of silk with the slightest turn of her head.

Still dazed with delight, Beth returned to the flat, where Lois's rapturous reception was all she could have wished for. But it was nothing compared with her cousin's reaction when she heard of Danny's proposal.

'Marriage?' Lois gasped. 'Are you serious? Or more important still, is *he*?'

'He'd hardly make a joke about *that*?

'I guess not.' With an effort Lois shrugged aside her concern and hugged Beth close.

'How do you think you'll like living on a ranch?'

'I'd live anywhere with Danny. My main worry is his brother. They live together, and if Dean doesn't like me ...'

'Why shouldn't he?'

'Jealousy. That sort of thing.'

'He won't be jealous of you once he meets you. No one could.'

'You're just a fan of mine!' Beth hugged her. 'How about coming to Arizona with me ? I'm sure you'd love it there.'

'And be your poor relation? You must be kidding!' Seeing the hurt on Beth's face, Lois said quickly: 'I'd love to come and stay with you for a holiday, but not for keeps. Besides, Danny will want you to himself for the first year at least!'

'But you will come and visit, won't you?' Suddenly aware how far away she would be moving, Beth realized too that once again she would be changing one strange environment for another. But how happy she would be to make this particular change!

'When's the great day?' Lois asked.

'I don't know. It all happened so suddenly I haven't had a chance to find out. But I'll ask Danny tonight.' Beth whirled around the room, more lighthearted than she had been at any time since her arrival in America. 'I can't believe it's all happening to me - it's just like a fairy tale.'

Lois said nothing, and Beth found it impossible to ignore her silence. 'Why are you still worrying?'

Lois half closed her eyes, her usually open expression now guarded. 'I don't know. Perhaps because it's been so fast and you're so young.'

'I'm nearly twenty-one.'

'You're a baby when it comes to experience.' Lois threw back her head as though trying to discard any unpleasant thoughts. 'Don't take any notice of me. I'm just plain jealous, I guess.'

'You could never be jealous of me,' Beth said quickly. 'But honestly, things will be fine. I feel it in my bones!'

Later that evening as she waited for Danny, Beth could not stop herself remembering some of her cousin's misgivings. She had only known Danny for three weeks. Was this long enough on which to build a marriage? Would it not be better to wait, to go to the ranch with him for a holiday so that they would have a chance to know each other away from the glamour of this exciting yet artificial city?

Further thought was prevented by Danny's arrival, and seeing the astounded look on his face as he took in her changed appearance, any doubt she might have had as to his feelings for her vanished as if they had never existed.

'You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen,' he said huskily. 'I never imagined ... never realized.' Again he drew her close, kissing her with a passion that threatened to overwhelm her.

Carefully she extricated herself from his grasp. They had so many things to talk about that she needed to keep her thoughts clear; something it was impossible to do while Danny was holding her. She glanced at him from beneath her lashes. How handsome he was with his tanned skin still deeply bronzed despite three weeks of grey, rainy skies, and his tall thin body that did not disguise the lean muscles and strength of him. And he loved her and wanted to marry her! That was the most incredible thing of all.



'Where are we going?' she asked breathlessly, forcing herself to more mundane things.

'The Persian Room. You look so fabulous I want to show you off.'

'Must you? I'd much rather we went somewhere quiet.'

'No,' he said forcefully. 'I want everyone to see you.'

'And everyone certainly would,' she thought as she followed him down to the waiting taxi. For someone who only came to New York once a year, he seemed to be extremely well known. A corollary of having money, she decided, and knew it was something she must learn to accept.

In the large, softly lit dining-room her worst fears were realized, and by the time she was sipping her coffee she had lost count of the number of people she had met. Not that Danny seemed disturbed by it. Never had she seen him looking so pleased with himself, almost as if he were taking personal glory from her altered appearance. Yet why shouldn't he? she asked herself. If he had not taken her to Arden's she would still be the pretty but unremarkable girl of yesterday.

Filled with an upsurge of fear, as inexplicable as it was unreasonable, she leaned over and caught his hand. 'Do you love me?' she asked urgently. 'The real me? Or is it the made over version you prefer - the one all your friends are ogling?'

Danny stared at her in surprise, his thin face motionless. Then the wide mouth, with its full, sensual lower lip, curved into a grin. 'It's the real you I'm with right now. I don't get what you're complaining about. All I did was to uncover the potential!'

'But would you love me if I didn't look like this? If I were plain, for example?'

'But you're not plain. You never were.' He squeezed her fingers tightly. 'From the minute I set eyes on you I knew just how lovely you could look.'

'That wasn't what I asked you.'

'Then what *are* you asking?' His drawling voice, always light and soft, now seemed lighter, with a faintly aggrieved note to it. 'If I would have fallen for you if you'd been ugly? Of course I wouldn't. What man would?'

'Looks aren't everything,' she said quietly, 'And beauty doesn't last.'

'That's a truism,' he stated, 'but it's one I'm not concerned with at the moment.' Seeing the look of hurt on her face, he moved his chair until he was sitting close to her. 'What is it, honey? Why all this cross-examination? You *are* lovely and I *do* love you. Why not just accept that fact?'

Staring into his eyes, so blue and sparkling with humour, she gave up trying to make him be serious. Perhaps when he was in Arizona with her he would show his more serious side. Indeed he could not be all playboy; if he were, he would not be able to run his ranch and control all the activities that made up his vast fortune. She sighed, wishing he would start treating her as his equal and not like a doll to be mollycoddled and teased.

With a start she realized he had been speaking to her.

'And so,' he finished, 'you'll have to manage without me for a few weeks.'

'Why? Where are you going?'

'I've just told you. To the ranch. Something's cropped up and I must get back to deal with it. I'm leaving in the morning.'

Dismay gripped her. 'Can't your brother do it? You said he was capable.'

'Did I?' Danny looked irritated. 'I don't remember.'

'You said he'd like to take control. I assumed that meant you thought he was capable of doing so.'

'Well, he isn't. Not by a long way!' Danny gave her a smile. 'Cheer up, angel. I won't be gone for long.'

'I wish I could go with you. Why can't I?' she said with sudden earnestness. 'I haven't got a job yet.' Only as she saw the discomfited look on his face did she feel she had spoken out of turn. Yet he was her fiance; why shouldn't she have suggested going home with him?,

As though aware of what was going through her mind, Danny caught her hand again. 'It isn't that I don't want you with me, it's just that I haven't told Dean about us. He's such an odd guy that if I bring you home without any warning --'

'But he's not your keeper!'

He shrugged. 'We've been very close, and that's made him possessive. Not that he won't love you once he gets to know you. But first I want to tell him about you. My having to go home is probably the best thing that could have happened, otherwise I'd never have torn myself away from you. Like this, the sooner I put Dean in the picture the sooner you can fly down and marry me.'

Hearing him utter these magic words dispelled all her fears, and disregarding the fact that anyone might be watching them she clutched his hand to her heart.

'I love you so much, Danny,' she whispered. 'I couldn't bear it if anything came between us.'

'Nothing will,' he assured her, and abruptly pushed back his chair and stood up. 'Let's get out of here. I want to be alone with you.' His hand was hot on hers. 'Come back to my hotel, Beth.'

Confused, she shook her head. 'I don't think so. No, Danny, I don't want to.'

'Why not? I won't rape you!'

Scarlet, she stood her ground. 'It's better if I don't give you the chance!' Seeing he was still looking annoyed she said quickly: 'Anyway, I might try and take advantage of you!'

Her humour restored his. 'Let's get into a taxi at least. That seems the nearest I'll get to having you to myself!'

Held close in his arms in the dark confines of a car, Beth forgot her doubts and fears about Danny's imminent departure. It had been wrong of her to disclose them. The poor darling had quite enough to worry about with his brother's reaction to what would certainly be surprising news, without her adding to his problems.

'You have no right to look so enticing,' Danny said, resting his lips against her throat. 'If you go on like this I'll have to call you passion flower instead of English rose!'

She laughed, but the sound was stifled as he suddenly pulled her close to him and his mouth closed on hers; his lips were warm, gentle and

comforting, and Beth sighed with happiness as his arms tightened around her. Her own hands slid upwards to stroke his hair. 'Beth, my sweet,' Danny murmured softly against her lips.

Beth knew that this blissful, languorous state would not last for long. It was up to her to decide what happened next, and it was not fair to Danny to encourage him further. Gently she pulled herself out of his arms.

'I think that's enough,' she smiled firmly.

Reluctantly his hands fell away from her, but he still remained close, his mouth raining little kisses across her eyelids and down her cheek.

'You're adorable,' he whispered. 'I can't wait till you're mine... till I can have you....'

The cab drew to a stop, and with a sigh of relief Beth stepped out.

'Saved by the meter!' Danny murmured, following her. 'Next time you might not be so lucky.'

'Or unlucky,' she teased, feeling able to do so now that she knew herself to be safe. 'I hope I've given you the urge to get back to me quickly?'

'I've had that urge the whole time!'

Laughing, they went into the foyer. Thick carpets deadened their voices and in the dim light of shaded lamps Danny looked unexpectedly serious.

Don't forget me while I'm away.'

'I'll try not to.'

'Beth, don't tease. He caught her hand. 'I'll tell Dean the moment I can.' He kissed her fingers. 'We can't talk any more. I've a six-thirty call in the morning.'

'Can't you take a later plane?'

'No. Dean's already fixed it. It's one of our own jets.'

She digested this. 'You did say your *own* jet?'

'Sure. We've got three.'

Though she had known Danny was rich she had not envisaged him having his own fleet of aircraft, and unaccountably she became afraid.

'What's wrong?' he asked, seeing her change colour. 'You needn't be scared of my flying.'

'I'm not scared of that. It's only that I never realized you could afford.... I mean, you're so rich!'

He laughed. 'You'll soon get used to money!' He caught her round the waist. 'I'm going to enjoy showing you how to live. We'll go round the world for our honeymoon and then we'll settle on the ranch for a bit.'

Happiness warmed her and she snuggled against him. 'I can't think that far ahead. Living with you... It seems like a dream.' She lifted her head. 'Do you know I don't even know *where* you live!'

'About sixty miles from Phoenix. A small place called Barlby.'

'I can't wait to see it. I wish you'd told me more about your home. Then I could picture you in it.'

'It's large and ranch style with a swimming pool and a sauna.'

'Sounds luxurious. Any beautiful girls?'

'Loads of them.' He grinned. 'We've a dude ranch close by and the women always trek over to see us. Dean gets real mad when they do.'

Curious to know what a dude ranch was, she asked him.

'It's a hotel where everyone dresses up and pretends they're cowboys. In a few weeks you can see it for yourself.'

'I only want to see you,' she replied.

Behind them the elevator doors opened and a couple of people got out. Danny looked at Beth and dropped his hands from her waist.

'We'd better say good night.' He escorted her across the lobby. 'Keep well, angel. I'll call you the minute I can.'

The sliding doors of the elevator hid him from sight and she blinked away the tears. It was childish of her to feel so miserable. After all, he was not going to the end of the world. Only to Barlby. She said the name out loud, trying to get accustomed to it. In a matter of days she would be seeing it for herself. There was no reason to be depressed. A short parting would not do either of them any harm. She half smiled. Anyway, Danny was telephoning her tomorrow, and once she heard his voice all her fears would disappear.

## CHAPTER THREE

BETH'S optimism received a devastating blow. The telephone call she had anticipated from Danny the night after his return to Arizona did not materialize, and when a whole week passed without word from him she was distraught with fear.

Could Dean have made him change his mind? Even as she thought this she dismissed it. Danny would never listen to anyone, and certainly not when it concerned his emotions. But his silence must be due to something.

'Even if he were tied up with business he could still have called me. Seven days! It doesn't seem possible.'

'Call him,' Lois said. 'You should have done so a few days ago. It would have saved you from dying a million deaths every time the phone rang.'

'I've been afraid to call him,' Beth admitted.

'Afraid of the man you love?'

'Because he's so terrifyingly rich!' came the miserable explanation. 'I couldn't bear him to think I was running after him.'

'You must be out of your mind! You love each other. What more reason could you have for calling his home to find out what's wrong?'

Beth did not answer. Logically Lois was right. Yet ever since Danny had returned to the ranch she had felt a deep fear. Not that she doubted he had a reason for going home, merely that she did not believe his reason for refusing to take her with him.

Why did he need his brother's approval before bringing the girl he loved to his home? If she had not been so naive she would have



questioned his statement the very minute he had made it. Danny was too strong a personality, too used to getting his own way, for her to believe he would allow himself to be dictated to - especially when it concerned the girl he loved.

But did he love her? Could his silence indicate a change of mind?

'Well,' Lois said patiently, 'why don't you call *him*?'

'Because I don't think he loves me any more. It's all over.'

'He might be ill. Have you thought of that?'

It was the one fear which had not entered Beth's mind. But now that Lois had voiced it, it suddenly became of paramount significance and she hurriedly picked up the receiver and asked the operator for Danny's number.

'Perhaps he's had an accident,' she said over her shoulder. 'His plane might have crashed. He might even be dead!'

'We would have read about it in the newspapers,' came the practical reply. 'That's one penalty for being as rich as Danny!'

'Do you think so?' Beth asked doubtfully.

'I don't think. I know. If anything had happened to him we would have found out by now.'

'Then why hasn't he called?'

'That's what you're ringing to discover!'

'We have your number on the line,' the operator said. 'Did you wish to make it person-to-person?'

The unfamiliarity of the words took Beth by surprise and she mumbled unintelligibly.

'I'll connect you directly,' the operator said brusquely.

'No,' Beth called, but it was too late. There was the sound of a click and then the deep voice of a man, with a languid drawl that reminded her of Danny. Fright made it impossible for her to speak and she moved her lips without any sound emerging.

'Who's there?' the man's voice was quicker now and sharper. Who is it?

Beth cleared her throat. 'I'm Danny's - it's - it's Miss Morrison. I'm calling from New York and I'd like to talk to Danny.'

'He's out riding. Can I give him a message?'

'I wanted to know if he was all right. I haven't heard from him since he left.' Beth hesitated and then plunged on: 'Are you Dean?'

'Yes.' The voice was more guarded now. 'But I'm afraid you have the advantage on me. I take it you are a friend of Danny's?'

'We're engaged,' she blurted out. 'Hasn't he told you?'

The silence was so long that Beth heard the faint crackle and hum of wires, as if the very telegraph poles were echoing her words. Desperately she glanced at Lois, trying to mouth what had happened, but it was impossible.

'Danny was going to tell you,' she stammered. 'And I've been waiting to hear from him... wondering why he hasn't called me. I thought he ... I thought something was wrong.'

'Something *is* wrong, Miss Morrison,' the man said abruptly. 'Apparently you have been misinformed about my brother's intentions. He is certainly engaged - but not to you. He has a fiancée down here!'

Beth struggled to speak, but again no words came and the look on her face was so eloquent that Lois took the receiver from her nerveless hand and spoke into it.

'Mr. Harding? It's Lois Morrison here ... Beth's cousin. Can you please tell me what you just said?'

'Danny's engaged to someone else,' Beth mumbled, clutching Lois's arm. 'You were right! He was lying to me the whole time!'

Lois shook Beth to be quiet, her attention still fixed upon the telephone. 'I see,' she said in a cool voice, and then a little later: 'I agree with you, Mr. Harding, but unfortunately I doubt if anyone will be able to teach your brother a lesson! It seems to me....'

But Beth did not wait to hear any more. With a cry of pain she ran into her bedroom and flung herself on the bed, too hurt for tears, too numb to feel anything except a void.

" It seemed a long while later, although it could only have been a short time, when Lois came into the room, her expression bitter.

'When I think of the way he acted with you, the things he said.... I'd like to get my hands on that two-timing—'

'Don't! It's as much my fault as his. You warned me not to believe him.'

'I only warned you in the beginning- later on - after the rush he gave you - I thought he was serious.' Lois flung herself into a chair, 'What I can't figure out is why he had to propose to you.'

'Because I was stupid enough to let him know I loved him,' Beth said huskily. 'I made it impossible for him to get away from me.'

'Men like Danny don't find it impossible to get away from any girl! Seems he got carried away by his own playacting and then didn't have the courage to tell you.'

'I think it's that which hurts most. His cowardice.'

'From what the brother said to me,' Lois went on, 'I got the impression Danny hadn't even told him about you! However, now he knows, he's asked me to tell you that if there's anything you'd like - in the way of a cruise or a mink coat - he'll arrange it.'

For an instant Beth was too stunned to reply. 'He didn't,' she stammered at last. 'He - he couldn't!'

'He did and he could! I guess it's his usual way of buying off his brother's girl-friends.' Lois perched on the side of the bed and put a tentative hand on her cousin's arm. 'If I sound cynical it's only because I want you to face facts. Danny's a louse and you must forget him! The sooner the better.'

'Don't worry. From now on he doesn't exist.'

Forcing a smile to her lips, Beth went over to the dressing table. Though she had spoken brave words she did not mean them. No matter what Danny had done she could not forget him as easily as she had said. Yet forget him she must, and the best way of doing so was to throw herself wholeheartedly into work.

Unexpectedly she remembered Bill Saunders' offer of a job. If anybody needed taking care of he certainly did! Yet how would Lois react? Though she had turned the offer down when she had first received it, Beth now hesitated, and hurt against Danny made her decide to ask Lois directly. They owed it to each other to be truthful.

'Your ex-boss asked me to work for him,' she said lightly, looking at Lois through the mirror. 'It was the night you gave that party. He said he wanted to keep your job in the family.'

'You never told me about it before.' Lois could not hide her surprise.

'I didn't think about it much. I thought I was going to get married!' Beth swung round, lipstick in hand. 'Would it hurt you if I took it?'

'Why should I care?'

'Because you still love him,' Beth answered, having decided to put an end to subterfuge. 'And it might make it worse for you if you knew I was seeing him every day.'

The dark eyes filled with pain. 'It couldn't make it worse. Nothing could do that.'

'*Oh, Lois!*' Beth ached with sympathy for her cousin. 'I won't accept his offer if my working for him *will* make it worse for you.'

'No!' Lois was incisive. 'My not talking about Bill hasn't helped me forget him; in fact it's made it worse. Work for him and talk to me about him as much as you like. Perhaps if I could see him as a rather stupid man with loads of faults it might help me to get over him!'

The door banged shut behind her and Beth continued to apply her lipstick, though her hand was shaking so much that she finally had to wipe it off and start all over again.

Taking Lois at her word, Beth telephoned Bill Saunders the next morning and tentatively asked if his offer was still open. His enthusiastic response left her in no doubt as to her welcome, and she agreed to be in his office on Monday.

'How is Lois?' he asked carefully, just as Beth was going to put down the receiver.

'Wonderful,' she lied. 'Enjoying her new job and dating like mad.'

'Give her my regards, won't you?'

'When I see her. But she's out so much --'

Replacing the telephone, Beth pulled a face at it, wondering why she had bothered to lie to the man. If working close to Lois had not shown him her worth it was a waste of time trying to make him see it now. Apart from which he was not free. A wife had prior rights - and so did a fiancée. Memory of Danny washed over her like a sea of gall, bringing him so close that she almost felt he was in the room. But he was thousands of miles away, separated not only by distance, but by another love.

For the rest of the week-end Beth remained at home, making all sorts of excuses for doing so, though both she and Lois knew her real reason was the hope that Danny might telephone. Not that anything he said could mitigate his behaviour; merely that even a call from him apologizing for what he had done - no matter how feeble his excuse - would have served in some small way to placate her hurt.

But Saturday and Sunday passed without a word from him, and the faint hope she had cherished died, leaving her bereft of feeling.

'What a fool I was,' she cried. 'What a gullible fool!'

'We're all gullible when we're in love,' Lois reminded her. 'And most men are out for what they can get.'

'Bill Saunders wasn't!'

'More's the pity.'

'Lois!'

The older girl shrugged. 'At least you've got some memories to look back on. All I have is a farewell lunch and a handshake!'

'At least you have your pride.'

'That's the last thing in the world that matters when you're in love.' Lois leaned forward, her hair dark as a raven's wing in the lamplight. 'Is that the main thing that's hurt with you - your pride?'

'Pride is important,' Beth reiterated.

'What has it got to do with love?'

'Everything. If Danny had respected me - had thought me intelligent - he would never have pretended the way he did.'

'Rubbish! He would just have acted more cleverly! Anyway, intelligence doesn't stop a woman making a fool of herself over a man! You aren't the first one to do so and you won't be the last.'

'I won't fall in love again,' Beth averred.

'I'll remind you of that a year from now!'

'I won't change,' Beth reiterated. 'I promise you that.'

As though determined to live up to her words, Beth became so firmly resolved not to let emotion enter into her life, that she now became the epitome of the liberated female, and hardly a night passed when she did not go out with one young man or another, never returning before the early hours of the morning.

As the coolness of spring gave way to the enervating heat of the summer Lois felt duty bound to remonstrate with her, choosing one rare Sunday afternoon when Beth was at home.

'You can't go on living it up the way you are,' she said. 'If you get any thinner you'll vanish.'

'You go out as much as I do.'

'Then I get home earlier!'

'Thanks!'

'I know you'll hate me for saying this,' Lois persisted, 'but you're making yourself cheap and ridiculous, and I can't bear it. You're turning yourself into something your parents would have loathed.'

There was a long silence, and Lois saw that Beth's face had become completely colourless.

'I'm sorry if I've hurt you,' she whispered. 'But I have to try and make you see sense.'

Beth went over to the window and stared down at the street twenty storeys below. How small the cars and the people looked when seen from this height, giving no indication of the damage they could do.

'We all have our own way of trying to forget things,' she murmured. 'And if my way seems wrong to you --'



'Doesn't it seem wrong to *you*?''

Beth hesitated and then said truthfully: 'Only when I stop to think about it. And I try not to think any more!'

'You can't go on for ever without thinking!'

'Why not? I'm not hurting anyone.'

'You're hurting yourself! Danny acted cheaply towards you and you're proving he was right!'

'That's a horrible thing to say! I don't get drunk and I'm not immoral. All I do is go out and have a good time.'

'Are you really having a good time, or are you just scared to stand still and face your thoughts?'

A ring at the door announced the arrival of some of Lois's friends, and Lois looked at Beth anxiously. 'Don't be angry with me, darling. I mean it for your own good.'

'I know.' Beth sighed, and unable to bear talking to anyone, ran into her room.

Though she longed to forget what her cousin had said, she found it impossible, and restlessly she paced the floor. Was Lois right? Was going out night after night the wrong way to forget Danny. A picture of his lean face, with its bright blue eyes and sensual mouth, told her that she was no nearer forgetting him than when she had last been held in his arms, and with a cry she sank down beside the bed and buried her head in her hands. How could she go on loving a man who had behaved so badly? And even worse - how could she have allowed his behaviour to have triggered off her own crazy actions?

Lois *was* right. Everything she said had been justified. And she could have said so much more! You could not forget one man by going out with a hundred others; nor could you pay that one man back by making a lot of other innocent ones suffer. The only way to forget Danny was to try and see his action in perspective; to try and understand why he had felt the compulsion to turn what could have been a light-hearted flirtation into a serious but finally meaningless love affair.

Leaning back on her heels, Beth wiped her eyes. If only she had some understanding of psychology. Without it, it seemed incredible that Danny - so wealthy, handsome and young - should still have the need to make a young and innocent girl fall in love with him when he was already going to marry someone else. Could it have been an urge to show he was still free? A desire to discard his responsibilities? Or had he perhaps subconsciously wished to ape his brother Dean whom he had admitted was a breaker of hearts?

From the living-room came the sound of laughter, and afraid that Lois would come in to try and persuade her to join them, she decided to go for a walk. The cold and windy streets of New York were preferable to the false bonhomie she would otherwise have to display.

Outside on the pavement she shivered and wished she had brought a mackintosh to slip over her suit. It was unexpectedly cold, the skies heavy with rain-filled clouds. But to return for something warmer would mean running the gauntlet of Lois and her friends, and bracing herself against the weather she set off towards Central Park.

Few people were about, so few indeed that she decided against walking in the park itself, and remained on Fifth Avenue until she reached the fantastic outlines of the Guggenheim Museum.

For the next hour, as she walked the sloping floors and stared at the modern paintings, she gave no thought to Danny, though as she

returned to the street he came into her mind again. Would there come a time, she wondered, when a whole day would pass without her thinking of him? Angry at her weakness, she set off for home.

As always in the city the wind seemed to come from the East River, and every time she crossed an intersection an icy blast penetrated to her very bones. Soon rain began to fall and she looked round for a taxi. None was in sight and, head bent, she trudged on. What at first began as a drizzle quickly developed into a downpour, and within seconds she was drenched to the skin. Gasping, she ran for shelter into one of the doorways of Lord and Taylor, only to find that at least a dozen people had had the same idea, and deciding that the sooner she was out of her sodden clothes the better, she continued on her way downtown.

Letting herself in through the front door some half hour later, she was glad to find the living-room deserted, the only signs of occupancy being a stack of glasses with ice cubes melting in them.

Squelching her way into the bedroom, she peeled off her clothes and ran a bath, hoping the hot water would drive away the chill that was seeping into her bones. But nothing could stop her shivering, and deciding against getting dressed again, she climbed into bed.

She lay in her room for what seemed an eternity, but when she looked at her watch she was dismayed to find it was only nine o'clock. If Lois came back soon perhaps she would go down to the drugstore for some aspirin; it was the only way of preventing what looked like becoming a first- class cold.

She heard a door slam and she sat up and called out. The centre light was switched on and she blinked against the brightness. 'Thank goodness you're back,' she croaked. 'I'm getting an awful cold.'

'You've already got it.' Lois came further into the room. 'Why on earth did you go out in this weather?'

'I wanted to be alone ... to think.' Beth lay back against the pillows. 'You were right ... I've been such a fool. It hasn't helped either - just made me more miserable.' Tears filled her eyes. 'And I've been rotten to you. I don't know why you haven't thrown me out.'

'Now stop feeling sorry for yourself,' Lois said brusquely. 'At least you've come to your senses *now*, and things won't get any worse!'

'I hope not,' Beth sneezed.

'Aspirin,' Lois muttered, and hurried out of the room.

Beth sneezed and coughed her way through the rest of the night, and morning found her with a temperature that made her weak at the knees and light in the head.

'No work for you today,' her cousin said, standing by the foot of the bed. 'I'm not even sure I should go in myself. You look pretty awful.'

'It's just a cold. If you could leave me a jug of water --'

Lois still looked dubious. 'I'll pop back at lunchtime to make sure you're all right.'

'There's no need to worry,' Beth said with more confidence than she felt. 'I'll be up by the time you get home.'

But it was several weeks before Beth was able to keep her promise, for the cold developed into bronchitis which in turn became pneumonia. One afternoon several weeks later as she sat on a chair beside Beth, Lois said, 'I'm not sure I didn't prefer you as a goodtime girl instead of a weeping willow!'

'I don't know why I feel so depressed,' Beth said feebly.

'Neither do I. You've received five bottles of scent, three negligees and twenty-one books to show how many men are thinking about you! To say nothing of the ones who keep trying to knock the door down to get a glimpse of you! I've promised to let them know when you're ready for visitors.'

'I don't think I ever want to see anyone again.'

'You'll change your mind once you feel stronger.' Beth looked doubtful and Lois decided not to press the point; far better for nature to take its course.

But when September gave way to October and Beth showed no positive signs of recovery, Lois could no longer hide her fear that something might be seriously wrong with her young cousin, and on her way home from work one evening she went to see the doctor who was attending her.

As usual his consulting room was full, and she settled herself with a magazine and prepared for a long wait. But hardly had she turned one page when a familiar voice spoke her name and, with fast beating heart, she raised her head to see Bill Saunders looking at her. In one of his familiar dark suits with his usual conservative tie, he was just as she remembered him: faintly lined around the eyes, with shadows on the lids that told of too many sleepless nights spent working on his cases. Did all lawyers look after their clients so conscientiously? she wondered, and hurriedly pushed the thought aside. What did she care how hard he worked!

'Are you ill?' he was saying, his head bent forward anxiously.

'Ill? Why should I be?' Then realizing where they were: 'I've come to talk to the doctor about Beth. I'm worried about her.'

'So am I. That's why I'm here.'

Lois digested this remark and found it unpalatable. 'Beth will be delighted to know you're such a conscientious employer.'

'It isn't only Beth I was thinking of. It was you as well.'

This time Lois could not hide her surprise, and seeing it, Bill Saunders coloured. 'With Beth not working for so long I felt it must be a strain on you - financially, I mean. That's why I wanted to talk to the doctor ... to see if there was anything I could do ... perhaps if she went to a warmer climate for a few months....'

'That would hardly decrease the financial strain,' Lois said dryly.

'I was planning on helping.'

'We don't need help.' Taken aback by his kindness, Lois's attempt not to show it resulted in a harshness of voice that made the man in front of her look unexpectedly angry.

'Must you be so obstinate?' he asked. 'Surely we've known each other long enough for me to help you without you being so prickly about it? You know very well I can afford it.'

'Beth and I aren't your responsibility.'

'*You* are. And if my helping Beth helps you too --'

His voice died away and Lois felt her strength die with it. How hard it was to hide her feelings for him when all she longed to do was throw herself into his arms. Imagining his astonishment - not to say horror - if she did so, her weakening spirit strengthened. He had always seen her as efficient and she was not going to show him the other side of herself at this juncture.

'Your anxiety to help lame ducks is very touching,' she said in her most sarcastic tone. 'But there's no need to pretend you want to help *me*. If you're interested in Beth—'

'I'm married,' he said in a low voice, 'and I can't have an interest in *anyone*. If I weren't tied do you think I'd have let *you* leave me? Knowing you were in my office - that I could see you every day - was the one bright spot in my life. It's been hell since you left!'

As if in a dream she heard him out, unable to believe she was not imagining something she had so desperately longed to hear. At one time she would have given anything in the world to have heard Bill Saunders speak like this: it would have been the fulfilment of all her dreams; but now that he had actually said them he had released a nightmare of emotion that she did not have the strength to hide.

'I never knew,' she whispered. 'You were so aloof - so uncaring.'

'I had to be. I couldn't let you know. I wouldn't have spoken now except that seeing you again - without expecting it - was more than I could bear.' The last person in the waiting-room went out and he sat down in the chair beside her. 'Forget what I've said,' he muttered. 'If you don't want me to talk to you again I'll understand it. But at least let me help Beth.'

'By all means help Beth,' Lois marvelled that her voice could be so calm, 'but you'll have to see me too. That's part of the deal!'

He swung round to look at her. 'You're not angry with me?'

'For saying you like me?' She forced a laugh. 'What sort of girl do you think I am!'

'I don't just like you. There's no point pretending. Now I've finally spoken you might as well know exactly what I mean. I love you. I love you, but I can never marry you!'

Shaking, she half turned away from him and his voice, urgent and low, was in her ear.

'Don't be angry, Lois. I'll never talk of it again, I swear it. But not being able to see you... not even having Beth to tell me how you were... Lois, forgive me.'

Eyes bright with tears, she looked him fully in the face. 'Forgive you?' she cried. 'Oh, darling, don't you know I love you? That I've loved you for years?'

Urgently he pulled her into his arms. Gone was his tenderness and composure, to be replaced by a passion that gave painful pressure to his kiss and burning grip to his hands as they strained her close. Again and again he kissed her, murmuring broken words of endearment that had no meaning and yet said everything.

Lois was the first to draw back, rubbing her hand over bruised lips and aching to be held close again.

'What's going to happen to us?' she asked huskily.

'Nothing. We can't see each other again. At least not alone. There's the children ... and Margery.' He stood up and slowly paced the floor. 'Our marriage is a sham. It's been so for years. We were both too young ... incompatible in too many ways. But we didn't see it until it was too late. -The children arrived and we were tied. Margery wouldn't refuse me a divorce - not if-I paid her for it - but she wouldn't be good with the children. She'd turn them against me... particularly if I married again.'



'And if you didn't marry again?' Lois ventured.

'Then there'd be no reason for a divorce.' Suddenly aware of what she meant, he came and stood beside her. 'I don't want *that* sort of relationship with you! It's either marriage or nothing.'

She clasped her hands together. 'So it's nothing?'

'I'm afraid so. Try not to hate me. I couldn't help—'

'I don't hate you!' she cried. 'I love you. And I love you more *because* you've got such old-fashioned ideas. It will break my heart and ruin my life, but I wouldn't want you to be any other way!'

'*Oh, Lois.*' Although he did not touch her his look was a caress, and for a long moment they remained staring into each other's eyes.

The entry of the doctor, curious to know why no one had appeared in answer to his buzzer, precluded further conversation, and together Lois and Bill spoke to him about Beth.

'There's nothing wrong with her that a few months' warm weather won't put right,' he said. 'I know she's depressed, but that's often the case after pneumonia. The main thing is to see she doesn't get another chill.'

'Then you think she should be in a warm climate for the winter?' Lois said.

'Most of my patients should,' the doctor chuckled. 'I wouldn't say no to it myself!' He grew serious. 'Florida or some place like it would be ideal. It would turn her into anew woman!'

'We'll see what can be done,' Bill Saunders replied, and holding Lois by the elbow, guided her out.

On the pavement he looked at her and then hailed a taxi. 'I can't let you go so soon. At least let's have this one evening together.'

'As a memory to cherish when we're old?' she asked, unable to keep the pain out of her voice.

'A memory for *me*,' he answered. 'You're so young and lovely you'll fall in love again.'

She did not waste time arguing with him, though not until they were seated opposite each other in a small Italian restaurant did the mood of restraint lift.

'Our first and last date,' she sighed. 'We must make the most of it.'

'I've given you a meal before!'

A<'Only as a boss. But this is special - and all because of Beth.'

'Because of Beth,' he echoed, and leaned closer. 'How would it be if she went away for the entire winter?'

'She'd never let you spend so much money. She has too much pride.'

'Like someone else I know!'

'I haven't any pride where you're concerned,' Lois said quietly. 'At least not now I know you love me.'

'If you say things like that I'll forget all my resolutions.'

'You won't,' she sighed. 'We both know that.' She turned the conversation back to her cousin. 'Perhaps if she went away for a month or six weeks --I'll talk to her.'

'I'd be happier if she were out of New York for the whole winter. She looks dreadful.'

'It was more than the pneumonia which pulled her down,' Lois said, deciding to be frank without giving too much away. 'She - she fell in love with - with someone who let her down.'

'Like I'm doing with you?' he said bitterly, and caught her hand so tightly that she winced.

'Bill, you're hurting me!'

At once he relaxed his grip. 'We'd better stick to talking about Beth. If we don't. ...' He frowned. 'There must be some way we can get her out of the city for the winter. If I could—' He stopped and banged his hand on the table. 'I know the very thing! How about a job in a resort - some place that's warm and dry?'

'Wouldn't the work be rather hard?' Lois asked doubtfully. 'Holiday places in season can be pretty hectic.'

'Not the job I've got in mind. The place belongs to a client of mine, and if I explained that Beth had been ill....'

'Yes, I'm sure it's the answer. Mrs. Mays called me a couple of days ago and said she was looking for a receptionist.'

'It sounds fine,' Lois said guardedly, 'but are you sure you won't be paying for her on the side? I mean this isn't something you're making up?'

'Scout's honour! I swear it. I'll call Mrs. Mays when I get home and fix it up. Now let's talk about us. This is our one and only evening and I don't want to waste it.'

'Nor do I,' she said, 'but I can't get home too late. I don't like leaving Beth alone for long. If we cut this evening short maybe we can have another one to make up for it.'

'We daren't see each other again. It wouldn't end at one more meeting. You know that as well as I do.'

'You're right.' Lois spoke brightly but did not look at him. 'One of us has to be strong and - and it couldn't be me.'

'You were strong enough to leave me and get another job.'

'Because I didn't know you loved me.'

'I wish I'd had the sense to keep quiet!'

'I'm glad you didn't.'

The arrival of the waiter turned their conversation to more mundane matters, and deliberately they both kept it there, realizing that once they let emotion take over it would be impossible to master it.

At half past ten Bill took Lois home, but even at the door of her apartment he refused to kiss her, the ashen greyness of his face telling her how deep a control he was putting on himself.

'If I can talk to Ellen Mays tonight I'll call you at once. Take care of yourself, my darling.'

'And you,' she said breathlessly, and quickly turning, entered the apartment.

Half reading, half dozing, it had been nine o'clock before Beth had begun to worry at Lois's absence, and she had spent the subsequent time frantically wondering if there had been an accident. One look at

Lois's face, sad yet at the same time tranquil, told her something momentous had happened.

'Sorry to be late, Beth, but I went to see the doctor and bumped into Bill.'

'How odd for you to meet him like that.' Beth decided to pretend she had not noticed anything strange in her cousin's behaviour. 'Was he ill too?'

'Neither of us are ill. We went to talk to the doctor about you.'

'Will I live?' Beth asked humourlessly.

'You'll stand a better chance in a warm climate. That's where you should spend the winter. And it's all arranged. I'm hoping Bill will call me tonight about it.'

Beth sat on the bed and looked incredulous. 'If you think I'm going to let *my* boss - because *I* work for him now, not you - pay for me to go away --'

'It isn't like that at all.' Quickly Lois told her what had happened. 'And it seemed like a miracle when Bill remembered this client of his.'

'A fortuitous miracle! Come off it.'

'It's true! She really does need someone. He swore it. It's a bona fide job, Beth. You'd be mad not to accept.'

Beth was silent for so long that Lois came over to her, instinct telling her what thoughts were taking place behind the pale and bone-thin face.

'If Danny should call while you're away I'll tell him where you are.'

'No! I never want to talk to him again. As far as I'm concerned he never even existed!'

'Then why are you hesitating about taking this job?'

'I wasn't.' Beth looked up, her eyes bright with unshed tears. 'I was only thinking how lucky I was to have rtvo people who ... who cared about me enough to ... to. ...' She stopped and buried her head in her hands.

'You must thank Bill, not me.' The telephone rang and Lois hurried to answer it, returning a few moments later with such a strained expression that Beth immediately ran over to her.

'What's wrong? It doesn't matter if the job has fallen through. I'm sure a winter in New York won't kill me.'

'The job *hasn't* fallen through. Airs. Mays will be delighted to have you.'

'Then what's the catch?'

'The "catch", as you put it, is that the place isn't a hotel - it's a dude ranch in Arizona.'

Beth gasped, 'Oh no!'

'Oh yes!' Lois made no more pretence. 'And even worse: it's near Barlby!'

For an instant there was silence. Then Beth started to laugh, only stopping as Lois gripped her roughly by the shoulders. 'Stop it, Beth! Stop it!'

'I'm not hysterical,' Beth gasped. 'I was just laughing at the way I'm being forced to eat my words.'

'What do you mean?'

'A moment ago I said Danny didn't exist for me. Now I'll have to prove it'

'You can't take the job,' Lois protested. 'If it were anywhere else in Arizona, I'd say go. But Barlby's on his doorstep!'

'All the *more* reason for me to go. It will force me to get him out of my system.'

Still unconvinced, Lois hesitated, and Beth went to the door. 'Is Bill still on the line?'

'No. I said we'd call him back.'

'Then I'll do so.'

"You're very brave.'

'Or very stupid,' Beth replied. 'Only time will show which!'

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE great silver jet-liner dipped its wings - as though paying homage to the fleecy white cloud that served to highlight the intense blue of the Arizona sky - before it lowered its nose to the landing strip of Sky Harbor airport.

Peering nervously through the window Beth caught her first glimpse of Phoenix, a lush green oasis rising dramatically from the treeless desert. Rimming the city on all sides were gaunt mountains; the Superstition, Camelback and, in the far distance the Four Peaks, their tops hard-edged against the crystal clarity of the sky, their purple sides descending to merge into the dusty yellow and orange of the desert. Then the plane banked sharply and all she could see was brilliant blue sky, the same blue as Danny's eyes.

Determinedly she concentrated on tightening her already tight seat belt. She must not think of Danny. She had vowed not to do so, yet here she was with not even a foot set on Arizona soil and thinking about him already! With an effort she went over the instructions Lois had given her when she had kissed her good-bye, hoping she had not forgotten anything vital. Mrs. Mays would try and meet her at the airport, but it all depended on when a new batch of guests were arriving. If this clashed with the time of Beth's' own arrival, then a car would be sent for her: a yellow car with a Mexican driver who would take her straight to the Circle Q. Even now, though she had repeated the name of the dude ranch many times, she could not help smiling at it and wondering if it would live up to all her expectations.

But suddenly there was no more time for thought. The plane dipped, there was a suggestion of enormous force and braking power and the jolt of wheels on tarmac as they finally touched down.

Within moments Beth stepped out of the aircraft, the heat on her face so unexpected after the cold of New York that she was startled by it.



Following the rest of the passengers, she entered the airport to claim her luggage, then went to stand by the Pan-American Airways desk, where she eyed with some trepidation the numerous grey-haired dowagers - though blue-haired would have been more fitting for their superbly rinsed coiffures - and hoped none of them would turn out to be her new employer.

'Miss Morrison?' a sibilant voice inquired, and she swung round to see a short, tubby man. In faded jeans and checked shirt, with a greasy-looking sombrero twisting round in gnarled hands, he was not the chauffeur she had anticipated. But his swarthy skin and jet black hair indicated his Mexican heritage and she guessed he had been sent to meet her.

'Senora Mays could not come herself,' the man said with a flash of white teeth. 'These your cases?' At Beth's nod he picked them up as though they were empty and, with a curious rolling gait, led the way out to a yellow shooting brake.

Deftly he hoisted the cases into the back and then bowed her into the front seat.

'Mrs. Mays said you come from England.'

'That's right.'

'I hope you like it here. You ride horse?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Never mind. I teach you ride and you teach me speak English. Okay, we have bargain?'

'That depends on what spare time I have,' Beth said firmly.

'You have plenty time,' the Mexican assured her. 'Mrs. Mays excellent employer! Now you sit back and enjoy drive.'

'Is it far from here?'

'Very near. 'Bout sixty miles.'

'As much as that?'

'In Arizona that's little journey. We very big State.'

Murmuring agreement, she settled back, feeling the power of the large car as they roared down the highway. Phoenix, she knew, was in the heart of the Salt River Valley, an oval bowl of land some twenty miles wide and forty miles long, which skilful use of irrigation had turned into a predominantly lush area where cotton, lettuce and corn grew all the year round. Seeing the level acres for herself she was awestruck by the immensity of the work that had been required to turn a barren desert into such a prolific food-producing area.

Skirting the town itself were large orange groves, and she could well imagine the magnificent scent of the blossoms on the still, dry air. Indeed the dryness of the air was the main thing that had struck her since her arrival; it made the heat far more, bearable than she had imagined, for though she guessed the temperature to be in the high eighties there was no sense of discomfort.

By-passing Phoenix itself, they were soon speeding away from the more colourful landscape, and the dark green of alfalfa, the lush green of orange groves and the golden fields of grain gave way to dry desert yellows and browns, with the tall saquaro cacti-like giant needles - pointing fingers to the brilliant blue sky.

Occasionally they passed a small village, Indian and Spanish in appearance, where low, rambling structures of painted adobe brick,

with red-tiled roof and patio intermingled with irregular two-storey homes.

Even more occasionally the landscape was broken by the ugly sight of an abandoned mine shaft, reminding Beth that much of Arizona's wealth had stemmed - and indeed still did - from its vast copper and other mineral resources.

Lulled by the heat and the steady motion of the car, she must have dozed, for when next she opened her eyes they were crossing an area of gentle rolling land with undulating hills forming a backdrop.

'Have we much further to go?' she asked.

'We here now,' came the reply, and the car turned sharply through a heavy pair of wooden cattle gates into a narrow road whose dusty surface was bordered by unexpected clumps of well-watered bushes.

But even so she was unprepared for the expanse of green grass that met her eyes as they skirted a group of trees, and she marvelled at the resourcefulness which had made a country estate out of dry sand. Not that it was really a 'country estate in the terms which she knew it to be; rather it was a New World version of a rich man's retreat, with gaily painted garden hammocks and beds replacing wooden seats, and a huge, free-form swimming pool where the croquet lawn should have been!

But it was the ranch house itself which took her breath away; single-storeyed, with wide verandas and walls composed of rough brown logs, it seemed to stretch for miles. But as she continued to look at it, it began to take on more positive shape. Here and there the walls were broken by large expanses of plate glass behind which she glimpsed spacious lounges, while to her left, through another wall of glass, she saw what was obviously the dining-room, where girls in pink checked dresses were hurrying backwards and forwards.

Nervously she climbed the wooden steps and entered the lobby. Straight ahead of her another window afforded a view of scrubland, while on her right lay the reception desk manned by a slim young man with the impassive features of an Indian. Everything seemed to be informal and gay, an effect increased by the polished wood floors and bright Mexican rugs, and some of her fear left her. Large the Circle Q might be, but it certainly did not promise to be dull!

'There you are, my dear! I was so sorry I couldn't come and meet you.'

Beth turned to see an extremely tall woman of indeterminate middle age approaching her. With plain face devoid of make-up, and short, thick hair an unmistakable pepper and salt, she was so unlike the image Beth had been anticipating that all her nervousness vanished and she held out her hand with enthusiasm, her thin face, still pinched with illness, made beautiful by a wide smile.

'I'm delighted to be here, Mrs. Mays, and your driver made the journey most interesting!'

'I'm sure he did! I forgot to warn him not to talk too much. That's Miguel's only trouble.' Beth gave a laugh and the woman looked inquiring. 'I suppose he chatted nonstop?'

'I wasn't laughing at that. Only at his name being Miguel. It's so - so expected!'

'Most things are, in Arizona,' came the dry reply. 'But don't let that fool you! They just love to act the way the tourists expect them to. Mexicans look more Mexican and cowboys look more glamorous than they're ever likely to look in high summer - that's when most tourists go—' came the aside. 'But in season, Arizona is one great big send-up!'

'It sounds fun.'

'It is. But I mustn't keep you talking. You must be tired after your journey.'

'I could do with a wash,' Beth admitted.

'Of course. I'll show you to your room.'

Beth followed her down a long corridor that ran through the centre of the ranch house, its only light coming from antique type carriage lamps on the walls. But even this did not make it gloomy, for here too were bright Mexican scatter rugs and gaily blooming flowers stacked in Indian pottery jugs and bowls.

On her right lay the lounges, television room and bar, while on her left, closed doors with coloured numerals painted on them indicated bedrooms.

At the end of the corridor two bedroom doors faced each other, and Mrs. Mays opened the one on her left. 'I've put you opposite me,' she explained, 'so if I want to work in private we can always do it here. Sometimes my office gets inundated with visitors.'

The bedroom in which Beth found herself seemed too unreal to be true. Was this a staff room or the suite of a visiting grandee from Spain? Magnificent dark wood furniture comprised the canopied bed, dressing table and wardrobe, while silver-gilt bedside lamps and ornaments increased the air of opulence. Thick rugs covered the floor and narrow curtains in matching tweed marked the wide windows. Through a half open door a small but perfectly appointed bathroom could be seen, stark and modern in contrast with the rest of the suite.

'It's fabulous,' Beth gasped. 'I feel more like a guest than an employee.'

'I hope you'll always feel that way. There's quite a bit of work to do here, but some of it should be fun for you.' Brown eyes appraised her. 'You're very pale and thin though.'

'I had pneumonia,' Beth explained. 'But otherwise I'm perfectly healthy.' She went to the window from where she could see tennis courts and another sweep of lawn, while in the distance were stables and several barns. 'I'm not completely sure what I have to do here,' she said, swinging round.

'Deal with my letters, call on my suppliers - food and flowers and things like that. They all deliver, but it keeps them on their toes if they know we go around and inspect them once in a while.' Mrs. Mays leaned against the bedpost. 'But in the main I want you to mix with the guests and see that no one is lonely. You also have to organize bridge sessions and the seating in the dining-room.'

'A sort of subtle matchmaker?' Beth suggested.

'You needn't worry about being subtle! Most girls these days go all out for what they want.'

Wishing she had the same characteristic, Beth held back a sigh. 'Do you want me to wear anything special?'

'The usual cotton dresses or trousers.' Mrs. Mays walked to the door. 'I'll leave you to settle in, Dinner is any time between seven and nine, but I generally dine around eight o'clock. You can eat in your room if you prefer it, or you can join me.'

'I'd like to join you, if I may.'

With another smile Mrs. Mays left, and Beth unpacked slowly. Would she ever return to her normal high spirits and energy, she wondered, or would she always feel this lassitude and vague

depression? Seeing her reflection in the mirror she pulled a face at herself. How drab she looked, with her thin body and lustreless hair. If Danny were to see her now - 'No,' she said aloud, 'I mustn't think of him. I mustn't.'

Promptly at eight o'clock Beth joined her employer at a secluded table in the dining-room. The room was more than half full, with the guests dressed in elaborate outfits ranging from full-length evening dresses to exotic cowboy apparel. Doubts about her own appearance vanished; her cotton dress might be inexpensive, but it would certainly not be noticed amongst such a motley array!

'Feeling more rested?' Mrs. Mays inquired.

'Yes, thanks. And I wasn't tired before,' she lied. 'I don't know what my hours are, but I'm used to working long ones and I don't clock-watch!'

'There are no fixed hours here,' Mrs. Mays smiled. 'It depends on how many guests we have. We all work longer during the season, of course, but we make up for it in the summer. I hope you'll stay here long enough to take advantage of that!'

'You might want to get rid of me before.'

'Not unless I've slipped up in my judgement. I like you, Beth, and I hope you'll like being here.'

'So much already,' Beth admitted, 'that I'm afraid I'll wake up and find it's a dream!'

The well-cooked meal did nothing to detract from the Arabian Nights atmosphere which had gripped Beth from the moment she had entered the Circle Q, and she knew that if only the memory of Danny

would not plague her she could be far happier here than she had been at any time since her arrival in America.

After dinner she accompanied her employer out into the grounds. Behind her came the sound of music and laughter, followed by the heavy beat of feet as they stamped around the floor in a square dance. A melodious male voice could be heard telling the couples what to do, the words amusing and incongruous: 'Hold her hand and swing her round, then stamp your feet upon the ground!'

'That's Sam,' Mrs. Mays said. 'He's awfully good at organizing square dances.'

'I hope I won't have to do that?' Beth asked, and was relieved when the woman shook her head.

In silence they walked along the edge of the pool. Lights lit up the dark water and threw part of the shrubbery into relief, but for the most part the grounds were only faintly illuminated, with here and there a cluster of chairs arranged around a lamp-lit table. The sky was so dark a blue as to appear black, punctuated intermittently with stars that - in the dry desert air - seemed to shine with an incredibly bright and steady light. It was cooler than it had been during the day, and Beth was glad of the cardigan draped around her shoulders.

'I love the desert at night,' Mrs. Mays said. 'It seems to come to life.'

'It looks so bleak,' Beth murmured.

'Wait till you get to know it. Once you do, you'll fall under its spell, just the way I did.'

'Have you always lived here?' Beth asked without thinking, and then quickly apologized. 'I'm so sorry, I've no right to question you.'



'Good gracious, child, we don't stand on such ceremony here! Though you mustn't object if I'm equally curious about you.' The woman stopped walking and breathed deep. 'I came here thirty years ago. It was nothing like it is now. No dude ranches and no tourists. Just wild country and wild people - though perhaps untamed is the better word.'

'And you settled here?'

'Yes, we both loved it. It's here where my husband died. Eight years ago, now. I lost all heart for carrying on and decided to sell up; would have sold up too, if it hadn't been for Wyatt Harding. He owned the ranch next to this one, and he made me see that running away wouldn't solve anything. Sol stayed on and built this place up to what it is today.'

'He must be very pleased with you,' Beth said, though there were many other questions she would have preferred to ask.

'Unfortunately he never lived to see it. He died six- months after my husband. His son runs the place now. Very successfully too. He's a wonderful young man.'

Glad that the darkness hid the colour which flamed into her cheeks, Beth again had to force herself not to ask the questions uppermost in her mind. Was Danny already married? Had he known his fiancée long? Was she as rich as he was?

'And now it's my turn to find out about you,' Mrs. Mays was saying. 'I gathered from what Bill told me that you're an orphan.'

'Not exactly. I have a cousin. I lived with her in New York.'

'Ah yes, Lois. I met her once when I called in at Bill's office. A pretty girl with a sad face.'

'Sad?' Beth was taken aback.

'Yes. As if she were trying to get over an unhappy love affair.'

Dismayed at the woman's perception, Beth realized she would have to be careful not to give her own emotions away.

'And there's no point in *your* hiding it either,' Mrs. Mays added. 'You're also running away from a man, aren't you?'

'Yes.'

'Then you couldn't have chosen a better place to come to. Six months from now, you won't even remember his name!'

Bleakly wondering what her employer would say if she knew that the very man she was promising Beth would forget was the same one whom she had only a moment ago described as being 'wonderful', Beth gave an incoherent murmur and searched round wildly for a way of changing the conversation. But her mind was a blank, filled only with torment and emptiness.

'Don't look so unhappy,' Mrs. Mays said. 'No pain lasts for ever. I can promise you that. Now go in and get a good night's rest. Things always look different in the sunshine.'

More quickly than she had believed possible Beth settled down to her new job. At first she found it nerve-racking to go up and speak to all the guests, but this soon changed, and before the month was out she was never at a loss for words when it became necessary to introduce one person to another, or to organize the bridge parties and canasta evenings which seemed to be the favourite occupation of those who

did not want to participate in the twice weekly square dances or moonlight trekking expeditions.

So gradually as to almost go unnoticed she began to regain the weight she had lost, while her pallor gave way to a delicate shade of honey and her hair, brightened by the sun's rays, became a nimbus of honey gold.

'You're the loveliest creature I've seen in years,' Mrs. Mays said one morning at breakfast. 'And so good-tempered too!'

'I couldn't be anything else in this marvellous place.' Beth helped herself to some toast. 'I still find it hard to believe I'm here.'

'And you're really happy?' There was another question in the brown eyes which Beth was too honest to deny.

'I haven't managed to - to forget,' she said quickly. 'But I'm doing my best.'

Sipping her coffee, she wondered for the hundredth time how she would have been able to answer that question if the Circle Q had been in another part of the States and not - by unhappy chance - so close to Danny's ranch. Despite her efforts to forget him, the knowledge that he was so close made her constantly on edge lest he turn up as a visitor. Yet one day they would have to meet, and though she accepted this as the best thing that could happen to her, the longer she could avoid it the better chance she would have of controlling her emotions.

Breakfast over, she took up her duties. It was Sam's day off and she spent part of the morning at the reception desk making telephone calls for the guests and welcoming a few new arrivals.

As usual it was a beautiful day, the sky a deep cornflower blue, the sun a golden orb and the air crisp and dry. In the pool, children and grown-ups were swimming and young waitresses rushed from group to group with trays of cold drinks and plates of sandwiches. How these clients ate!

'Can you get me a number?' a light voice asked.

Beth looked up and saw a girl of about her own age and height. But here the resemblance ended, for where she herself was fair the girl was raven dark, with magnolia-coloured skin and full red lips that bespoke her Spanish blood.

'Do you want the call out here,' Beth asked, 'or shall I put it through to your room?'

'Out here, please.' Large brown eyes regarded her. 'You're English, aren't you?'

'Yes. I can't seem to disguise my accent.'

'You shouldn't try. It goes down well in the States.'

Although the words were meant as a compliment there was a certain insolence in them that made Beth blush, as though she were guilty of maintaining her accent in order to impress.

'If you could give me the number you want?' she murmured.

'Double five nine three. Just ask whoever answers to tell Mr. Harding to bring my sunglasses when he comes. I left them in his car when he collected me at the airport yesterday.'

Glad that the top of the desk hid her shaking hands, Beth dialled the number. Could this girl be Danny's fiancée? Yet if so, why was she staying here and not with him? Hard on these thoughts came the fear

that Danny himself might answer the call, and nerves made her fumble the last digit so that she had to start all over again.

'Do hurry,' the girl said, 'or he'll have left already.'

Head bent, Beth dialled once more, and was half-way through when the girl gave a cry of delight and ran towards the entrance.

'Don't bother getting the number,' she called over her shoulder. 'He's here!'

Sinking further down into the chair, Beth attempted to hide from sight. It was too late to make a dash for the office. She would have to find the courage to face this through.

'Darling,' she heard the girl say, 'how clever of you to know they were *my* glasses!'

'As you're the only girl who's been in my car in the past twenty-four hours, it wasn't too difficult,' came the amused reply.

At the sound of the man's voice Beth's fear evaporated. This must be Danny's brother; the young man who wanted to be in control.

Carefully she straightened and across the distance of the lobby studied the man framed in the doorway. What she saw surprised her, for expecting youth and weak charm, she saw instead maturity and strength. Here was no youth to be given orders-but a man of over thirty who looked as if *he* was used to command. Dark hair, thick and straight, was combed back from a high forehead where well defined brows marked piercing grey eyes, their colour made lighter by the deeply tanned skin. A beaky nose and firm jaw increased his air of strength, while control was apparent in every line of the tall, lean body garbed in tailored shirt and riding breeches.

'Are you ready to leave?' he was asking his companion.

'In a second. I want to fix an appointment with the hairdresser.' The girl hurried back to the reception desk. 'Could you arrange it for me? Tomorrow morning, as early as possible.'

'With whom?' Beth asked.

'Carlo, of course. Don't tell me he doesn't come any more?'

Pink-cheeked, Beth nodded. Only in the past week, with the ranch filling up with visitors, had there been enough clients to make it worth while for the hairdresser to spend three mornings a week in attendance. Yet like a fool she had forgotten about it.

'Yes, he's here,' she said hurriedly. 'I'll call him and arrange it. Whom shall I say it's for?'

'Lynn Grantham. And if he can't fix me up tell him he won't get the box of cigars I brought him!'

'That's bribery,' Dean Harding said, his voice so clear that Beth, turning away to pick up the internal house phone, guessed he had come to stand by the desk.

'Who cares so long as it works,' his companion said arrogantly, and tapped her fingers on the desk. 'Have you fixed it?'

'The line is busy,' Beth replied, and though she looked fixedly at Lynn Grantham, was aware of Dean Harding watching her, a slight frown on his face.

'Are you new here?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'How do you like Arizona?'

'I haven't seen much of it yet.' Beth's voice, thin and shaky, held nothing of its usual soft tone, and aware that he was still looking at her, she added, 'I intend going on some excursions.'

'You must,' he smiled.

'There you are, Dean! So you've already met Beth.' Mrs. Mays swept into sight, beaming happily. 'Wasn't it clever of Bill Saunders to find her for me!'

'Did you say Beth?' Dean Harding asked.

'Yes. Beth Morrison.'

The man turned and looked at Beth with ice-cold eyes.

'So you decided to come here on your own.'

'What an odd thing to say,' Mrs. Mays commented.

'Not when you know Miss Morrison.'

'Do you?'

'Only by hearsay,' Dean Harding drawled. 'Danny met her in New York.'

Mrs. Mays looked at Beth in surprise. 'You never said you knew Danny.'

'I wasn't sure it was - I didn't know if it was the same one.' Even as she spoke, Beth was aware of the feebleness of her reply. As if there could be two Danny Hardings who owned ranches in Arizona!

'Do let's go.' Lynn Grantham put her hand on Dean's arm. 'You said you were in a hurry.'

'So I am.'

With a brief touch on Mrs. Mays' shoulder and a look of rage at Beth, he moved away, and not till the swing doors shut behind him did Mrs. Mays speak.

'What in the name of heaven was all *that* about?'

Haltingly, with the shrieks of laughter from children as a perpetual background, Beth recounted the story of her meeting with Danny and all that had developed from it.

'That's why his brother was so rude to me,' she concluded. 'He thinks I chased Danny, and that I've come here to continue it.'

'As you've been here a month and not even tried to see him. ...'

'When you've a preconceived idea about someone, facts don't count.'

'You can blame your precious Danny for any ideas Dean has about you.'

'That's what hurts most,' Beth admitted. 'That Danny didn't have the courage to tell his brother the truth. That he pretended *I* was chasing *him*!'

'Danny's afraid of Dean.'

'But why?'

'Because Dean could send him away from the ranch.'

'But it's his!'



'It's Dean's,' Mrs. Mays corrected. 'Left to him by his father.'

Beth could not hide her bewilderment. 'But Danny -'said-'

'Danny says a lot of things that aren't true. Everything belongs to Dean. Wyatt Harding left Danny an income, but not enough for him to retire on! And they aren't brothers either, they're cousins. Danny's mother was Wyatt's sister. She and her husband died when Danny was about ten, and he's lived on the ranch ever since.'

'So Dean *could* send him away?'

'Technically, yes. Not that I can ever see him doing it - no matter how much he threatened.'

'None the less he could,' Beth said. 'Especially if Danny wanted to break his engagement.'

'Dean wouldn't use those kind of threats to force someone into marrying. Much as it hurts me to tell you, no one is forcing Danny to do anything. So coming here isn't the right solution for you.'

As she understood the implication of the words, angry colour stained Beth's cheeks. 'You can't believe I came here to try and make Danny change his mind!'

'I think that *consciously* you meant what you told me,' Mrs. Mays interrupted. 'But what about *subconsciously*? You're intelligent enough to know about hidden motivations. Be honest with yourself, child.'

Hands clenched, Beth pondered on the words. Were they true? Had she hoped to make Danny fall in love with her again when he realized how near she was to him, or had she - as she believed - come here to show him she did not care about him at all?

The heat in the lobby seemed overpowering despite the air-conditioning, and she swayed and grew pale. Vaguely she was aware of being led into the inner office and having some brandy forced down her throat, while Mrs. Mays talked to her in a warm, reassuring voice.

'Poor child, it's been too much for you. You look so well and healthy that I was forgetting you've been ill.'

'I'm perfectly well,' Beth answered, and made to stand up. But her body was not as willing as her mind and her shaking limbs decided her to remain seated a bit longer. 'It's all your talk about subconscious motivations,' she said, trying to inject a note of humour into what was otherwise likely to become a scene of pure bathos. 'Making me face up to the truth was what probably made me feel ill. You're right, of course. I suppose I did come here in the hope that..Unable to go on, she turned her head away, fixing her gaze determinedly on the patch of blue sky which she could see through the small window. 'I think it would be better if I left. I'll try to arrange a flight for tomorrow.'

'And leave me in the lurch? That's not a nice thing to do!'

'But I thought you'd prefer me to go?'

'I would prefer you to stay.' The woman looked at her without smiling. 'To stay and face Danny.'

'I couldn't bear to see him. Not now. Not after the way he lied to me. It's like finding out he never existed!'

'The Danny you thought you knew *didn't* exist. That's why I want you to meet him again.'

Beth could not prevent a wry laugh. 'You're a great believer in kill or cure!'

'It's the only way. And you will be cured. I feel it in my bones.'

'And do your bones say how long it will take?'

'It depends what works first. Father Time or another man!'

'Not another man,' Beth said with total conviction. 'I can't promise to fall *out* of love, but I *can* promise I won't fall *in* love again!'

## CHAPTER FIVE

FOR the remainder of the week Beth was tense to the point of exhaustion. Her discovery of Danny's true position had made many things clear, at the same time further blurring her knowledge of him. Was everything he had told her a pack of lies? Logic forced her to conclude that it was, but even this did not help her forget him. Perhaps Mrs. Mays was right when she said the only way to do this was for her to see Danny face to face and tell him that she knew him to be a liar and a coward. Yet somehow she could not bring herself to force a meeting; when this happened - as happen it would - it would have to come about by accident.

Of Lynn Grantham she saw little, though on the few occasions they did meet she was aware of the girl's barely concealed curiosity.

Work seemed the best palliative, and work there was in plenty if she went looking for it. Casual the dude ranch might appear when viewed with a tourist's eye, but the effort that went into making it seem so was anything but casual, particularly now that they were full.

The temperature had increased and though the nights were still cool, the days were well over ninety degrees, with noontime being so hot that movement out of doors was an effort. But air-conditioning made even the highest temperature bearable and she could well understand why Arizona was called the air-conditioned state!

The large swimming pool was always filled with people, though by mid-morning a majority of them would leave to explore the famous trails that meandered their stony way through the desert. Some of them would return to lunch in the cool dining-room, but others would picnic at one of the small springs which trickled spontaneously and wastefully into the arid land.

Seeking jobs to occupy herself, Beth took on the supervision of the picnic baskets, the daily arranging of flowers in their pottery vases, and the nightly laying of the buffet on the veranda.

At night, when there was no square dancing in the lounge, there was dancing alongside the pool, and more coloured lights were switched on to increase the romantic atmosphere of an already overcharged scene.

It was usually in the evening - in the lull before dinner - that Beth found it most difficult to control her thoughts. Staying in her room made them worse and she took to walking around the perimeter of the ranch, finding some calm in the coolness of night-time and the vastness of the landscape. As Mrs. Mays had prophesied, she no longer found the desert a bleak, tortured expanse of yellow and white sand, but rather a place of moods. In the morning it had the clean, fresh smell of herbs and shrubbery, with a small breeze whispering like a lullaby; at midday, in the full sun, there was a ghostly hush over everything: in the brilliant light the very grains of sand stood apart from each other, while rocks glistened with fool's gold and the distant mountains seemed a painted, unreal backdrop to the scene, reminding one of the brooding emptiness of eternity which had fashioned this landscape. But it was at night that the desert came into its own. The towering pillars of saguaro cacti assumed gnarled, primitive shapes and stood like sentinels of the past, pointing warning fingers to the limitless sky; night cries of animals searching for food echoed in the air, signifying a muted battleground where the struggle for survival continued without cessation.

As she herself was struggling to survive without the man she loved. ...

'How long can I go on?' she asked herself one night as she stood by the rough-hewn barrier she had come to regard as her own leaning post. 'What should I do?'

'Return to New York,' a male voice said.

Only then did Beth realize she had spoken aloud, and she spun round to see Dean Harding. His white dinner jacket increased the dark air of malevolence with which her fevered dislike of him had already cloaked him.

'How dare you creep up on me?' she burst out. 'Or do you make a point of eavesdropping?'

'As you're out here alone, I could hardly have anticipated eavesdropping! I didn't know you normally talk to yourself.'

Mortified, she turned away from him, was aware that he remained looking at her.

'Come, Miss Morrison, there's no need for *us* to be enemies. I can't help it if Danny's behaviour made you believe he wanted to marry you.'

'Made me believe!' she retorted. 'It was a definite proposal of marriage.'

'I see.' His voice was without expression, 'In that case I can understand why you're so angry.'

'Then *show* some understanding.'

'That's what I'm trying to do. But you keep misjudging my motives. In suggesting you return to New York I was thinking as much of your well-being as of Danny's. No matter what you may think, I can assure you he won't break his engagement'

'I haven't asked him to!' she flared. 'Nor have I even attempted to see him. I came here because I was. ...' Her words trailed away. 'Oh, what's the use, you wouldn't believe me.'

'I know you were ill,' he said quietly. 'Mrs. Mays has told me. But remaining here won't help your recovery. I'm sure there are other places where you could go.'

'I'm a working girl, Mr. Harding. I have to stay where I can also find a job.'

'How would Texas suit you? The climate is excellent and a friend of mine is looking for a secretary.'

'I have no intention of running away.'

'Why must you see it as defeat? Surely it's better to be a realist? Danny got carried away by your looks - you don't need me to tell you how lovely you are - and he made promises he didn't mean.'

'How do you know he didn't mean them? If you'd given him a chance to decide for himself he—'

'Do you think I *forced* him into continuing his engagement?, Danny has a mind of his own.'

'But no money of his own! That can be a very strong lever.'

'I see.' Dean Harding made no effort to hide his temper.

'You think I forced him to give you up? That I'm the one to blame for everything?'

'Yes,' she asserted, 'I do.'

'Then I'm afraid I'll have to prove you wrong. What I say may hurt you, but I've got no alternative. The first time I learned of your existence - let alone that Danny had proposed to you - was when you telephoned my home and asked to talk to him. Until then, he hadn't said a word about wanting to end his engagement. He even came back

from New York a week earlier than I'd expected because he said he'd found it rather dull.'

Any doubts Beth might have had as to the veracity of the man's statement were quelled by this last remark. To have made it up would have needed a subtlety of thinking far removed from masculine intelligence. Besides, it held the ring of truth and tolled the death knell of any hopes she might have cherished.

As though sensing her pain he tried to ease it. 'I'm sorry I had to tell you, but it's better for you to know the truth.'

She looked up at the sky, but there was nothing to see. It was empty as *she* was. 'Poor Danny,' she murmured. 'Frightened to tell *me* the truth and frightened to tell you! Does that make you feel important, Mr. Harding?'

He looked perplexed. 'I don't follow you.'

'I just wondered why Danny was so scared of you.'

'Don't play the amateur psychologist!' Dean Harding's perplexity was replaced by irritation that made a thin line of an otherwise well-shaped mouth. 'If Danny has an inbuilt fear, it started long before I came into his life. He was ten when we first met, and as I'm sure you know, traumas begin long before then! However, if you're saying he's frightened because he doesn't want to fend for himself, then on that basis-ninety-nine per cent of the population should be nervous wrecks!'

Beth swallowed painfully, as though trying to absorb what she had just heard. It was impossible to deny the force of Dean Harding's argument, and hard enough though it was she had to accept it.

'But why don't you want me to see him?' she asked.



'Because he's weak. You might make him change his mind.'

'Would that be so terrible? Or do you have a reason for wanting him to marry this Cindy?'

'He loves her,' came the harsh reply, 'but he's too stupid to realize it! If Cindy were more worldly she'd know how to manage him. But as it is. ...' The tall figure came nearer, powerful and overbearing. 'You must leave here. It's the best solution.'

'Not for me,' Beth said with finality. 'I intend to stay.'

'For what purpose? Even if you do turn Danny's head again, how long do you think it will last this time? And will you be happy knowing that the moment you're out of sight he'll forget you?'

They were questions Beth had already asked herself, and the answers to them were anything but pleasant. Yet not for the world would she admit it to this insufferable man who set himself up as the arbiter of what was right and wrong.

'Well?' he said again. 'You haven't answered me.'

'I don't intend to. What I think or what I decide is my own affair, and nothing you say will make me alter my mind. I am not leaving here.'

'And Danny? I assume you intend seeing him?'

She closed her eyes. Would she attempt to see Danny again or would she leave it entirely to chance? All she had learned about him tonight had put him more out of focus than before. Yet despite knowing him to be a liar and a weakling she could not stop loving him. But this was something she did not intend to discuss with Dean Harding.

'It's late,' she said by way of reply. 'I'm going to bed.'

She turned to leave, but he barred her way, making her realize how far she was from the ranch house, and how isolated this part of the property was. Her heart began to pound, heavy beats that made her throat dry.

'If you won't take notice of words,' he said heavily, 'Perhaps you'll take notice of *this*.'

His hand came out and she recoiled. 'No!' she gasped, and stopped as she saw the folded slip of paper in his hand.

Mystified, she took it and tilted it to the faint starlight to see what it was.

A cheque for ten thousand dollars had been made out in her name. Furious tears blurred it from sight and, with shaking hands, she tore it across and across.

With an exclamation he caught her roughly by the shoulder. 'If you think you'll get a larger amount, forget it. I won't give you one cent more!'

'I wouldn't leave here for a million dollars! Haven't you listened to one word I've said? Do you think everyone sees love in terms of money? I don't care *what* Danny has. I'd love him if he was a pauper!'

Before he could reply she pulled away from his grasp and ran down the path, stumbling against some stones but ignoring the pain, intent only on putting as much distance as she could between herself and a man who stood for everything she despised.

The morning brought Beth a greater sense of logic and she was able to analyse Dean Harding's behaviour and see it more as a protection

of his cousin than an insult to *her*. Not that she could forgive him for believing her to be a gold digger! The very word brought a return of irritation and she jumped out of bed and began to dress.

It was not until she went into the lobby that she realized how early she had awoken, for even now the clock on the wall only showed eight.

'You're full of energy today,' Sam said from his usual position behind the reception desk.

'So are you. In all the time I've been here, I don't remember you having any time off! Don't you get tired of working?'

Sam's usually impassive expression was replaced by a smite. 'I'm thankful to have the opportunity of working. Too many of my people never get the chance.'

The arrival of Mrs. Mays precluded any further conversation, though during breakfast Beth learned that Sam was an orphan whom her employer had 'adopted' when he was fourteen.

'Not that a fourteen-year-old Indian can be regarded as a child,' Mrs. Mays remarked. 'Sam had lived through a lifetime before he came here.'

'Are most Indians poor?' Beth asked.

Mrs. Mays nodded. 'But they're much better off now than they used to be. They aren't easy to take care of, you know. There are fifteen separate Indian nations, and they all want to live on their own. There are seventeen different reservations in Arizona alone!'

'I never realized.'

'Not many people do,' Mrs. Mays shrugged. 'As a state we have one of the best records for educating them and preserving their dignity.'

That's the most important thing of all, in my opinion - helping someone to maintain their dignity as a human being.'

They were sentiments Beth echoed, and she wished Dean Harding had been here to listen to them - not that he would be influenced by what anyone said.

'How about taking it easy today,' Mrs. Mays suggested, 'and let Miguel give you a riding lesson?'

Beth jumped at the idea. To get out into the desert, away from civilization, might be just the thing to restore her perspective and sense of humour.

'I'd love that. Will slacks do?'

Mrs. Mays looked vague. 'Why not go and change? It's better to start early.'

Not until she was in her bedroom did Beth understand the reason for her employer's absentminded expression, for on the bed lay the smartest-looking cowgirl outfit she had ever seen. Excitedly she donned the cream silk shirt, well-fitting trousers and heeled shoes which turned her into the epitome of a tourist's dream. Picking up the wide-brimmed Stetson which helped to complete the picture, she went to the lobby where Mrs. Mays dismissed her thanks with a shrug. 'Just go and enjoy yourself, child. That's all the thanks I need.'

Beth's first hour on a horse was more discomfort than enjoyment, and only the Mexican's good-humoured assumption that she was loving every minute of it prevented her from heading back to the ranch. But gradually she began to get the rhythm of the movement and soon she was able to take in the splendour of her surroundings. How could anyone want to live in a crowded city when they could enjoy the freedom of fresh air, sunshine and space? Space more than anything,

she decided, gazing at the far distant horizon where no work of man could be seen. No wonder Arizonans were proud of their state.

At midday they stopped to eat the picnic that had been prepared for them, and never had food tasted as good as it did now, when eaten in the shade of some sagebrush.

'We must return now,' Miguel said. 'You been riding long enough for one day.'

'But I'm not a bit tired,' Beth protested.

'You will be by this evening,' came the sly answer. 'Oh my, how you will suffer!'

Beth sniffed and clambered back on her horse. 'Don't be silly. Come along, Miguel, just another hour.'

Chuckling, the Mexican obeyed, this time setting a different pace. 'No good to tire the horses in the heat,' he exclaimed. 'Better we go slowly.'

It was thirst rather than fatigue which finally decided Beth to return home, and the sight of the ranch house made her long for a cool drink. Anticipation made her set the horse into a canter, and only as her body moved sharply against the saddle did she realize what Miguel had meant when he had said she would suffer!

But a hot bath would put her right, and a cushion on her chair tonight, she decided. Perhaps even two cushions!

But no amount of cushions made Beth's evening a pleasurable one, though she was too good-natured to grudge anyone the amusement of laughing at her discomfiture.

'By this time next week you'll realize how worthwhile it was,' Mrs. Mays said comfortingly as they sat together in the lounge sipping after-dinner coffee.

Unconvinced, Beth grunted, 'I feel such a fool!'

"'Why not go to bed? Then at least you can lie down!'

'It's too early for me to sleep. And it's awful being alone with your thoughts.'

Beth stopped and concentrated on her coffee cup as if she had never seen one before, but glancing at Mrs. Mays surreptitiously, saw that she was looking perturbed.

'I understand Mr. Harding spoke to you about me,' she began abruptly, 'and you told him I had been ill.'

'Yes. He asked me how I'd come to engage you. It would have been pointless not to tell him.'

'There was no secret about it.' Beth moistened her lips. 'I know you and Mr. Harding are friends, and if it's awkward for me to stay on here...'

'Certainly not. I won't hear of you leaving! Unless *you* want to go.' Mrs. Mays looked inquiring. 'Do you still feel the same way about Danny?'

'I don't know what I feel any more. Mr. Harding told me so many things about him that I... I should hate Danny!' she said passionately, 'yet I can't. All I feel is a sort of blank.'

'It's time you met him. I told you that some while ago. The trouble is you're scared to put yourself to the test!'

Beth sighed. 'At least feeling numb is less painful. If I saw him again it might make things worse.'

'Then you'd better prepare yourself,' Mrs. Mays said softly, 'because he's just walked in.'

Beth stiffened. 'Can I get out?'

'Not without being seen.'

Shaking but resolute, Beth remained in her chair, and behind her heard Danny's voice raised above normal as he greeted Mrs. Mays.

'Lynn promised us some square dancing,' he said, 'so we decided to come here.'

'I'll go and tell Sam.' Mrs. Mays stood up, half-shielding Beth as she did so. 'I think you already know my new receptionist, Danny. I believe you met in New York.'

Beth turned and held out her hand. 'Hello, Danny.'

'Beth!' It was an incredulous cry. 'When did you... since when. ...'

'Several weeks,' she replied, and could hardly believe her voice was so normal despite the shaking of her body.

'I can't believe it,' he said huskily. Colour had flooded his skin and he was flushed, with a damp film of perspiration on his forehead despite the air-conditioning.

'I thought Dean had told you,' Lynn Grantham intervened blithely. 'Otherwise I'd have mentioned it.'

Looking at the expression on the magnolia face Beth was certain the girl was lying, and had deliberately planned this meeting.

'Dean never said a word to me,' Danny retorted.

'Is he here?' Mrs. Mays inquired.

'No, he isn't.' The answer came from a girl who had been standing slightly behind Danny. 'He's been in Phoenix all day, but we left word we were coming here, so he'll probably follow.'

Beth listened without hearing, all her senses absorbed by her first encounter with her rival. Anticipating glamour and sophistication, she was wrong on both assumptions, for the round-faced girl in front of her, with her tall, raw-boned body clad in sweat shirt and jeans, was neither glamorous nor smart. She was not even pretty. Beth hastily amended, this as Cindy gave her a slight smile which, though hesitant, none the less gave her warmth and vivacity.

'Danny always manages to meet pretty girls when I'm not around,' she said. 'But he won't tell me how he does it.'

'We met at a party,' Beth replied. 'But I - I didn't know - I'd no idea he lived so near here.'

The large brown eyes - Cindy's best feature - seemed to darken with pain, as if she did not believe what she had heard; but when she spoke she gave no indication of this. 'I expect we'll see a lot of you now. But at least I'll be able to check up on Danny more easily!'

Beth forced herself to laugh. 'He'll have far more competition for my attention down here. I've just become a fan of a horse. And they're much more controllable than young male Arizonans!'

'What a thing to say!' Taking his cue, Danny came into the conversation, at the same time flinging a casual arm over - Cindy's shoulder. The gesture, so easy and assured, stabbed through Beth like



a knife, bringing it forcibly home to her that Danny belonged to someone else.

'Hordes may be more controllable,' he continued, 'but they can't dance as well as I can! And that's what we came here for.'

" 'Give us ten minutes,' Mrs. Mays said quickly, and signalled to a couple of Mexican boys hovering by the door to roll up the rugs in preparation.

'I think I'll take a rain check on the dancing,' Cindy said. 'Now that you've met Miss - er - it won't matter if I sit out.'

'What's wrong, honey, your leg bothering you?'

The solicitude in Danny's voice astonished Beth, nor could she understand the look of shame that unexpectedly flashed across his face.

'Only a slight twinge,', Cindy replied, and looked at Beth. 'I'm sure *you* won't mind standing in for me?'

'I still have a few things to clear up in the office,' Beth murmured.

'You can't disappoint Danny. You're supposed to be his friend.'

'Beth's more *my* friend than Danny's,' a deep voice said, and they all swung round to see Dean Harding. As they watched, he came over to Beth and put his arm on hers, the gesture almost mirroring Danny's earlier one. 'Danny only saw Beth in New York because I gave him her address. I wanted him to check she was still faithful to me!'

Cindy's brilliant smile told - far more than words - of her earlier disquiet. 'In that case *you'll* want to partner Beth.' She looked at Lynn Grantham. 'Would *you* partner Danny?'

'That's what old family friends are for,' the girl laughed, throwing Dean a look which he returned imperturbably.

'Then it's all settled.' Danny smiled at everyone, relieved and carefree again. 'How about a drink before we start? Once the dancing begins, you can't get near the bar.'

'Beth and I will join you in a few minutes,' Dean said, and remained silent till he was alone with her in the corner of the lounge. Only then did he drop his arm from her shoulder and stand back to look at her, his expression contemptuous. 'If you wanted to see Danny you could at least have seen him alone. Bringing Cindy into it was—'

'I didn't arrange it,' Beth said. 'Though I don't suppose you'll believe me.'

'I don't,' he said agreeably, 'but at least I was able to put paid to your urge for mischief.'

'By pretending I was a friend of *yours*? Do you think Cindy fell for that?'

He nodded. 'And she'll go on thinking so unless you tell her otherwise.'

'What makes you so sure I won't? After all, someone who comes all the way down here chasing after Danny can't have any scruples about getting rid of a rival!'

'It's not *your* scruples I'm banking on. It's Danny's! No matter how infatuated he might be with you, he won't hurt Cindy.'

'Then you've nothing to worry about.' Beth went to walk past him, but he refused to let her move.

'Why must you be so obstinate?' he asked softly. 'By staying here you're only hurting yourself. If Danny had wanted to he could have broken with Cindy a long while ago.' The dark head lowered. 'But he doesn't want to. That's why he left New York and came back here. Can't you accept that?'

'And can't you accept that I'm not staying here in order to win him back?'

'Then why stay at all?'

About to speak, she stopped. How could she explain her reasons when she could hardly make sense of them herself? Far better for him to think her hard and uncaring than to guess that she was staying here for her own salvation.

'Well?' he repeated. 'Why stay?'

Deciding that the best method of defence was attack, she said: 'If you're so sure Danny won't leave Cindy, why does my being here worry you?'

'Because I won't have Cindy hurt. Danny may know what to do in the long run, but it won't prevent him taking any favours a pretty girl offers!'

Beth's hand rose, but Dean caught it and half drew it to his lips.

'Now, now,' he chided, his eyes glittering like pale grey stones. 'People are watching us. You don't want them to think we're having a lovers' quarrel!'

Furious, she pulled her hand away from him. 'You won't fool Cindy for long,' she burst out. 'Besides, your friend Miss Grantham might get annoyed!'

'Leave Lynn to me. Now let's join the others.'

'I've work to do.'

'Your work is to entertain the guests,' came the calm reply.

Knowing herself beaten, she allowed him to lead her to the bar, where Danny was the centre of a crowd, and sipping an orange juice, she perched gingerly on a stool and watched him. Like his cousin, he was dressed cowboy fashion, and the casual attire made him look younger than she had recollected. Because he was more tanned than he had been in New York his hair seemed fairer and his eyes more deeply blue. Even his voice was no longer the same, being lighter in tone and quicker. Yet this might be due to comparison with Dean Harding, whose slow drawl was so easily discernible among the quick chatter around him.

'Trust Dean to get Danny out of a tricky situation.' Lynn Grantham was speaking, her head bent forward so only Beth could hear her.

'You must have been disappointed,' Beth replied. 'You went to a lot of trouble to set the whole thing up.'

'Come again?'

'Don't pretend with me. You got Danny here deliberately.'

Thick mascaraed lashes veiled the brown eyes; hard brown eyes completely different from Cindy's gentle ones. 'I thought you'd be pleased. After all, it's what you've been waiting for. You needn't pretend with me, you know. I couldn't care less if Danny married you or Cindy.'

'I'll accept that, at least. You're only concerned with Dean!' Beth gave a cool smile. 'That's why you want him to think badly of me.'

'He already does!'

'Then why are you jealous of me?'

'Jealous?' Lynn's nostrils flared. 'Dean would never fall for you. He can smell fortune-hunters a mile off! That's why he never strays outside his own league.'

'Of which you and Cindy are members, of course?'

'Of course. Cindy mightn't look it, but she's one of the richest girls in the state. Her land borders Dean's, and when she marries Danny it'll give Dean the biggest ranch in Arizona. That's why he's keen on the match.'

'And you're doing your best to help him?'

'Naturally.'

Beth averted her head. As she did so her gaze met an ice- grey one, and an unexpected imp of mischief replaced her anger. Without giving herself time to think, she slid down from the stool and moved over to Dean, draping her body against his and looking meltingly into his face.

'What about the dancing you've been promising me?'

She felt him tense beside her and was uncomfortably aware of the hardness of his thigh. She made to draw back, but too late realized he had caught her round the waist and was pulling her even closer.

'Of course, angel,' he drawled. 'Let you and me lead off.'

In a grip of iron he propelled her to the lounge, now prepared for the dancing.

'I don't want to dance with you,' Beth said tightly.

'You should have thought of that before you made the offer.'

Country and Western music began and Dean whirled her round in time to it. Although the same height as Danny, he was much stronger, and she could not help wondering where the force came from, for he was whipcord thin.

Other couples were already joining in, and soon the room rang to the stamping of feet as Sam gave loud commands, enjoining them to: 'Dance to the left and then to the right, gentlemen, hold your girls real tight!'

'Here we go,' Dean mocked, and pulled her so close that the breath was almost knocked out of her body.

'Must you show off how strong you are?' she hissed.

He did not reply, for again Sam was telling them what to do: If she's a Missus, if she's a Miss, Grab her tight and give her a kiss!'

'Don't you dare—' Beth began, and found her mouth covered by a surprisingly gentle one.

'Hold that kiss as long as you can,' warbled Sam, 'and show your partner who's the man!'

Eyes closed, Beth lost all sense of time. The raucous music sounded miles away and the movement of her limbs was automatic. Only the mouth upon her own had any feeling of reality as it pressed hers with less and less gentleness, forcing her to a response she did not want to give.

'Tush her back and set her free,' commanded Sam, 'but keep her hand and count to three!'

Light was bright upon her lids as Dean Harding drew away from her, but he still held her hand, and she knew from the hard, tight smile on his face that he had no intention of letting her off lightly. But she could not go on with this charade. She was too tired, too depressed. Seeing Danny had given her a shock that was now beginning to take effect.

'Please let me go, Mr. Harding.'

'Call me Dean,' he ordered. 'After all, you know me so well.'

'I want to go,' she repeated.

'To New York, I hope.'

Anger washed over her. How dared he tell her what to do with her life! 'I want to go to my room. I'm tired.'

'Age-old cry of women when they're not getting their own way!' he jibed. 'I bet you never said that to Danny.'

'I loved *him*,' she cried, 'and I hate *you*!'

'Is hate more tiring, then?'

It must be, she thought, as she stared at him. Their verbal battle was robbing her of her last vestige of strength, leaving her as exhausted as when she had first been ill. She couldn't go on fighting this man; couldn't defend herself from his virile masculinity.

She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came. The room revolved around her, the lights growing so bright that they threatened to burn into her brain. She put her hand to her head and found the honey-gold tendrils of hair wet to the touch.

'I think I'm going to ... to faint,' she gasped, and felt herself slipping into unconsciousness.

'Beth!' Dean's voice seemed to come from an enormous distance, but there was no mistaking the urgency in it. 'Please stand aside,' she heard him say. His arms came about her again and she went to ward him off, but her efforts were useless and she was swung off the ground and carried like a baby. It was strangely comforting not to fight any longer, and with a sigh she relaxed against the hard shoulder, her head fitting comfortably into the curve of his neck.

Outside in the darkness she opened her eyes, but the lassitude which had engulfed her earlier had still not gone and she made no effort to move. How odd to feel so at home in the arms of a man who was her avowed enemy!

They had now reached the pool. A few couples were sitting on deck chairs, but in the far corner a hammock swung empty and she felt herself being placed on it.

'Thank you,' she whispered. 'It was kind of you to bring me out here. I'm sorry I made such a fool of myself.'

'I'm the fool. I should never have insisted on making you dance. I'd forgotten you'd been ill.'

'Why should you remember?' she said wryly.

He sat on the hammock beside her. 'I guess one only remembers facts about people one loves or hates.'

'I know I don't qualify for the first emotion,' she said with a return of her old spirit, 'but I was positive I came top of your list in the other!'

'I don't hate you. If we had met in other circumstances we could—'



'Don't say we could have been "good friends"! Triteness isn't one of your characteristics.'

'How do you know?'

'You're too incisive.'

He chuckled. 'My, my, we *are* being polite! A while back you'd have said obstinate or pig-headed!'

'I suppose I'm still too tired to quarrel.'

'Must we quarrel?'

'I wasn't the one to start,' she reminded him.

For a moment he was silent, and she turned and looked at him, wishing she could see his expression. But all she could make out was the high forehead and beaky nose which made him appear more saturnine than ever.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'From now on I'll hold my peace. I'll watch from the sidelines instead.'

'As a referee?' she asked before she could stop herself.

'Hardly. Referees have to be unbiased. And you know very well whose side I'm on.'

'You've made that very plain, Mr. Harding.'

'At least call me Dean.'

'So you still want Cindy to think I'm *your* friend, not Danny's?'

'Yes. Let her wear her rose-coloured spectacles as long as she can.'

'And if Danny and I should—' Beth stopped, unwilling to put the rest of the sentence into words.

'If you and Danny *should*,' came the frigid reply, 'then Cindy's spectacles will fall off by themselves!'

Beth's answer was forestalled by the tap of heels on the path as Lynn Grantham came in sight.

'So that's where you are! Feeling better, Miss Morrison?'

'Yes, thank you.' Beth rose. 'But do call me Beth. As we're such friends it's silly to be formal!'

With an ungracious grunt the American girl took the place vacated on the hammock, moving closer to Dean as she made herself comfortable.

Beth's brief moment of triumph vanished and with a murmured good night she left them.

Alone in her room she sank on to the bed and gave herself up to thoughts of Danny. Yet oddly enough he did not come clearly into her mind. All she could conjure up was a blurred image, with Cindy's features more clearly remembered than his.

Could this be due to guilt? It was all very well to believe one had the right to fight for the man you loved even though he was already engaged to someone else. But it was hard to maintain this attitude when faced with the actual flesh and blood creature who was wearing his ring.

Despondently she began to undress. Dean was to blame for this. He had made her feel she was in the wrong; made her believe she should go away and leave things as they were. But she wouldn't. She would

stay until her emotions had settled sufficiently for her to understand them. Only then, when she knew exactly how she felt about Danny, would she make up her mind whether or not to fight for him.

## CHAPTER SIX

DAWN had barely lightened the sky when Beth awoke. Her sleep had been fitful, punctuated with distorted images of Danny and Dean that had made no sense.

Still tired, she mulled over the events of the night before: her first sight of Danny for months, yet they had not exchanged more than a dozen words. No doubt he would call her today - if only to find out if she intended saying anything to Cindy.

Beth frowned. What had made Danny - who obviously liked a pretty face - want to marry a girl like Cindy? Lynn's assertion that Dean wanted the marriage because it would give him one of the largest ranches in the state did not ring true. It might make him encourage the match, but certainly not to the point of directly interfering. Indeed, if he wanted the land so badly he could have married the girl himself.

Then why was Danny engaged to her? Was it his need for security? If this were so it gave sense to his running away from New York.

Anxious to put him out of her mind, she busied herself helping prepare some of the picnics, for today there were three different trekking expeditions leaving the ranch.

'Why don't you go on one of them?' her employer suggested.

'You're touching a sore spot!' Beth grinned. 'I think I'll stick around here and take a swim later in the afternoon.'

'Would you like to go into Phoenix after lunch? I was planning to go in myself to get some things, but if you would go for me ...'

Beth bit back the desire to say no; it was impossible to remain constantly within earshot of the telephone on the chance that Danny would call. 'I'd love to,' she said quickly.

'Then take the rest of the morning off. There are only the flowers to do, and they can be left until later.'

Taking Mrs. Mays at her word, Beth changed into a bikini and went to sit beside the pool.

The hours passed slowly. She was too far away to hear the telephone ring, but whenever one of the Mexican boys came out through the swing doors she watched anxiously. But always they approached one of the guests and eventually she gave up watching them.

Lulled by the quietness and the heat, she fell asleep, awaking with a start as a pebble crunched near her ear. A figure blocked out the sunlight, and though she was still too blinded by glare to see clearly, she knew it was Danny.

'So there you are,' he murmured, and dropped down beside her. 'I've been trying to get here since nine this morning, but Dean kept finding me things to do.'

'You don't need to apologize,' she said coldly. 'I wasn't expecting you.'

He looked discomfited. 'I suppose you think I behaved like a swine? I did of course, and I can't explain it.'

'I'm sure you can!'

His face crinkled with pain. 'I've never known you be cruel.'

'And I've never *known* you,' she retorted. 'The man I fell in love with in New York doesn't exist!'

He lowered his head, the crouched position in which he was sitting making him look unusually abject. 'You've every reason to hate me. But you can't hate me more than I hate myself! I love you and—'

'Don't keep up that lie!'

'It's true! If I hadn't been in love with you, I wouldn't have felt so guilty. That's why I ran out on you.' He raised his head and looked at her with tormented eyes. 'When I saw you last night I knew I'd been crazy to think I could get over you. I love you, Beth. I can't live without you!'

They were words she had ached to hear, yet hearing them brought none of the pleasure she had expected. Faith - once destroyed - could not be restored by a few emotional phrases.

'Haven't you anything to say?' He caught her hand, holding it against his chest so that she could feel the pounding of his heart. 'Can you forgive me? Can we start again?'

'How can you ask that?' She tore her hand away from his and jumped to her feet. 'You may live in Mormon country, but even *they* have changed their rules!'

'You don't think ...' With a swift movement he stood up and pulled her away from the pool to stand in the shadow of some screening bushes. 'I'm going to tell Cindy the truth. I can't go on with an engagement that doesn't mean anything to me!'

'Why didn't you tell her when you first came back from New York?'

'Because I. ...' he stopped, and she knew him well enough to know he was searching for an answer that would not hurt her.

'Tell me the truth, Danny. I'm tired of lies.'

'I thought I would forget you,' he mumbled, 'but I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop thinking of you.'

'Why didn't you at least write to me?'

'Would it have done any good? Until I was free I didn't have the right to get in touch •with you.'

'You haven't the right now,' she-flared.

'I know. But I had to make sure you still wanted me.'

The words sickened her and she moved back a step. Not that she needed distance between them in order to put him into focus; he was too heartbreakingly clear already.

'Why are you looking at me like that?' he asked. 'I love you, Beth. I know you hate me for what I did, but don't make me pay for it for the rest of my life!'

Still she could not speak. She knew she should despise him; she probably did despise him, she thought fleetingly, yet somehow it did not affect her love for him, nor her need to be held in his arms.

'It's so wrong,' she whispered. 'We've no right ... we shouldn't...'

'We love each other,' he said passionately. 'And that gives us the right.'

Drawing her into his arms, he held her close, raining kisses on her wet eyelids and tear-stained cheeks before finally finding her mouth.

Beth gave herself up to his demands, but instead of the joy she had anticipated, she felt a binning shame that grew worse the longer she remained in his arms.

'No!' she cried, and pushed him away. 'I can't!'

'But you love me!'

'It isn't enough. You're engaged to Cindy.'

'I'll soon be free!'

'Then we must wait till you are.'

There was a finality in her voice that brooked no argument, and his hands dropped away from her. 'I'm sorry, darling. When I came here today I swore I wouldn't make love to you until I was free. But seeing you like this - so close - so beautiful...Forgive me.'

This sounded like the man she wanted Danny to be, and her anger dissolved. Seeing it, his face cleared.

'We won't have to wait long, honey. In a month at the most, this will seem like a bad dream.'

'Why a month?'

'Because Cindy's having an operation. I can't tell her about us until she's had it.'

The news took Beth by surprise. Was Danny lying again? Yet his story was too easy for her to check for him to have invented it.

'What's wrong with her?' she asked.

'It's her leg. It began when she was fourteen. She was out riding and her - her horse shied and threw her. After that she had trouble walking. Some days she was fine and some days she would fall down flat. I don't know how many specialists she saw, but none of them could do anything for her. For a few years they didn't even know what



was causing it!' As he spoke Danny's face lost its young look. 'You've no idea how awful it was for Dean and me. Cindy had been a champion at sports. There was even talk of her representing the States at the Olympic Games, but that darned horse put paid to everything.'

Beth's eyes brimmed with tears as she envisaged what a tragedy this must have been to a fourteen-year-old child. 'At least she seems to have got over it now,' she said.

Danny looked uneasy. 'It was because - well - she fell in love with me. After the accident I sort of took her under my wing. I didn't realize she'd think I was in love with her, and by the time I guessed what was happening, it was too late.'

He flung out his arms, looking like a young Greek god with his blond hair and tanned skin. 'I suppose I could have got out of it if I'd wanted to, but I let the thing drift on. And Dean was keen on the match ... that probably had something to do with it.'

Beth sighed deeply. Now it became clear why Danny had found it so hard to ask Cindy for his freedom. Bad enough to do so to a girl who was completely well, but to one who had already suffered so much and who regarded him as her salvation, it must have been impossible. Indeed it *had* been impossible; and for that very reason he had run away from New York.

'Perhaps you shouldn't tell Cindy at all,' she said gently. 'After all, if you hadn't met me again...'

'But I *have* met you. And I can't marry Cindy! As soon as she's had the operation I'll tell her the truth.'

Shaken by all she had heard, Beth sat down again, with Danny beside her. She glanced at him from beneath her lashes. How pale and serious he appeared despite his tan and natural good humour. Poor

darling, only now could she appreciate the torment he had undergone since leaving her. The disquieting thoughts of a moment ago were pushed firmly down into the recesses of her mind; later perhaps she might bring them out and examine them, but now she was not going to spoil this reconciliation by being petty and unforgiving.

Yet one question could not be denied. 'Why didn't Cindy have an operation before?'

'It was too dangerous. The trouble with her leg comes from pressure on the spine. But it's only in the last few years they've discovered a technique for operating.'

'What happens if it isn't successful?'

'She'll be the same as she is now. But I'll still tell her about us. Whatever happens, I can't go on living a lie.'

He caught her hand and squeezed it, and she wished he would say something to ease her conscience.

'How are you fixed for the rest of the day?' he asked.

His remark was so different from what she had wanted that she gave a wry smile. Danny was handsome, young and in love with her. If they were not as mentally close as she wished, it was a small price to pay for all his other attributes.

'I'm going into Phoenix after lunch. Are you free?'

'I can't go into town,' he said. 'I was hoping we could take a ride in the desert.'

'But it's fun in town. I want to get some presents and—'

'I can't go. Cindy's there today and we might bump into her.' Seeing the change on Beth's face, he leaned close. 'Don't look like that, darling. We've agreed we can't tell her about us until she's had the operation, and if she saw us alone together she'd smell a rat.'

Wishing she could sleep away the month ahead and wake up only when Danny was free to come to her without evasion, Beth forced a smile to her lips. 'I'm sorry. You're right, of course. Perhaps we'd better not meet at all.'

'That's too drastic. But we can meet when there are other people around. I'll fix it as often as I can.'

Later that day Beth went into Phoenix, using the long drive to mull over her conversation with Danny. Knowing his engagement had been an enforced one - albeit forced by emotion rather than Dean - made her view his behaviour with more understanding. If Cindy's operation failed, how could she let him break his engagement? Indeed, the girl would need him all the more. Danny might argue that at the very worst they might have to delay telling her the truth, but even acknowledging this brought Beth little comfort. Only when Danny was completely hers would she finally have peace of mind.

But would she really have peace or would she - as Dean had tauntingly said - always be afraid that if she went out of Danny's sight she would also go out of his mind?

Angrily she pushed the thought aside. Dean wanted her to have doubts. Only in that way could he keep her and Danny apart.

Arriving in Phoenix she set about buying the goods Mrs. Mays had listed, and by four o'clock was free to do her own shopping.

The stores were packed with people, and the noise and general confusion was so tiring that by the time she had bought a present for Lois - a silver and turquoise necklace - and gifts for Mrs. Mays and some of the staff, she could no longer face the prospect of buying anything for herself.

Laden with packages she went in search of the car, and depositing her things in the back, could not face the prospect of the return drive without a sustaining cup of coffee.

'I'll be back in ten minutes,' she promised the Mexican boy who was driving her, and went in search of the nearest drugstore. But here again Christmas crowds thwarted her, and she hesitated, unsure whether to forget the whole thing.

'Lost your way?'

With a start Beth looked up and saw Dean Harding in front of her. Unexpectedly he was wearing a lounge suit, the silk mohair beautifully cut and making him seem more like a banker than a ranch owner. It also made him look more formidable, an opponent to be feared and not treated lightly.

'I was wondering whether to bother trying to get a cup of coffee,' she replied to his question.

'Are you here alone?'

'One of the boys drove me in.'

A plump woman knocked into her and Dean caught her by the arm.

'Definitely not the place to hold a conversation,' he remarked. 'If you really want that coffee, let me drive you back and we'll have one on the way.'

'What about my driver?'

'He can go back by himself. We'll tell him.'

Knowing it would be churlish to refuse, especially since only last night he had proffered a peace-offering, she accepted his offer, and with surprising speed found herself seated in a large car with the city receding into the distance.

As she had anticipated he drove well: fast yet controlled, his well-shaped hands resting lightly on the wheel, his profile intent and serious. He had the surprising ability to look different each time she met him, but whether it was as dandily dressed cowboy or austere-looking business man, there was no denying his magnetic personality. No wonder Danny was awed by him.

'I'm not driving too fast for you, am I?' Dean unexpectedly demanded.

'Not at all.' She glanced at the speedometer, surprised to see they were doing a hundred miles an hour. In this car there was barely a suggestion of movement. But even the knowledge that they were travelling fast did not worry her. Wary though she was of the man beside her, she had no qualms when it came to his driving. Nor with anything else he might do, she realized with honesty, for she could not imagine him other than excelling in anything he undertook.

'How about that coffee I promised you?'

Surprised, she looked at the passing landscape. There was no sign of habitation for miles around, only scrubland and cactus. But even as she started to speak he drew the car into the side of the highway and then pressed several buttons on the dashboard.

Wide-eyed, she felt both their seats slide back until they had almost touched the rear ones, giving them considerably more leg room. Into

this space a low table rose from the floor while on the dashboard a light flashed on.

'Coffee's ready,' Dean said, and slid back part of the inside door to disclose a chromium interior lined with flasks and glasses. Setting a flask on the table, he waved a laconic hand. 'Care to serve?'

In silence she did so, pouring iced coffee into crystal goblets while Dean opened another door and took out a silver box filled with biscuits.

'What's in the door on my side of the car?' she asked in tones of casualness.

'Pyjamas, dressing gown and shaving kit. Just in case I decide to stay the night somewhere! The rear door holds hard liquor and cheese snacks.'

'I'm surprised there isn't a bed!'

'These seats fold right back and form a double one. I'll show you if you put your coffee down.'

'Noj thanks,' she said hastily, and without looking at him knew he was laughing at her. 'I've never seen a car like this before,' she changed the subject.

'It's custom-built to my own specifications.'

'It must be frightfully expensive.'

He shrugged. 'Expense is relative. And I'm not shy of spending my money. I've worked hard enough to get it.'

'I thought your father. ...' mortified, she stopped.

'That I inherited it from him?' Dean smiled. 'Matter of fact I did get quite a stack, but I've trebled it in the past five years.'

'You must be very clever.'

'Not particularly,' he said, taking her comment at face value. 'I had a lucky oil strike on some land I own in Texas and I also started re-working one of our old mines. Everyone said it had been worked out years ago, but I was convinced there was more copper there.' He set down his empty glass. 'There was - a great amount. But don't let's talk about me. What about you? Are things clarified with Danny? Was he able to make you forgive him this morning?'

'How do you know he saw—' too late she tried to draw back the question.

'I can read Danny like an open book,' Dean said calmly. 'When he started rushing around to get his work done ahead of time, I knew what was on his mind!'

'Then perhaps you already know what we've decided!'

'I probably would if I'd seen him when he came back! But I was already in Phoenix. Won't *you* tell me?'

'So you can start bullying me again?'

'I thought we'd agreed last night that I wasn't going to tell you what to do.'

'I didn't think you meant it.'

He rubbed the side of his cheek with one strong yet slender finger. Unlike most American men he wore no ring, and even his watch, she saw with surprise, was a plain and serviceable one in silver with a leather band.

'I never say anything I don't mean. Nor do I stick to an opinion if I find out it's wrong.' He paused. 'Aren't you going to ask me why I changed my mind about *you*?'

'I might not like the answer!'

'I'll tell you even so,' he drawled. 'And incidentally, I'd like to apologize for the way I behaved when we first met. But that was more Danny's fault than mine. The impression he gave was that you'd both been playing a game and it hadn't meant anything to either of you. That's why I thought you'd come here merely out of spite - to make trouble for him.'

'And you changed your opinion last night?'

'Yes.' His eyebrows, dark as his thick, glinting hair, lowered in two well-defined arcs over his eyes, making them appear a deeper and warmer grey. 'When you almost fainted and I carried you outside, you suddenly seemed so defenceless - so fragile - that I - I couldn't go on disliking you.'

Unprepared for such an answer - and also bitterly disappointed by it - she turned away. If only his change of mind had come from a reassessment of her character! Instead it had been the obvious masculine one of physical awareness.

'You look angry,' he said.

She shrugged. 'Just disappointed.'

'Why?'

Avoiding his gaze, she stared through the window, conscious that he was leaning close to her, though not realizing how close until she felt his breath on the side of her cheek.



'Why did my answer disappoint you?' She said nothing. 'Tell me,' he insisted.

'Because I think you've still got the same opinion of me as before. The only difference is that you now see me as too defenceless and fragile to win Danny back!'

'On the contrary. As it so happens I think you're more likely to succeed. That's why I won't try and stop you. If you love Danny so much that you can forgive him for the way he's behaved, then you've every right to fight for him. My only regret is that Cindy will be hurt.'

'That's my regret too.' She turned to look at him. 'Danny loves me and wants to marry me. But we've - we've decided not to say anything until after Cindy's had the operation. He told me all about it.'

'I see.' Dean's voice was slower than ever. 'So everything is settled.'

'Yes.' Without knowing why, Beth felt the need to justify herself. 'They would never have been happy together.'

Danny's sorry for Cindy, but that can't make up for love.'

'And will he forget his guilt when he's married to you?'

'If the operation is successful, why should he feel guilty?'

'But if it isn't a success, what then?'

'Danny will still tell her,' Beth replied. 'It will be much harder ... painful even... but you can't base a marriage on pity. It doesn't work.'

'Neither will *your* marriage to Danny - if the operation's a failure. His guilt will always stop him from being happy.'

Puzzled, she said: 'Why do you keep using the word guilt?'

'Because that's what he feels. He never meant the accident to happen - it was just a bad joke that misfired - but ,, nevertheless he blames himself. Surely you can understand that?'

Carefully she set down her empty glass. 'We must be talking at cross purposes. What joke do you mean?'

'But I thought.... You said Danny told you?'

'Only that Cindy had been thrown from her horse.'

'I see.' Dean picked up the empty glasses and flask and replaced them in the side of the door.

'There's more to it than that, isn't there?' Beth demanded. 'It's too late for you to stop now. You've got to tell me the whole story.'

'I'd rather you asked Danny.'

'Please,' she pleaded. 'I can't take any more lies. If *you* tell me, I know it will be the truth.'

Only as she spoke did she realize how true the words were. Strange that though she had begun by disliking this man, she had never doubted his honesty. Whereas with Danny... She pushed the thought aside, unwilling to follow it further.

'Very well,' Dean said quietly. 'Seems like I'm always the one to tell you something you won't enjoy hearing. But if you insist....' The long, thin fingers tightened on the wheel. 'He was responsible for her accident. He set up some kind of booby trap for her - in their teens they were always playing fool tricks like that - only this time it misfired. Cindy's horse reared and she was thrown. The rest you know.'

Beth closed her eyes, wishing she could also close her mind to what she had just learned. But the truth could not be blocked out and once again she had to admit that Danny had lied to her. What basic flaw was there in his character that made it so difficult for him to admit to something that might - even momentarily - detract from the image of perfection which he had set for himself?

'Don't look so upset,' Dean interrupted her thoughts. •What I've told you doesn't alter the position. You and Danny can still—'

'No,' she burst out. 'It changes everything. Everything! If the operation's a failure, he *can't* leave Cindy. I wouldn't let him.'

'You'd have no right to stop him.'

'Since when have *you* let him do what he wanted?' she demanded.

Dean drew in a sharp breath. 'I only wanted him to keep his word to Cindy. If I'd realized how deeply he loved *you* ... if he had told me about you when he got back from New York. ...' He banged his hand on the wheel. 'But at least you can understand why I want you to be careful. Why you must make sure that Danny knows exactly what he's doing. If the operation's a success you'll have nothing to worry about. Cindy will take it badly when Danny walks out on her, but then so did *you* six months ago! What worries me is what happens if Cindy's back to first base. Sure Danny will tell her - but how will he feel? Will his conscience let him be happy with you? If not, then three people are going to be mighty sorry for themselves.'

There was no denying the truth of this, yet she could not help a lingering doubt as to Dean's motivations.

'What's on your mind?' he said with disturbing perception.

'Nothing.'

'Now *you're* not being honest.'

'It's your ranch,' she muttered. 'It's next to Cindy's, and if it were amalgamated with yours...'

'You really do have a low opinion of me, don't you?' Dean's breath came out on a sigh. 'My ranch is already as big as I can manage. I don't run it for a profit. The fact that it does is beside the point. My real business is mining and oil, and my taxes on that each year would keep several hundred people for the rest of their lives! The ranch is my hobby, nothing more. As far as I knew, Danny was going to run Cindy's ranch for himself.'

Without questioning him further, Beth knew this was the truth; and no questions were needed to tell her that this was exactly what Danny had wanted: the independence of land of his own.

'I'm so confused,' she confessed. 'I don't know what to do. Perhaps I should go away.'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I've nothing to offer him!'

His surprise was obvious. 'You've got yourself! That should be enough for any man.'

Tears filled her eyes and, overwrought, she began to cry. 'It isn't enough. I can't fool myself. Danny might be happy with me for a little while, but he'd soon regret what he'd done... wish he were still with Cindy.'

The tears fell faster and she fumbled for a handkerchief. A square of white was placed in her hand, crisp and heavy and smelling faintly of

tobacco. She wiped her eyes and handed it back to him, trying at the same time to give a slight smile.

'I'm sorry. You must think me a complete fool.'

'I think you're pretty wonderful,' he said, and pulled her into his arms. 'Things will work out for you, Beth. I promise they will.'

Without knowing why, his words gave her comfort, or perhaps it was the feel of his chest beneath her head and the slow but steady pounding of his heart. All she knew was that she was no longer afraid, as if she had found the strength for which she had been searching and which she had childishly believed she had found with Danny.

Childishly believed? Did this mean she no *longer* believed it? The answer could not be denied, and though it brought relief it also brought shame; the shame of knowing that sexual attraction had blinded her to the shallowness and cupidity of the man.

How right Lois had been when she had wondered if her love for Danny had been a result of her determination to make a new life for herself in a new country. Only a need for security could have stopped her from seeing that Danny, for all his looks and charm, was too weak and facile to satisfy her for long.

Unfortunately he had left New York before her infatuation had ended, and absence had made her cloak him with a character he had never possessed.

But now her foolish love died. Irrevocably, inexplicably, it had ended, and she was free.

'Feeling better?' Dean asked.

Aware of his arms, she drew back, smoothing her hair and avoiding his eyes. 'Much better, thank you.'

'Good. Now promise me you won't worry about the future. Think in positive terms. That Cindy will get well and that you and Danny will get married.'

'And live happily ever after?'

'I'll do my best to make that possible for you.'

Puzzled, she looked at him, and he placed his hand over hers.

'My wedding present to you both will be a ranch for Danny. A place of his own.'

The magnitude of the offer left her speechless, and as surprise ebbed away it was replaced by a shattering depression. So intense was it that she began to shake. What was the matter with her? Why was she miserable when she should be delirious with joy?

She raised her eyes to Dean, but words of thanks would not come. She stared at him as though she were seeing him for the first time, aware that he was not only the most handsome man she had met but also the kindest. How weak Danny appeared by comparison. If only it had been Dean whom she had met in New York!

'No!' she thought desperately, 'this can't be happening to me. It isn't possible... it's too quick.'

Yet it *had* happened, and nothing could undo it. But she *must* undo it. Must prevent it taking root before it destroyed her life. 'I'm going insane,' she thought. 'One minute I'm in love with Danny and the next minute ...'

Yet she had never loved Danny. All too clearly she saw that now. Love was a mutual giving and taking, the sharing of one's thoughts and beliefs. And in this respect she and Danny had been strangers.

Yet Dean did not seem a stranger to her; that was the frightening thing. It was as though she had always known him, had been waiting for him to appear.

'Well,' Dean said, breaking into her thoughts, 'don't you think my wedding present will solve your worries about Danny?'

'Yes,' she said huskily. 'When he finds out he—'

'You're not to tell him,' Dean said sharply. 'He might blurt it out to Cindy. That's one thing you must promise me, Beth - that you'll make sure he doesn't break with her before the operation.'

'I've already told you he won't.'

'I know. But he can be changeable.'

She nodded, knowing too well what he meant. Not that she had any right to condemn him when she was exactly the same. But perhaps this new, unwanted love which had engulfed her with the rapidity of a spring tide would ebb as quickly as it had come, leaving her once again in control of herself?

Looking at the tanned face so close to her own, she knew this would never happen. Dean was not a man one could forget. If only she could go back to New York! But this would only make Danny come after her, ever ready to be the male giving chase! How clear her picture of him was now. But too late.

'Why the sigh?' Dean asked.

'I didn't know I had,' she replied.

'Miserable at having to keep your happiness secret?'

Not trusting herself to speak, she nodded.

'How about seeing something of *me* while you're here?' he went on laconically. 'After all, you're supposed to be a friend of *mine*\ And if you never come to the ranch Cindy might get suspicious.'

'Of course.' Beth's uplift of happiness died at these last words. How solicitous he was for Cindy's welfare!

'Good. Then we can begin the act today.'

'Act?'

'Yes.' His eyes were amused. 'Your pretence of being fond of me!'

She forced a smile. 'You'll have to pretend too.'

'What makes you think I'll be pretending?'

She did not answer and he set the car in motion, eyes intent on the road. 'Annoyed with me, Beth?'

'Certainly not.' Then hastily: 'Why should I be?'

'Because my honesty has embarrassed you.'

'No, it hasn't. I'm glad you said we can be friends.'

'We could be more than that.'

This time there was no denying his question and she turned to look at him. He was still intent on the highway and she could read nothing in his profile. Yet answer him she must, for not to do so might give her feelings away.



'You've made it very clear what you think of me, Dean. You find me defenceless and fragile. You also said I'm lovely to look at. Add all that up and you've got sexual attraction!'

For an instant he glanced at her, a sharp questioning look. 'Is that what you think it is?'

She nodded. 'I'm flattered too. I shouldn't think you're an easy man to please.'

'I'm not. Nor am I easily aroused by a beautiful woman. I'm not a celibate,' he went on forcibly, 'but good looks alone would never get me.'

His words warmed her, but she was careful not to show it.

'You know,' he said suddenly, 'you're still a stranger to me. Apart from the fact that you're English, I don't know much about you. What made you come to the States?'

'My parents died and Lois - my only relative - suggested I live with her.'

'Is *she* married?'

'No.' About to tell him of Bill, Beth decided against it. He would have no interest in the problems of a person he did not know.

'Is she a secretary too?' he asked.

'Nat now. She works for an interior decorator. But I took over her job. That was how I came here.'

'Ah,' it was a satisfied sound. 'The charming Mr. Saunders.'

'He's more than charming,' Beth protested. 'He's genuinely kind.'

'You sound as if you like him.'

'I do.'

'More than me?'

The abrupt switch of emphasis left her startled. 'I barely know you,' she replied lightly. 'Ask me that question in a few weeks' time!'

'If I do, will you promise to answer me truthfully?'

Again there was a tone in his voice which made her pulses race, but again she forced herself to ignore it.

'You're as big a flirt as Danny!'

'I don't flirt. It's a waste of time. Nor do I bother with flattery. If I want something from a girl, I come right out and ask her!'

'What will happen when you fall in love? Won't you bother with pretty speeches?'

'It shouldn't be necessary. I hope she'll *know* what I feel!'

'You'll have to make it obvious, then.'

'Isn't it always obvious when a man's in love?'

'I haven't had enough men in love with me to know. Danny was the first,' she added, bringing the conversation back to the safest subject she knew.

'You must have led a very secluded life,' Dean remarked. 'Personally, I think you're the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.'

She caught her breath. His voice was so calm that he might have been reciting the alphabet; yet this somehow gave more weight to what he had said, and she knew she would have to comment on it.

'Are you trying to make me blush?'

'I'm merely stating a fact. It was the first thing I noticed about you.'

'And the second?' she asked with false gaiety.

'Your intelligence. Though right now you're acting the dumb blonde!'

'Because I won't take you seriously?'

He grinned. 'At least you've stopped pretending you don't know what I mean!'

Deciding to play him at his own game, she said provocatively, 'You'd run a mile if I *did* take you seriously.'

'Try it and see.'

'Danny would object. Or have you forgotten him?'

'I wish *you* could forget him!' Slowing down, Dean looked her in the face. 'He isn't for you, Beth. He'll never make you happy!'

'You're not very loyal to him,' she said hotly.

'Because I want your happiness. I want *both* of you to be happy. And you won't be if you marry each other. You're not the girl for him. .You're too strong and too intelligent!'

'I thought I was too defenceless and fragile!'

'Only in appearance. In character you're streets ahead of Danny and he knows it. If he marries you he'll end up feeling inferior - and that's the reason many men start looking for girl-friends!'

Forgetting her embarrassment, she rounded on him. 'I suppose you'll be telling me Cindy's better for him!'

'She is. She loves him blindly and she'll never worry him by being too clever. With her, Danny will always be the boss.'

It was a perfect assessment of the situation and Beth longed to agree with it. But to do so would endanger her position, for if Dean learned she no longer loved Danny, he might wonder what had caused her change of heart, might even guess where her heart had been given instead!

The idea filled her with horror. Yet she knew that no matter how cleverly she hid her feelings from him, sooner or later she would have to tell Danny she did not love him. And when Dean found this out...

'Could we change the conversation?' she asked quietly. 'I don't want to quarrel with you.'

He hesitated, then thought better of what he had been going to say. 'Very well.'

He fixed his attention on the highway again and the car gathered speed, leaping forward like an unleashed animal; telling her more than words could have done of the untamed spirit that lay within the man beside her.

The rest of the journey was completed in silence and not until the Circle Q came within sight did he speak.

'I'll arrange a dinner party for tomorrow. Can you manage without seeing Danny until then?'

'Perfectly.' The car stopped and she jumped out before he could make a move to help her. 'What time shall I come over?'

'Before it gets dark. I would like you to see my home. I'll send a car for you at five.' He leaned forward, a slight smile on his mouth. 'I thought we were friends, Beth.'

'We are,' she said stiffly.

'Then don't act like a startled jack rabbit! Otherwise I'll begin to wonder if I have some special effect on you!'

'You have,' she replied with an effort at sweetness. 'But it's a murderous one!'

Turning on her heel, she ran up the steps and into the hotel, aware of his laugh, slow and deep, behind her.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

RESTING on the bed before dinner, Beth tried to come to terms with her present situation. The knowledge that she no longer loved Danny gave her a great sense of freedom, though it also made her ashamedly aware of how naive she had been not to have seen him for what he was more quickly. But now he no longer had any hold over her and the anguish he had caused could be looked upon as growing pains, and as easily forgotten.

But what she felt for Dean was something entirely different: a tentative but growing conviction that with him she could find real happiness and contentment; not only a physical coming together but a spiritual and mental one too.

Reliving her last meeting with him, she wished with all her heart that they could have met under other circumstances, their discovery of one another unmarred by memories of other attachments. How could she expect him to believe what she felt for him when only yesterday she had given a display of undying love towards another man? She writhed with mortification as she recollected the passionate way she had avowed her love for Danny, and would have given a great deal to have been able to recall those childish words.

What faith would Dean have in her when he knew that within one day to the next she could change her mind? Indeed what faith did she have in herself?

Yet Dean had made it clear he was attracted to her; had gone out of his way to say he always meant what he said, and if she were to accept this, she could then believe they might have a future together. If only she had the courage to tell him she loved him!

Too restless to remain still, she dressed for dinner and went to sit beside the pool. How soon could she tell Danny of her change of

heart, and how best to explain it without telling him the reason for it? If he guessed what she felt for Dean he might be childish enough to show his temper, and thereby not only tell Cindy what the position was, but also Dean. And Dean, more than anyone else, must never know.

The sophisticated scent of Femme made her realize that Lynn had seated herself in the next chair. In a long robe of delicate chiffon, its exotic pattern setting off the dark beauty of its wearer, she looked exactly the type to make a suitable wife for Dean. And she was rich too! Not in the same terms he was but enough to make him feel he was not being married for his money.

'I thought you would have come riding with us,' the girl said in an unexpectedly friendly voice.

'I had to go to Phoenix.'

'I keep forgetting you work here. I suppose it's because you're a friend of Danny's.'

Again the tone was friendly, and Beth waited, wondering when the dagger would be released.

'Incidentally,' the girl went on, 'I understand we're all going to the Bar L-T tomorrow night.'

'To the where?'

'Dean's home.' Lynn sounded amused. 'Don't tell me you don't know its name!'

'I'd forgotten. It isn't the sort of name one usually associates with a house.'

Lynn laughed openly. 'It's different from The Firs or Sea View, I must admit! But then it's different from most homes anyway.'

'Why?' Beth asked curiously.

'You'll find out when you see it.' Lynn faced her directly. 'Dean is pretty taken with you, isn't he? He made that obvious last night.'

'Only to stop Cindy from—' Beth caught her breath, furious that she had already said too much.

'You needn't pretend with me,' Lynn said quietly. 'Dean told me the whole story last night. What are you and Danny going to do?'

Beth hesitated, uncertain how to reply. Lynn was behaving as though she had never displayed any earlier animosity, yet her overture of friendship was still too new to be accepted without reserve.

Murmuring some noncommittal reply, Beth stood up. 'I must see if I'm needed inside.'

'I'll walk back with you.' Together they moved towards the ranch house. 'I haven't been very nice to you,' Lynn said suddenly. 'I hope you'll forgive me?'

'I - I hadn't noticed,' Beth lied.

'It's because I've known Dean for so long,' Lynn explained, ignoring the reply. 'That's why I'm inclined to be possessive over him.'

The confession was unexpected and some of Beth's reservations disappeared. 'I wondered if you were a special friend of his,' she ventured artlessly, and waited, nervous and afraid, for the reply.

'Lord no! We've known each other too long for that! We're family friends - nothing more.'



Although Beth did not believe this particular confession so easily, it at least told her one thing: if Lynn was prepared to say that she and Dean were only family friends, she must have given up hope of making it anything more. And that meant Dean had no romantic interest in her.

Angry for allowing her thoughts to centre on Dean again, she quickened her step. Why was it that every word she spoke, every idea that came into her head, always led her to Dean? The quicker she returned to New York the better. Not that she would be able to forget him so easily, but at least she wouldn't have to live with the fear that she might inadvertently give herself away.

But how could she leave Arizona without having Danny follow her? And by following, make Cindy aware of the truth. No, the only thing she could do was to wait until Cindy had her operation and *then* go.

As if in a dream Beth lived through the next day, counting the hours till she would see Dean again, yet bitterly afraid of the actual meeting. How careful she would have to be with him: not too cool in case he thought she was being rude again, and not too friendly in case he saw it as an excuse to be even nicer to her. She must try to act normal, she kept telling herself, yet all the while she was dressing and doing her hair she felt excitement burgeoning inside her.

The sun was just sinking below the horizon when Beth saw Dean's home for the first time. How right Lynn was when she had said it was unique, for it did more than combine luxury with practicality; it combined eighteenth-century splendour with twentieth-century living.

Like an emerald set in a sea of gold, so the house stood - an irrigated oasis of green surrounded by thousands of rolling acres of desert and scrubland. Built of weathered timber, sun-baked stone and plate glass, it rose part two-storey, part single-storey to form a series of

walled patios which held the eye and provided colourful contrast to the yellows and browns of the surrounding land. To the far left some dozen cars were already parked beneath a trellised roof that afforded protection against heat or rain, but the Cadillac which had collected Lynn and Beth deposited them in front of the entrance hall whose magnificent oak carved door was open in welcome. With the familiarity of usage the American girl led the way inside. To the left a shallow staircase rose gracefully, leading to what were obviously the bedrooms, but to the right, and also directly ahead, the house seemed to stretch for miles. The entire floor area was composed of old bricks, so highly waxed that they were reminiscent of ancient Provence tiles whose beautiful patina came from years of hand polishing. Wooden settles and chairs, oak carved and Spanish, furnished the hall itself, but the living-room spoke of another era, with its jewel-like quantity of lacquered pieces: Coromandel screens, with their delicate tracery of leaves and trees and posing birds on curving branches, formed backdrops to large upholstered armchairs and settees, their white textured fabric blending with the brass-locked, painted chests that served as coffee tables. The whole of one wall was glass, now opened to afford direct access to a garden room which - placed between the living-room and the loggia proper - gave an increased air of indoor-outdoor living. Here the furniture was wrought iron, white and thin, with down-filled cushions in palest pastels and hand-painted china urns acting as lamps.

Beyond the living-room, screened from it by an enormous free-standing fieldstone chimney, lay the dining-room, formal with hand-carved table and chairs, the long side-board resplendent with silver candelabra and bowls. 'How could anyone eat at such an immense table?' she thought, and had her unspoken question answered by Lynn, who led her through into a smaller suite of rooms that, curving in the opposite direction from the two large ones they had just left, formed a square around a patio set with flower-filled tubs and swinging hammocks. These rooms were smaller than the

ones they had just seen, though hardly small by normal standards. But they were obviously 'family' rooms, well lived in if the chintz-covered easy chairs and book-stacked tables were anything to go by. The walls were covered with Impressionist paintings, their brilliant colours repeating those of the Tibetan and Persian rugs on the wood-blocked floors. Pride of place above the mantel in what she took to be Dean's own personal room was given to a magnificent Gauguin. The strange luminescent yellow which he used, and the strong, bold features of the dark-skinned women in their brilliant-coloured sarongs, was exactly the kind of painting she would have associated with Dean: striking and different, yet withal, tender and compassionate. 'Dean,' she cried to herself, 'If only we had met before!'

'What do you think of my home?' The question came from the man who had just been in her thoughts, and the nervous beating of her heart made speech impossible. Blindly she looked at Lynn, and Lynn replied for her.

'I think Beth's speechless. It must be pretty different from a British home!'

'From *any* home.' Beth had found her composure, and with it her voice. 'It's so huge. Don't you ever feel lonely?'

'Never.' He was as incisive as always. 'Once you're used to size, you don't notice it.' He caught Beth's arm. 'Everyone's by the pool. Let's go and join them.'

Waiting beside him, Beth was conscious once again of his height and strength, and of the peculiar aura of command which emanated from him. Did it come from wealth alone or was it a part of his character? Yet if money caused it, surely the men to whom she was now being introduced would have it too? Though not all in Dean's class of wealth, many of them had fortunes not far short of his, yet none of

them could compare with him when it came to personality or manner. Yet she was prejudiced, seeing him through the eyes of love. As quickly as she thought this, so she denied it, for even at their very first meeting, when he had been anything but friendly, she had felt and fought against his attraction. 'No,' she admitted with weary resignation, 'I must have loved him from the moment we met.'

Danny, looming up in front of her, brought her back to the present.

'Hi there,' he smiled. 'You're looking gorgeous. If I weren't in love already, I'd make a play for you!'

By his side Cindy giggled, looking at him with such adoration that Beth was sickened by Danny's falseness. But what right did she have to condemn him when - until yesterday afternoon - she had been a party to it? Remembering how she had sat in the car next to Dean and blithely told him of her love for Danny and their plans to marry as soon as Cindy had come through the operation, it required all her self-control not to pull Cindy to one side and tell her the truth about the man she loved.

Yet what good would it do? Cindy would never believe her; in the same way that she herself, in the first flush of her love for Danny, would never have believed him to be so false and weak.

'When you've quite finished trying to steal my girl,' Dean said, and drew Beth's arm through his, at the same time leading her away.

Conscious of his touch, she trembled, and aware of it, he led her to a chair. 'Are you trembling because of Danny or because of me?' he asked softly.

'Neither of you. It's just that I hate pretending. It makes me feel so-so....'

'Think of Cindy. That should help you to keep up the act.'

'*I am* thinking of Cindy,' Beth said truthfully, and would have given a great deal to have told Dean all that was in her thoughts. Would he laugh if he knew, or would he merely look knowing, as if taking it as his rightful due that women should find him attractive?

'I'm surprised you haven't got a real girl-friend,' she blurted out. 'I thought Lynn was until she. ...' Her words trailed away and Dean nodded, understanding what she had left unspoken.

'You shouldn't jump to conclusions,' he drawled. *I have* got a girl-friend.'

'You have?' She could not hide her dismay.

'Certainly. The loveliest girl I've ever seen.'

Suspicion dawned, but she refused to admit it. 'I hope you've told her about the act you're putting on with me?'

'Naturally. I wouldn't do anything without her approval.'

'Now I know you're joking,' Beth exclaimed. 'You'd never ask anyone - especially a girl - for their approval!'

His laughter acknowledged the truth of her assertion, but as the sound died away, he became serious. 'I don't need anyone's approval before I decide to do something. But I'd never knowingly do anything that the woman I loved would *disapprove* of.'

Not knowing how to reply to this, she did not reply at all. 'Let's dance, shall we?' he said, and edged her to where a small group of musicians were playing beside the beautifully landscaped pool.

All too fast the evening sped by. Many men asked Beth to dance, and each time Dean let her go he did so with such reluctance that she almost believed him when he protested at having to be parted from her.

'This is the last time,' he said when, shortly before midnight, Danny appeared beside them. 'I've hardly had one whole dance with Beth the entire evening.'

'I haven't had *any*,' Danny commented, his smile not reaching his eyes, and then in a low voice added: 'Don't put on the act with me, Dean.'

With a laconic wave Dean sauntered over to where Lynn was talking to Cindy, and Danny pulled Beth close and started to dance.

'I've been aching to do this all night,' he muttered. 'It's been hell having to watch you with another man.'

His words brought with it a wave of shame and she tried to ease herself from his clasp. 'Don't hold me so close, Danny. It doesn't look right.'

He chuckled. 'You and your middle-class conventions!' Nevertheless he held her more loosely. 'I never believed I'd ever have you here - in my home,' he said softly. 'It's like a dream come true.'

She wondered what he would say if she told him that to her it was more like a nightmare, but decided that now was not the time nor place to shatter his illusions. Poor Danny; how badly he would take it when she told him she no longer loved him, and how he would plead with her to change her mind. Not because he really cared for her deeply, of that she was sure, but because his ego would not let him admit that his appeal was not universal.

'I suppose we should be grateful to Dean,' he murmured into her ear. 'If he weren't such a sport about it, I wouldn't be able to see you like this at all. As it is, Cindy doesn't suspect a thing.'

'Don't!' Beth exclaimed. 'How can you talk like that?' From his expression she saw he did not understand her, and her self-loathing increased. 'Please let me go, Danny. I don't want to dance any more.'

'I know how you feel,' he whispered. 'Holding you as if we were strangers is worse than not holding you at all.'

Marvelling at his obtuseness, yet grateful for it, she moved over to Cindy. Dean and Lynn were dancing together and the girl was by herself.

'I hope you haven't come back just to keep me company?' she asked with a grin.

'Blame Danny,' Beth lied, and was rewarded by the melting look that Cindy gave him. 'Don't you dance at all?' she asked.

'Very little. But two months from now I'll be making up for it.'

'You certainly will,' Danny agreed, and gave her a hug. 'How about a lemonade, ugly face?' He turned to Beth. 'What will you have?'

'Nothing, thanks. I think I'll go and explore. I've only seen a quarter of the house and garden.'

Waiting until Danny and Cindy were out of sight, afraid that if he saw in which direction she had gone he might follow her, she moved away from the pool, and did not slow her pace until she had gone so far away that the music could only be faintly heard in the distance. Yet even here the grounds were beautifully tended, with masses of exotic blooms flowering amidst lush grass. The expense of its upkeep must

be fantastic, she mused, and was surprised that no girl had yet managed to captivate Dean.

'What dark thoughts are making you so pensive?'

As though conjured up by her imagination Dean was beside her, looming taller than ever in the night.

'Do you make a habit of following me?' she retorted.

He nodded. 'I saw you disappear into the bushes and I was curious.'

'I didn't have a secret assignation with Danny!' She knew from his sudden stillness that her remark had hit home, and anger washed over her with such force that she lost her temper. 'What sort of girl do you think I am? I know what Cindy will have to face a few weeks from now. Do you think I want to make it even worse for her by letting her know that Danny's—' Just in time Beth stopped herself from giving away too much. 'If that's your opinion of me,' she finished, 'then I'd rather we stopped pretending we're friends.'

'Even if it meant you couldn't see Danny so frequently?'

'Even if it meant I couldn't see him at all,' she said firmly.

'You really do mind what I think of you, don't you?'

Afraid where her answer would lead, she bent to peer at a bush.

'I'm waiting for a reply,' Dean said. 'And I intend to have one.'

Knowing he meant it, she faced him, glad of the darkness. "You're a kind man, Dean, and a good one. Why do you find it strange that I should value your opinion of me?"



'Put like that it isn't strange at all. I was hoping there was another' reason - a more personal one.'

'Don't tease me.' Her voice was despairing. 'I can't bear it.'

'What makes you think I'm teasing?'

But she had already moved away and his question floated after her, suspended on the air. Intent on escape she pressed forward, but the path was a tortuous one and when she anticipated coming out to face the pool, she found herself on the other side of the house. Crossly she swung round, stopping abruptly as she came right into Dean's arms.

'You!' she burst out.

'It *is* my home.' There was no denying his amusement. 'All you have to do is ask me to take you back.'

Reluctantly she laughed. What a fool she was! Determined not to give her feelings away, her actions were making it impossible for him not to guess! She searched wildly for something that would act as a cover for her behaviour.

'Tonight's been so hard for me. Seeing Danny with Cindy ... knowing that we have to pretend...'

'Of course.' Dean was polite and distant again. 'I can understand how you feel.'

If only he did, she thought miserably as she followed him down the path. If only she could tell him how she felt. Why did he have to be Danny's cousin? How could she expect him to have faith in a girl who swung from one man to another? Eyes blinded by tears, she stumbled and Dean reached out and caught her. Close in his arms her defences

vanished like snow in summer, and unable to stop herself, she clung to him.

'Darling,' he whispered, and pressed his mouth on hers.

It was a soft kiss, but as she responded to it, it grew less gentle, the pressure increasing until it roused her to a passion she had never known before.

She loved him. She loved him with every fibre of her being. It was impossible to pretend any longer.

'Dean,' she cried. 'Dean!'

With an abruptness as startling as it was unexpected, he let her go. The glow of a lantern illumined his face, showing the tenseness of his mouth and the narrowing of his eyes.

'I'm sorry,' he said stiffly. 'I let myself get carried away by the moonlight.'

As if she had received a physical blow, Beth shuddered, and hardly knowing what she was doing, plunged past him.

'Beth,' he called. 'Wait! Let me explain.'

Heedless of his call, she plunged on. The music of the guitars could be heard more loudly and with a gasp of relief she knew she was nearly safe. Another few steps and she would be among people, making it impossible for Dean to talk to her intimately. Intimately. The very word made her long to cry. Bright lights shone on her face and she stopped running. She was safe. Dean could not speak to her without anyone else overhearing.

'You run fast,' he commented. 'Why were you scared to listen to me?'

'We have nothing to say. Besides, a kiss or two doesn't merit explanations!'

'How cynical you've become!' He caught her under the elbow and guided her towards Cindy. 'But you're still *my* girl,' he warned, 'don't forget that.'

'I won't. So long as you only carry on the charade in public.'

Together they sat down beside Cindy, and Danny who was dancing with Lynn, came over to join them.

Watching the two cousins Beth was struck by the difference between them. Though similar in appearance, both being tall and lean with tanned skin and lazy manner, there was a strength in Dean that was lacking in the younger man. It was apparent in the piercing glance of the pale grey eyes and the sudden way he had of tilting his head sharply when he was speaking, and even more noticeable when he moved his body, for then one was conscious of the vibrant energy that was so much a part of his make-up. Even in conversation he was the leader, his comments always more intelligent and amusing, his answers more succinct.

As though aware that he was being appraised, Dean leaned forward and spoke directly to Beth. 'You're very pensive, honey. Anything wrong?'

'No,' she said hastily, and seeing Lynn's gaze upon her too," added: 'I'm hungry. That always makes me look thoughtful!'

There was a general laugh and Dean stood up. 'That's easily remedied. Let's go and have supper.'

There was a concerted move towards the barbecue, though before Beth could help herself, Dean was proffering her a plate piled high with food.

'Eat up,' he commanded. 'You look as though you're ready for something - or someone - to bite!'

Afraid lest he read her thoughts, she hastily took the plate and speared a sausage with her fork.

'It must be hard for you to watch Danny acting the part of the loving fiance,' he continued, his words indicating that though aware of her turmoil, he had misjudged the reason for it.

'I'll survive,' she said briefly.

'I'm sure you will. And live happily ever after.'

The statement was so ludicrous and so painful - how could she be happy with anyone other than the man standing beside her? - that she shivered, and seeing the movement he again misjudged the reason for it.

'You should wear a fur in the evening. It gets chilly.'

She glanced around her. 'I thought cashmere would be out of place!'

Instead of giving the smile she had expected, he frowned, and afraid that he would misunderstand this remark too, she added quickly: 'I'm perfectly all right, thank you. Don't forget, in England, this sort of temperature would be considered warm!'

'You should still have a fur. I thought all young women aspired to mink!'

'Not this young woman,' she smiled. 'I'd rather have a stereo and records.'

'I'll have to remember that next year - it sounds more exciting than buying a hundred mink wraps.' Seeing her blank look, he explained: 'I buy them for the wives of my top executives.'

'How many?'

'A hundred or so.'

'That's a lot of money!' she gasped. 'I could never get used to being so rich.'

'I wouldn't accept that remark from most women,' he smiled, 'but I'll take it from you.'

Pleased by his comment, she blushed and bent over her plate again, breathing a sigh of relief as some other guests commanded his attention.

He was an excellent host and moved courteously from group to group, seeing that everyone had enough to eat and drink and signalling the servants to offer round trays piled high with pate de foie gras and caviar.

'A little snack before the steak,' she murmured, and Cindy, standing close, giggled.

'You can't blame Dean. Everyone comes here expecting the best, and they'd feel slighted if they didn't get it!'

'I wouldn't have thought Dean cared what—' Beth was stopped by a shrill scream, and swinging round she saw a girl running wildly from the barbecue, her chiffon skirts alive with tongues of fire.

'Get the fire extinguisher!' a man shouted.

'Throw her in the pool!' a woman cried. 'She'll burn to death!'

But Dean was ahead of everyone else, pulling the girl into his arms and throwing her to the ground in one single movement. Flinging himself on top of her, he pressed her close and smothered the flames with his body as well as his hands.

The whole thing was over so quickly that he was on his feet again before anyone could move, bending anxiously towards the girl who - clutching the burned tatters of her dress around her - stood swaying and staring up at him in awe.

'You ... you saved my ... my life,' she gasped. 'If you hadn't ... hadn't been so quick .. I would have ... have died.'

'I just ran faster than anyone else,' he said lightly, and glanced round. 'Would someone fetch Dr. Anderson? I saw him near the patio a little earlier. I think our Miss Cinders is in need of attention.'

Hard on his words the girl began to shake as though with fever, and as the charred fragments of her dress disintegrated to the ground, ugly red marks could be seen on her thigh and leg.

Hurrying forward, Danny swung her into his arms and Dean .moved aside with a look of relief. 'You'd better take her up to the house.'

Danny nodded and moved off, Cindy following him, and Lynn and a crowd of others clustered round Dean, exclaiming in admiration at his fast reaction which had averted a tragedy.

Only Beth remained where she was, her limbs still trembling too much for her to walk. For one instant, while Dean had been fighting the flames, she had known the terrible fear that he might die, and the

horror of it had left her in no doubt of her love for him. Without being aware of it she found herself by his side, standing a little behind him so as to be out of his eyeline. From this position she had a good view of him and saw - with a sharp indrawing of breath - that he was holding his left arm behind him, his hand partially hidden by the edge of his dinner jacket, yet not sufficiently to prevent her glimpsing raw, red flesh.

He was hurt. And trying to hide it!

The desire to protect him was so strong that it routed all her timidity, giving courage where none had been before, and enabling her to push forward and take command.

'How about letting Dean change his dinner jacket?' she said lightly. 'He smells roasted!'

'Take it off here,' a young man suggested, and moved over to help.

But Beth blocked the way with her body. 'Won't you let *me* play Florence Nightingale? I've been waiting a chance to nurse Dean ever since I met him!'

There was a general laugh and Beth put her hand on Dean's arm. 'Shall we go inside?'

'How can I refuse?' Dean smiled, and winked at the friends still clustering around him. 'I'll be back in a few moments.'

'No, you won't,' Beth remarked as they moved out of earshot. 'That hand of yours needs medical attention.'

'There's nothing wrong with my hand.'

'Don't be childish!' she said crossly. 'I've got eyes, haven't I?'

'So it would appear. And rather observant ones. But there's no need to fuss. Some antiseptic ointment and a bandage will do fine.'

'A doctor will do even better!' They had reached the patio and she faced him, growing angrier as she saw the pallor around his mouth. 'Stop acting like a baby. You told Danny to call a doctor for the girl, and *you* must see him too.'

Steps sounded on the tiled floor and looking past Dean's shoulder she saw a middle-aged man coming towards them. It did not need the black case he carried to tell her his profession, and she ran over to him. 'You're Doctor Anderson, aren't you?'

'That's right,' he said, and did not lessen his pace until he had reached Dean's side. 'Danny's taken Alison to the hospital. I'm on my way there now.'

'Is she badly hurt?' Dean asked sharply.

'Not as much as she would have been if you hadn't acted so fast. She'll have some pain, but she won't need plastic surgery.'

'Good. Make sure she has the best suite available and a day and night nurse.'

'There's no need for that,' the doctor protested. 'She'll only be there a week.'

'All the more reason for her to be pampered!'

'What about pampering yourself?' Beth interposed, and spoke directly to the doctor. 'Dean's burned his hand, but he's being stoical about it.'

'Is he indeed?' Dr. Anderson said, and swiftly caught the arm that was held away from him. He bent to look at it. 'That hand needs treating at once. You'd better come to the hospital too.'



'Rubbish. I've some excellent ointment upstairs.' Dean spoke in his most matter-of-fact tone, but he could not hide the increasing paleness of his skin, and seeing it, the doctor grasped him none too gently and led him through the suite of rooms which Beth had earlier labelled as family ones, and into a circular hall where a staircase led to what was undoubtedly Dean's private suite.

Here again no money had been spared to achieve a mixture of luxurious splendour and masculine simplicity. White silk shimmered on ceiling and walls, acting as a perfect foil for sombre mahogany furniture and breathtaking lapis lazuli decoration. The exquisite blue topped the bedside tables that stood on either side of the enormous eight-foot bed, whose width was covered by a silk spread of the same brilliant colour. On the floor, Persian prayer rugs lay scattered, the woven silk gleaming like jewels. One entire wall was of glass and led to a terrace where flowers rioted around a lapis lazuli pool, and wrought iron tables and chairs spoke of leisurely breakfasts in solitude.

On the wall opposite a door led to the bathroom, and it was here that the doctor propelled Dean. Still following, Beth again found her senses overwhelmed. Never had she realized that beauty and function could be so elegantly combined. Everything was in marble, but of a colour she had not seen before: white veined with palest pink and gold, which seemed to bathe the room in the perpetual radiance of dawn, an illusion heightened by the blue of bowls and bottles that arrayed the twin pedestal wash basins and the sides of the deep sunken bath - almost large enough to swim in - that took up the centre of the floor. Glass-louvred doors at the far end indicated twin showers while an alcove led to a mirror-lined dressing-room as big as the living-room of an ordinary house. Here the floor was inches deep in blue pile, so that one had the impression of walking on air, and it was here that the doctor settled Dean into a white cane chair. √ 'Can I help?' Beth asked.

'Only if you promise not to pass out on me!' Dr. Anderson replied.

'I've done some auxiliary nursing, so I *should* be all right.'

'Then help our hero out of his jacket. That hand of his has to be cleaned up before I put anything on it.'

Beth leaned towards Dean, but he abruptly stood up and took off his jacket unaided.

'I hate being fussed over,' he grumbled. 'Go back to the others. I'll join you later.'

'I'd rather wait for you,' she replied, and watched as he went to remove his shirt. He fumbled with the buttons, cursing softly as he failed to undo them, and silently she did it for him, forcing herself to concentrate on the task and not to think how near she was to him and how she had only to raise her head for her lips to touch his. 'There,' she said breathlessly, 'it's done.'

'Thanks.' He was still curt. 'Now go downstairs and leave *me* to deal with Dr. Anderson.'

'You do nothing of the sort,' the doctor said good- humouredly. 'As long as you're here Dean will at least be controllable!' He pushed Dean down into the chair again. 'Give me your hand and lean back and close your eyes. I'm afraid it will hurt.'

'Then get it over with quickly,' came the brusque reply.

'I'll do my best.' The doctor bent over the red hand with a pair of long, shiny tweezers. 'Have to get this gravel out. But there's a lot of it, so be patient.'

Dean said nothing, though Beth saw the muscles bunch along the side of his jaw as the instrument slowly began to probe.

For the next few minutes the doctor worked, extracting minute particles of stone and snipping away burnt flesh before finally declaring himself satisfied that it was clean enough to be covered with lotion. 'This is going to sting,' he explained, taking a pink bottle from his case.

Dean shrugged, his eyes glittering like grey ice in a face that - despite its tan - was almost the same colour. 'Get it over with. Then I'll have a whisky.'

'You can make it a double,' Dr. Anderson replied, and in one sharp gesture poured the entire contents of the bottle over the hand below him.

Dean gave a strangled exclamation, and only then did Beth - holding a bowl directly below his hand - realize why the doctor had doused it so quickly: to have swabbed it inch by inch would only have extended the agony.

'Sorry about that,' Doctor Anderson murmured. 'It was the only way.'

Dean raised his head and looked from Beth to the doctor with . eyes that saw nothing. 'That's quite all right,' he said in his quietest, most polite tone; then like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he leaned back in his chair and fainted.

'Thank the lord for that,' the doctor said. 'Now if I can put on the ointment and bandage before he comes round...'

With Beth helping, he did so, though not before he had rung a gold bell inset into the wall to bring a Japanese manservant hurrying in with a surprised look on his face. 'Prepare Mr. Harding's bed,' he ordered. 'I'd like him in it before he wakes up. Otherwise he'll insist on joining the party again!'

'My master stay in bed as long as you order,' the Japanese responded. 'I will see to that.'

'I bet you will,' Dr. Anderson grinned. 'You're a green belt judo, aren't you?'

White teeth flashed in an answering smile and the man disappeared, returning after a moment to busy himself opening drawers and taking out navy silk pyjamas and dressing gown.

'You won't be needing me any more,' Beth said to the doctor. 'I may as well go downstairs.'

'You can stay here if you wish. Dean might be pleased to see you when he comes round.'

Remembering the look of anger Dean had given her a few moments before he had fainted, she doubted the truth of this. He was obviously a man who disliked showing any weakness, and would not forgive her for having been a witness to it.

'I can always come back if he wants me,' she said, and hurried out.

Unwilling to face a barrage of questions - her nerves still raw from witnessing Dean's pain - she went to the elegant drawing-room and hid herself in one of the large, white armchairs. She would have preferred the more intimate atmosphere of the family living quarters, but a sense of intrusion prevented her from going there. For her, the hospitality of the exquisite yet soulless room was as much as she had the right to accept; possibly even more than she should accept, bearing in mind the false premise on which she was here; making Dean believe she was still in love with Danny, yet knowing full well that the real pose lay in her pretence that she could ever consider a future with anyone else except Dean. Dean --Even the sound of his name was more than she could bear, bringing him so vividly close

that she buried her head in her hands and wished herself a million miles away.

'What's wrong, Beth? Where's Dean?' Beth looked up and saw Lynn. 'Nothing's wrong. I'm just tired. And Dean's in his room. Dr. Anderson's just finished his hand.'

'His hand? You mean he's hurt?'

'Yes. But he's fine now. He's in bed.'

'No one even knew he'd been burned. I'll go up to him,' Lynn said abruptly, and hurried away, half running even as she spoke.

Beth sighed. It was easy to do what one wanted if one was a friend of the family, she thought wearily. Not that she herself had done too badly in the past hour. But once Dean was in command again she would be firmly put in her place; as he had, in fact, tried to do prior to fainting.

She stood up and went to the door. She had to find a way of getting back to the dude ranch. The party might go on for hours yet and she could not face the prospect of pretending to enjoy herself. She was in the patio, wondering whether it was possible to telephone for a taxi, when Danny and Cindy came in sight. They were arm in arm, looking so natural and happy together that she felt a pang of jealousy at their closeness.

The instant he saw her Danny loosened his hold of Cindy and though his words were casual when he spoke, she saw embarrassment in his eyes.

'Dean around? I understand you took him off to change his jacket.'

'It was a little more than that.' Quickly she told him the truth. 'Lynn's with him now,' she concluded, 'and I was just going in search of a lift home. I feel pretty tired.'

'We can take you,' Cindy said. 'It must have been awful for you to have seen Dean in such pain. If you love someone you. ...' She stopped and gave a nervous giggle. 'Sorry Beth, But you're his girl-friend and I automatically assumed—'

'Don't assume anything,' Danny interjected irritably. 'Being someone's girl-friend these days doesn't signify undying love!'

'Cindy's a romantic,' Beth said hastily, seeing her redden. 'And personally I prefer it to being cynical.' She stared at Danny, defying him to say anything to the contrary, and seeing her look, he tightened his lips and said nothing.

'Do you want to leave at once?' Cindy asked.

'If it's not too much bother.'

'*You* needn't come, honey,' Danny said to his fiancée. 'You've already had a long drive into Phoenix. I'll take Beth myself.'

'Don't be silly, darling. Of course I'll come with you.'

Beth released her breath on a sigh of relief, and throwing Danny a casual glance, could have cheerfully kicked him. How annoyed he looked at having his plans foiled, and how blind Cindy must be not to be aware of it!

With no hope of being alone with Beth, Danny drove to the ranch at a speed that made conversation difficult - a fact for which she was particularly grateful - and hardly had the car screeched to a stop than she was already out of it, calling good night over her shoulder. But as

she reached the lobby, Danny was beside her, his handsome face sulky.

'What's got into you, Beth? Why are you running away from me?'

'What do you expect me to do?' she prevaricated. 'You're with Cindy, aren't you?'

Instantly his face cleared. 'Don't be jealous, sweetheart. You know I have to pretend until—'

Unable to bear any more, she swung away from him and entered the lobby.

Not till she was finally alone in her room was she able to relax, but though tired, she found it hard to fall asleep, and when she managed to do so her slumbers were disturbed by such vivid nightmares of Dean in danger that she eventually gave up trying to sleep and went to sit by the window, where she watched the sky gradually lighten into dawn.

Had Lynn remained with Dean throughout the night, she wondered, or had she come back here? Either way it would make no difference to her own relationship with him. No matter how friendly he was, the whole thing was an act, and she would do well to remember it. But how difficult it was to maintain an air of indifference when she longed to tell him she loved him.

'But I mustn't,' she whispered aloud. 'He must never know. Never.' But even as she spoke, she realized the words were easier to say than to act upon, and she knew that only when she returned to New York would she be able to try and put him out of her heart.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

BETH was having breakfast in the dining-room when Lynn came over and asked if she could join her. The American girl looked tired, and her first words explained the reason.

'I only got back an hour ago. I stayed with Dean most of the night.'

Beth's pulses jumped, but she kept her expression calm. 'How is he?'

'In pain - not that you'd know it from the way he behaves. He was threatening to get up as I left. Said he had something important to do.'

'He must be mad!'

'Don't worry, he won't be going anywhere. Jimo's locked every single cupboard, so unless Dean's prepared to go out in his pyjamas, he's good and stuck!'

Beth could not help smiling. 'He'll be furious.'

'That's why I left!' Lynn helped herself to some toast. 'It was clever of you to spot that he was hurt.'

'He was angry with me for making a fuss about it,' Beth confessed.

'He'll cool down once he realizes you were right.'

'And admit *he* was wrong? I can't ever see him doing that!'

'Dean isn't stubborn,' Lynn replied. 'You've only got to look at his changed attitude towards you and Danny to realize that.'

Beth made no comment, and wondered how to leave the table without appearing rude. No matter how hard she tried, she could not feel at



ease with Lynn, still certain that her friendliness was forced. But forced by whom? And for what purpose?

'You still don't trust me, do you?' Lynn said. 'I've known Danny and Dean so long that I'm inclined to be possessive about them. That's why I was rude to you when we first met. But you can't hold it against me for ever. Surely we can be friends?'

'Of course,' Beth replied, and hoped her voice held more conviction than her belief. Pushing back her chair, she stood up. 'But you must excuse me now. I'm in charge of the reception desk this morning.'

'You're running away,' Lynn said. 'But I'll forgive you!'

Only as she manned the desk did Beth relax, and the next hour passed quickly as she sorted the mail and dealt with numerous calls. She was sipping a mid-morning cup of coffee when Dean telephoned, his voice so thin and tired that she was filled with anxiety.

'Is that you, Beth? I thought I'd have the devil's own job getting hold of you.'

'I'm on the switchboard,' she replied as coolly as she could. 'But even if I'm not, the staff always know where to find me.'

'After the way I behaved last night I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me any more.'

She was puzzled by his words. 'Why not?'

'Because of the things I said ... the way I....' His voice faded and she pressed her ear to the receiver, her fear growing.

'Dean, are you all right? Are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm here. Just tired --It's the painkillers Anderson gave me. I can't seem to focus on things.'

'You should be sleeping, not talking. I'm going to hang up and-'

'No, don't do that. I want to see you. At once.'

'But I'm working.'

'Then *I'll* come over to you.'

'Lynn told me your clothes have been locked away.'

'In my pyjamas,' he said firmly, and from his tone she had no doubt that he meant every word.

'I'll come over after lunch,' she said quickly. 'Now tell me how you feel. Are you in much pain?'

'Not when I'm talking to you. And I've no intention of waiting till after lunch before seeing you. I want to see you now.' His voice was louder, but this only served to emphasize its shakiness, and with heightened fear she wondered if he was delirious. It was the only way she could account for his behaviour.

'I'll come and see you as soon as I can. I'll have to get Miguel to drive me.'

'I've already sent my chauffeur. Come back with him.'

The phone went dead, the pitched tone telling her the line had been cleared. Biting her hp, she went in search of Mrs. Mays, explaining as best she could what had happened.

'Of course you must go to Dean,' came the immediate reply. 'You didn't even need to ask. Though I agree with you that he doesn't sound like himself!'

'Do you think I should call Dr. Anderson?' Beth asked anxiously.

Mrs. Mays smiled. 'He'd just say Dean was acting like an impatient lover!'

'He doesn't keep up the pretence when we're alone,' Beth said softly. 'Only when Cindy's around.'

'Maybe he isn't pretending.'

Remembering Dean's cruel sarcasm after he had kissed her last night, Beth shook her head. 'I'm sure he's just light-headed from his pills!'

'Then go and sympathize with him. It would be wonderful if you and he ... I mean, you never know. ...' Mrs. Mays' voice trailed away though the look she gave Beth made her meaning abundantly clear.

Entering Dean's bedroom some half hour later, Beth greeted him as coolly as she could and, ignoring his outstretched hand, seated herself some distance from his bed.

'You're looking much better than I expected,' she said brightly. 'You're just using your hand to get your own way.'

'You can't blame me for that. I wanted to see you as soon as I could.' There was no teasing in his voice, only a seriousness that made her tremble. 'Lying here has given me plenty of time to think of you. And it's made me see what a fool I was not to have told you the truth weeks ago. But I kept hoping you'd guess - that your own feelings would tell you. ...' He shifted on the pillow, his face pale and shiny with the exertion of speaking. 'There were so many times when I thought you

*did* know how I felt - last night for example - but then you went all coy on me again and I was afraid you'd never have the sense to realize it! That's why I hit out at you.' Once more he moved, leaning forward as though to see her more clearly. 'You do know what I'm trying to tell you, don't you?'

Afraid that love for him was making her read more into his words than he meant, she shook her head.

'You can't be that dumb,' he said in exasperation. 'I love you, Beth. I have done from the moment I set eyes on you.'

Here at last were the words she had longed to hear; words she had never believed Dean would say. Yet she couldn't let herself believe he meant them; to do so would be courting heartache.

'Well,' he went on, 'haven't you anything to say?'

'I - I—' Unable to bear his gaze she went to stand by the window. 'I know you find me attractive - desirable - but I didn't think it was - was love. After all, only last night you—'

'Forget what I said last night! I was furious with you for being so blind about me. I wanted to hit out at you, hurt you the way you were hurting me.'

'I never meant to hurt you,' she said quickly.

'But you did! Do you think it was easy for me to have you wince every time I came near you? I was positive you didn't love Danny; positive you were only scared to admit the real truth. Be honest with me, Beth. Say you love me!'

She clenched her hands, forcing herself not to acknowledge the truth of what Dean had said. 'Don't you think it would be better if we waited? You're in pain and—'

'What's that got to do with it? I'm not delirious! I know exactly what I've said. I love you. Can't you accept that and be honest with me?'

'I don't want to be hurt any more,' she burst out. 'Once was more than enough.' With an effort she controlled herself. 'I'm not in love with Danny - you're right about that. But I was so ashamed when I found out. It made me feel so stupid — as though I wasn't capable of caring deeply about anyone.'

'You were doing yourself an injustice.' Dean's voice was gentle again. 'Your idea of love is so different from Danny's that you couldn't have gone on loving him. Sooner or later you had to wake up to the truth. And my aim was to be there when you did.'

'Was that why you kept trying to force me to go back to New York?' she asked pointedly.

'Only because I was afraid you wouldn't come to your senses in time! My recurring nightmare was that he'd talk you into eloping with him. You've no idea how relieved I was when you told me you were going to wait till after Cindy's operation. It at least gave me a breathing space - time to make you see that I was the man for you. Won't you admit it? Must you still go on pretending?'

Hesitantly she walked over to the bed, and only as she neared it did she see the beading of sweat on his forehead and realize the effort it had cost him to maintain his strength and command. Awareness of his vulnerability made nonsense of her desire to protect her own emotions. Hiding her love would not help her to forget him; better to admit the truth and enjoy whatever happiness she could, even though it might not last.

'I do love you,' she whispered. 'I tried to hide it because I didn't think you'd believe me. One minute I thought it was Danny and the next I wasn't able to think of anyone else except you. I thought I was crazy!'

'I hope you'll be crazy for ever.'

'For ever is a long time,' she said.

For several seconds he stared at her. 'Does that mean you anticipate getting over me too?' he said at last.

'Oh no,' she cried, amazed that he could have misunderstood her. 'I was thinking about you! That you'd stop loving me!'

'I see.' Again he was silent and it was impossible for her to read his mind. 'You have a lot to learn about me, honey,' he said slowly. 'And the first lesson is that I don't give my love lightly. In fact until I met you, I hadn't given it at all.'

'Not even to Lynn?'

'Not even to Lynn,' he said in his dryest tone and, before she could stop him, had pulled her down on to the bed. 'But I'm delighted to see you can be jealous. At least it shows you care.'

'I care very much. These last few days have been agony.'

'Forget them. They're past. It's the future that counts - *our* future.'

The words filled her with joy, though thought of Danny still lay heavy in her mind. He would have to be told the truth now whether he liked it or not. But how would he react? And could he be relied on to maintain the status quo with Cindy, or would his anger lead him to destroy her happiness as well?

'Worried about Danny?' Dean asked with a perception she had come to accept. 'He'll rant at you, no doubt, but in a few weeks he'll be acting like your cousin!'

'I don't mind about his attitude to *me*,' she replied. 'It's Cindy.'

'He won't let her down, I promise you that. She's the one thing he really cares about.'

'Cares about?' Beth echoed. 'Why, the minute she'd had her operation he'd have told her he was in love with me and—' She stopped in mid-sentence and stared at him. 'You don't think he *would* have left her, do you?'

'Yes, he would. But I'm pretty sure he'd have returned to her too. I told you so, but you wouldn't believe me, and I was scared you were letting yourself in for more hurt.'

'You're the only one who can hurt me now,' she confessed.

'Then you'll never be hurt again,' he replied, and kissed her gently.

The lack of passion in his kiss told her more than words of the pain he must still be in, and she drew away from him. 'You must try and sleep, darling. You look exhausted.'

'Say it again,' he ordered. 'The part where you called me darling.'

She smiled. 'Darling, darling, darling. Satisfied?'

'Certainly not!' He went to draw her back to him, but she jumped up and took a chair by the window. 'You must rest, otherwise I'll go downstairs.'

'What a bully!' he grumbled, but settled back against the pillows. 'Talk to me, Beth, I'm in too much pain to sleep.'

Wishing she could ease his hurt, she did as he asked, and gradually his lids drooped and he fell into a light slumber.

Beth remained where she was, hugging to herself the wonderful happiness of knowing Dean loved her. Soon she too fell asleep, awakening some time later to find him watching her, his face alight with tenderness.

'You look even more beautiful when you're asleep,' he said.

She flushed and sat straighter in her chair. 'You shouldn't have watched me. Defences are down when one's asleep.'

'I hope I'll see yours down even further!'

'Now you're trying to embarrass me.'

'And succeeding! Come here and kiss me, woman.'

The command was so much more like the Dean she had become accustomed to that she did not resent the order; indeed it delighted her, indicating that he was feeling better.

With a smile she ran over and knelt beside him, careful not to jar his bandaged hand. 'I love you so much,' she said. 'So very, very much.' Nervously, aware that this was her own first gesture of affection towards him, she placed her mouth over his. It lay soft and passive beneath hers, emanating a warmth that made him seem unexpectedly vulnerable. The thought robbed her of her last vestige of fear, and putting her arms around his neck she drew his head down.

'Well,' a furious voice said behind them, 'forgive me for interrupting you!'

With a gasp Beth straightened to see Danny striding into the room, his face scarlet with rage. 'No wonder you were both so happy to pretend



you were fond of each other. But it wasn't to fool Cindy, was it? It was to fool me!'

'That's not true,' she said quickly.

'Beth!' Dean's voice was a command. 'Leave this to me.' He sat up and glared at Danny, wincing as the sudden movement he made stabbed at his hand. 'If you hadn't come in just now, I'd have asked to see you.'

'Oh yes?' Danny mocked.

'Yes,' Dean echoed. 'I can appreciate your being angry, but at least give me a chance to explain.'

'Explain how you two-timed me?'

'Danny, don't!' Beth put her hand on his arm, pulling him back from the bed; afraid that in his fury he would strike out. 'You can't blame Dean for what happened. It was my fault. I stopped loving you, but I was scared to tell you. I didn't think you'd believe me, that you'd think I was only saying it because I didn't want to hurt Cindy.'

'That's exactly what I *do* think! And Dean's taking advantage of it!'

'He isn't! I love him,' she cried, 'and I told him so. It's wrong of you to blame him.'

'You love *me*!' Danny shouted as if he had not heard one word she had said. 'Me!'

'I don't. I don't love you.'

'If this is your way of paying me back—' •

'Don't be ridiculous. You don't know me at all if you can think a thing like that. I've stopped loving you. If I hadn't been so stupid I'd have realized it as soon as I saw you again.'

'If I weren't engaged to Cindy you wouldn't be talking like this,' he reiterated.

'If it weren't for Cindy I'd have told you the truth last night!'

'Pity you didn't. Or were you trying to make sure you at least caught *one* of the Harding men? There's nothing like having two strings to your bow!'

'That's enough!' Dean's voice was loud behind them. 'The reason Beth didn't tell you the truth was because she was afraid you wouldn't believe her; afraid you were too conceited to admit anyone could stop loving you! She was also scared that if she left without a word and went back to New York you'd follow her. That's why she kept quiet. Not because she had an ulterior motive, but because she didn't want to hurt Cindy.'

Listening to Dean, Beth found it uncanny that he could have read her motivations so clearly. And she had thought to hide her love for him!

'Dean's speaking the truth,' she said. 'Every word of it.'

Danny rubbed his hand across his face. 'But you came to Arizona. If you didn't love me...'

'I didn't realize that until I saw you again. I'm telling you the truth,' she asserted. 'It would be foolish of me to pretend.'

Danny swung round to look at Dean. 'What's your story? That you fell for Beth at first sight and fought against it, or that you deliberately agreed to be her boy-friend in order to steal her from me?'

'Haven't you heard one word I've said?' Beth burst out before Dean could answer. 'My not loving you had nothing to do with Dean! It might have helped me to see the truth a bit earlier, but even if I hadn't met him, I wouldn't have gone on loving *you!*'

'How can you be sure?'

'Because we've nothing in common.'

'You never thought that in New York.'

'I was infatuated with you,' she answered wearily. 'I was thrilled at being taken around by a man every other girl wanted. But it wasn't love. Not real love.'

'You don't mean that,' Danny cried, his anger in no way abated. 'You're only saying it because Cindy's made you feel guilty.'

'No!' she cried, and knew there was only one way to stop him. 'It wouldn't work any more. You bore me, Danny. I find you boring and childish!'

It was as if she had physically hit him. He fell back a step and stared at her, the colour ebbing from his face. Momentarily she wished she need not have been so cruel, but then had to admit that only by puncturing his conceit could she reach the inner core of the man.

'We're not right for each other,' she went on. 'A marriage has to be based on respect and liking; on mutual beliefs. And ours wouldn't have been. If you'd think about it, you'd see I'm right.'

'No,' he said dully. 'I never thought ... not you and Dean. It doesn't seem possible.' He looked at his cousin. 'I suppose you'll be wanting me to pack up and clear out?'

'Don't talk rubbish!' Dean said crisply. 'This is your home. Let things ride for a while. If you want to leave the ranch later on, that will be up to you. But you needn't go on my account.' There was an imperceptible lessening of anger in Danny's body, and though his face was still pale, his fists were no longer clenched. 'I'll see how things go,' he muttered, and swung out of the room.

'There's still Cindy to be considered,' Dean called after him.

'I won't let *her* down,' came the reply. 'That's *one* thing that hasn't changed!'

Not till the door had closed behind him did Beth dare look at Dean.

'That wasn't as bad as you thought it would be, was it?' he asked in his most conversational tone.

'It was a million times worse,' she said, and burst into tears.

Dean made no attempt to quieten her, and it was several moments later before she was able to wipe her eyes. 'I must look a sight,' she hiccupped, and hurriedly got to her feet.

'You look beautiful,' he replied tenderly, and pulled her down to him, smoothing away the hair that clung in damp tendrils on her forehead. 'Such a woebegone little love,' he murmured. 'I hope these will be the last tears you shed for a long time.'

Gently he went on stroking her, and with a sigh she rested her head on his shoulder, careful to keep her weight light. His touch calmed her, sending away her fears, but as he continued to move his hand along her hair and the curve of her shoulder, she found herself increasingly aware of him. Something of what she felt made itself apparent to him for his touch grew heavier and she felt the quickened beat of his heart.

'What a waste of a situation,' he whispered. 'Alone with you in..my bedroom, yet I haven't even got the strength to fry and seduce you - let alone succeed!'

She laughed softly. 'I don't believe you'd even try. I think you're old-fashioned at heart.'

'I am where *you're* concerned.'

She-half raised her head and looked at him, her heart in her eyes. 'You will be the first man, Dean.'

'*Darling!*' Without another word he bent his head until their lips touched.

His arm pressed her so tightly against his body that she could feel the way he trembled, and knowing it was her closeness which aroused him, she was in turn aroused by it. Placing her hands behind his head, she stroked his dark hair and the strong column of his neck, exulting in his strength and longing for it to master her. For several moments they remained close, and only as passion grew in intensity did they draw apart as though by mutual consent, happy merely to be together, content in the knowledge of their love.

'You can't go on working for Mrs. Mays,' Dean said, resting back against the pillows and looking at her. 'You must stay here with me.'

'I'll have to give proper notice,' Beth protested.

'There won't be any problem replacing you. And even if there is, I'm sure Mrs. Mays can manage.'

'You're not very considerate,' she chided.

'I'm considering *me*,' he grinned. 'And I'm hoping you will do the same.'

'I'll talk to her when I get back,' Beth promised. 'But I won't leave her in the lurch, no matter how much you bully me.'

'I'm sorry,' he said at once, and half lifted his hand in her direction. 'But loving you is so wonderful that I want you with me the whole time.'

For answer she kissed him on the mouth, then knowing that only by putting herself a safe distance from him could she remain in command of the situation, she went to sit by the window. Outside the fountain sparkled, sending a delicate spray of crystal water over the gaily coloured flowers around its base.

Beyond the shade of the balcony the golden orb of the sun could be seen, while at horizon level an undulating rim indicated mountains whose purple peaks faded into violet before merging into the infinity of the sky itself. How beautiful it all was; how much more lovely than she had ever known.

'Why the smile?' Dean asked.

'Because I'm happy. When I woke up this morning I never realized the day was going to be as wonderful as this.' She suddenly flung her arms wide. 'I'm so happy!'

His face grew grave, the smile leaving his mouth so abruptly that she half stood up. 'What is it, Dean? Is anything wrong?'

'No, darling,' he said quickly. 'Everything is right. Right and perfect.'

## CHAPTER NINE

NOT until the next morning did Beth have an opportunity to tell Mrs. Mays what had happened.

'I couldn't be more pleased,' the woman exclaimed. 'You and Dean are just right for each other.'

'I thought he would have wanted someone more sophisticated,' Beth confessed. 'Someone used to his kind of background.'

'Don't be old-fashioned! Anyway, Dean probably loves you *because* you're different.' The grey head tilted. 'I take it you'll be wanting to leave here?'

'Not until you've found a replacement,' Beth said firmly. 'Besides, it will be better for me if I'm busy all day. Otherwise I'll want to follow Dean round like a puppy!'

'I should think he'd be delighted.'

'Well, I wouldn't. I've got to retain some bit of independence - at least till I'm married.'

'When will that be?'

'Dean and I haven't discussed it yet. I think he'll want to wait till after Cindy's had her operation.'

'And also to give Danny time to recover his pride and be willing to dance at your wedding!'

'He was furious,' Beth admitted ruefully. 'But I saw him just before I left the ranch last night and he was almost civil to me. Just looked full of hurt and misery.'

'Enjoying being the one who was let down instead of it being the other way round,' Mrs. Mays replied dryly. 'Don't expect me to feel any sympathy for that young man.'

It was a statement with which Beth concurred, and indeed her sympathy disappeared completely as she saw the way he turned for solace to Cindy, acting the part of the impatient lover with such ability that the girl blossomed like a desert flower after rain.

'Only two more weeks until my operation,' she said one evening as they all sat in the patio listening to music. 'And then two more weeks after that before I'll be up and about again.' The gamine face creased into a smile. 'What do you say about our having a double wedding?'

'Not on your life,' Dean answered before Beth could reply. 'Weddings are too personal to be shared. Besides, I'll want mine to be very quiet.'

'What does Beth want?'

The question came from Lynn, who sat curled up on a hammock, its pastel cushions an ideal backdrop for her vivid green trouser suit. Her attitude on hearing that Dean and Beth were in love had been one of quiet amusement, as though she was participating in a joke that no one else knew about. Yet her behaviour to Beth had been exemplary: friendly and full of advice without being inquisitive. Now she was looking from Dean to Beth with wide-apart dark eyes, waiting for a comment to her question.

'I agree with Dean,' Beth replied. 'I'd hate a large wedding. But first of all I'd like to get a proposal!'

'You don't mean—'

'I haven't been asked,' Beth said, studiously avoiding Dean's eyes. 'I guess it must be an oversight.'



'Some oversight,' Lynn drawled. 'What's wrong with you, Dean? Or do you believe in long courtships?'

'I don't believe in any,' he said blandly. 'I intend taking Beth out one morning and presenting her with a *fait accompli*!'

'You can't marry a girl without warning,' Cindy protested. 'What about her trousseau?'

'Why should she need clothes?'

'When you've both finished!' Beth laughed, putting her hands to her ears and shaking her head. 'Can't we change the subject?'

'A good idea,' Danny spoke for the first time. 'How about coming for a stroll, Beth? I could do with some exercise.'

Beth glanced quickly from Dean to Cindy, but Dean's look was impassive while Cindy just nodded, and realizing that to refuse would seem strange, she followed Danny into the garden.

He did not speak till they were some distance from the house. 'I can't get used to thinking of you and Dean ... the whole thing's incredible.'

'I don't see why.'

'Don't be so innocent!' He kicked moodily at a pebble. 'When did you know? Or was it love at first sight, the way you said it was when you fell for *me*?'

Accepting the sarcasm, she decided to ignore it. 'I'm not sure when I fell in love with Dean. It wasn't at first sight, though. I was too muddled up thinking of you.'

'So you didn't just write me off the minute you set eyes on Dean!'

'You know I didn't.' She stopped walking and faced him, determined to solve the situation between them. 'It wouldn't have worked out for us, Danny. In some ways we're too alike. We both need someone we can depend on - on whom we can lean.'

'Thanks!'

'It's true. That doesn't mean we're weak - just that neither of us are leaders.'

'I still can't get used to the idea of you and Dean—'

'That's because he's your cousin. Think of him as a man who—'

'*You* think of him as a man!' he retorted.

Unable to stop herself, she laughed. Danny glared at her, but his anger was not rigid, and it slipped from his face to be replaced by a wry amusement that made her feel, for the first time, that they might be friends.

'What about you and Cindy?' she asked impulsively.

'I don't intend messing up *her* life - that's one thing I *can* say. As soon as she's over the operation I'm leaving Arizona.'

'Why?'

'Because I can't go on working for Dean. I have to stand alone.' His **eyes** narrowed. '**It's** what you wanted me to do a long while ago, isn't it?'

She nodded. 'But not in this way. I hoped you and Cindy. ... Still, it's probably the best way.'

'Yes,' he said firmly. 'She's too good for me. Once I'm out of the way she'll find someone else.'

Beth knew better than to argue the point; Danny undoubtedly believed what he said, and as long as he did, he would be deaf to anything one might say to the contrary.

'I always figured Dean and Lynn would marry one day,'

he said unexpectedly. 'She's been after him for years.'

'He obviously didn't reciprocate the feeling. Dean wouldn't take long to make up his mind.'

'He would when it came to tying himself to one woman! Just shows how much he thinks of you, to let you rope him in so fast!'

She was still pondering on Danny's words when they returned to the patio. The strains of a Bach fugue filled the air, though Cindy and Lynn appeared bored by it; a fact which Dean did not appear to take into account, for as the music came to an end, he went over and put on the other side.

With a mute look of protest, Lynn stood up and beckoned Cindy and Danny who, with a smile at Beth, proceeded to tiptoe into the living-room, carefully closing the double glass doors behind them. Half smiling, Beth glanced at Dean, and as she did so, he held out his hand to her.

'Alone at last! I never thought they'd take the hint! There's a lot to be said for maintaining the sanctity of one's castle! I never realized the problem of being renowned for one's hospitality!'

'But there's only Cindy and Lynn here,' she protested, hiding her pleasure at his words.

'You're not suggesting I make love to you in front of them?'

'I didn't know that's what you wanted to do,' she replied demurely.

'It's what I've been aching to do all evening.'

He went to take her into his arms, but she glanced over her shoulder to the closed glass doors, through which she could see Lynn dealing cards to Cindy and Danny.

Interpreting her movement, Dean reached out to the small table beside him and pressed a switch on it. At once a cloud' of drapery obscured the inner room, and before it finally hid the occupants she had a glimpse of Lynn's startled face.

'What an obvious thing to do,' Beth murmured, half laughing.

'I want to kiss you too much to worry about subtlety,' he responded, and wasted no more time with words.

To Beth, the next half hour was heaven. Dean was tenderly affectionate to her; there was no doubt of his feeling for her, but he seemed content to show it without making any demands on her that both of them would regret later.

'Did you mean what you said about our getting married?' she murmured at last, when, more sure than ever of how much she loved and needed him, she leaned against his shoulder.

'Of course. I've no intention of having every Tom, Dick and Harry making a circus out of something that's so personal.'

'I meant about your not giving me any warning? I mean I wouldn't—' she stopped, confused, and heard him chuckle.

'Don't worry, darling. I won't spring it on you without *arty* warning. You'll have at least two hours' notice!'

'Beast!' She raised her head and" kissed his cheek. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a flash of green behind the curtains, and knew that Lynn was watching them. Hurriedly she straightened.

Dean raised an eyebrow quizzically, but her explanation was forestalled by Lynn and Cindy coming into the patio.

'How about making our way back to the ranch?' Lynn asked.

'A good idea.' Conscious of her flushed cheeks and ruffled hair, Beth jumped up, arrested by Dean's sudden exclamation of annoyance.

'I wish you'd end this nonsense of working,' he said. 'I'll talk to Mrs. Mays myself in the morning.'

'You'll do no such thing,' Beth answered. 'She's trying to get someone, but it isn't easy and mid-season.'

'It isn't easy for me either. I want you here.'

'You'll just have to get a special licence,' Cindy giggled. 'Beth wouldn't be able to argue against that.'

Dean gave her an affectionate glance. 'You've got something there, funny face. Once *you're* on the mend, that's exactly what I'll do!'

Driving back to the ranch with Lynn, Beth gave herself over to contemplation of the future, and was glad her companion also seemed too preoccupied to speak. In a matter of weeks, if all went well, she would be Dean's wife. The thought was so fantastic that it was difficult to absorb, and she tried to consider the more mundane aspects of what this would mean, though nothing about her marriage to such a dominant man could ever be considered mundane! How

lucky she was to have found such happiness. If only Lois could do the same. Yet though the letters she received from her cousin were full of news of her busy social life, there was no mention of Bill Saunders, no hint that her love for him was dead. Poor Lois. If only she could meet someone else.

'What would you have done if you hadn't become engaged to Dean?' Lynn asked suddenly.

The question took Beth by surprise. 'I wouldn't have married Danny, if that's what you mean. I'd have gone back to New York.'

'Do you think you'll like living here? It's so far from theatres and all the good concerts.'

'Dean has his own plane,' Beth said, marvelling at her ability to find the right answer. 'So we won't exactly be isolated!'

'Sorry, Beth.' Lynn gave an apologetic laugh. 'I didn't mean to annoy you. I just wondered if you've considered what your life would be like when he's working. You might find it lonely.'

'I intend learning about his work. There's nothing duller than a hausfrau!'

'How clever of you to realize that. You're much deeper than you look.'

Beth shrugged, relieved to see the dude ranch come into view.

Lying in bed later that night, she pondered on Lynn's remarks, wondering at the latent hostility she had detected in them. For all that she had professed not to want Dean herself; Lynn was undoubtedly suffering the pangs of jealousy.

In the morning, in the bright, perpetual sunshine of another glorious day, Beth's vague disquiet of the previous night seemed foolish, and

encountering Lynn at breakfast in the dining-room she was able to greet her with her usual friendliness.

'What are your plans for today?' she asked. 'Going on a picnic or lazing by the pool?'

'I was going into Phoenix with Cindy,' Lynn told her, 'but I got a message from her this morning to say she wasn't able to make it. Said she'd call me later on, but that I shouldn't wait around for her. What are *you* doing today?'

'Checking through the groceries to make sure we won't be caught short over Christmas, and then going to buy the rest of my presents.'

'I might come to town with you.'

'I'm not sure what time I'm leaving,' Beth said quickly, reluctant to have Lynn with her while she searched for a present for Dean.

'In that case I'll go over to see Dean. I might persuade him to take me to the mine. They're working a new shaft at the moment.'

Keeping a smile on her face, Beth made no comment, though as Lynn disappeared through the swing doors into the lobby, she found that her happiness had disappeared with her. But it was ridiculous to be jealous; she was doing exactly what she had been denigrating Lynn for! Dean would hate a wife who watched over him like a mother hen and was jealous every time he was seen with a pretty girl. That was one thing she must learn to accept.

Pushing aside her personal problems, she concentrated on the ones she was being paid to deal with, and by the time she had gone through the stores with the chef, it was well after noon, and she decided not to go into Phoenix until later that afternoon when it would be cooler.

So it was that five o'clock found her walking the broad and busy streets, accustomed now to the squatting Indian women selling their wares at frequent intersections and occasionally beseeching her to buy from them. What on earth could she find for Dean? Even if money were no object she would have been hard pressed to know what to get him. Strange to think she knew him so well, yet not well enough to be sure of his taste.

Frowning, she entered a jewellery shop and, still frowning, re-emerged, shocked by the high prices demanded for ordinary cufflinks and cigar lighters. Anyway, there must be something a bit more unusual that she could buy than links! Still undecided, she continued to walk, and only as the crowds thinned out did she realize she was in a part of the city she had not visited before. Here the shops were considerably less fashionable, and the people more simply dressed, with cotton dresses and jeans. Knowing it was unlikely she would find anything suitable for Dean here, she turned to retrace her steps, only stopping as her eye was caught by a narrow window displaying several faded canvases. But it was the painting in the centre which held her gaze and, without hesitation, she opened the door of the shop and went in.

The gallery - for that was what it was, albeit it was minute in size and dusty as an ancient museum - seemed deserted, and she tapped her hand on one of the frames leaning against the wall.

'Is anyone around?' she called.

'Coming,' a quavery voice answered, and an old man in faded velvet trousers and fraying cashmere pullover came forward to greet her.

'I like the painting in the window,' she said. 'The one of the Sussex Downs.'



'You recognize it!' the old man exclaimed in delight. 'But of course, you're English.'

She smiled. 'That's why I'd like to buy the picture. If it isn't too dear.'

'Does this shop of mine look as if it would hold anything too dear for you?'

She flushed. 'The painting is beautiful. It might be very valuable.'

'How understanding of you to say a thing like that!' he beamed and shuffled over to the window. 'I painted that picture' myself,' he said, his back to her as he extricated the canvas from its position. 'So you will forgive me if I take personal pride in your compliment.'

'You've every right to be proud,' she commented, looking more closely at the painting now directly in front of her. 'It's so real, I almost feel I could be there.'

'None of your abstract work,' he agreed. 'But that's why it hasn't sold. People don't want things they can recognize!'

'I do. How much is it?'

'It is for you?'

She shook her head and a look of disappointment crossed his face. So strong was it that she felt impelled to explain further. 'It's for my fiancée. He has so much - so many wonderful things that I didn't know what to get him. Until I saw your picture .. A then I knew it was exactly right.'

The old man looked pleased. 'You can have it for twenty- five dollars.'

'That's far too little,' she protested.

'This picture *has* no price. I would only sell it to someone who genuinely wanted it. As you do.'

'But twenty-five dollars ...'

Smiling and wordless, he carefully began to wrap the painting.

'When were you in England?' she asked.

'Before you were born, my dear. My wife was English, you see, and I met her not a hundred yards from where I painted this scene. That's why I never wanted to sell it.'

'You make me feel guilty. Are you sure you—'

'Quite sure. My wife is dead and I'm an old man. I'll be glad to know the painting has gone to someone who will enjoy it.'

Feeling as though she were clutching a fragment of history, Beth returned to the ranch and placed the painting in her wardrobe, then hurried out to see if there was anything she could do to assist Mrs. Mays.

'You're back,' her employer greeted her with heartfelt relief. 'Dean's been trying to get you since the minute you left here.'

'Is anything wrong?'

'Cindy's having the operation.'

'You don't mean *today*?'

Mrs. Mays nodded. That's why he rang. He wondered if you'd had any idea of it.'

'Of course not! I'll call him and—'

'You needn't. He's just arrived.'

Beth turned as Dean came into the lobby. Even from a distance he was pale and tense, his skin almost the colour of the bandage still covering his hand.

'You've heard about Cindy?' he greeted her without preamble.

'Yes. How did you find out?'

'By sheer accident. She cancelled her arrangements with Lynn, as you know, so Lynn spent the day with me. Coming back from the mine we decided to drop in on Cindy. Her ranch manager told us she'd left the house earlier that day with a suitcase - said something about spending the Christmas vacation with *me*.' He shook his head, still bewildered by the turn of events. 'Lynn guessed at once what had happened. I suppose it takes one woman to know what another one can be up to!'

'But last night Cindy said the operation was in two weeks. Why did she keep it a secret?'

'Stoicism, perhaps; or foolhardiness.' His voice grew angry. 'The silly little fool, I could wring her neck!'

Tears filled Beth's eyes as imagination sent her along Cindy's lonely drive to the hospital. 'She wasn't foolhardy, Dean, she was brave.'

He shrugged, not deigning to answer. 'Where's Lynn? I promised Danny I'd meet him at the hospital. Apparently the operation's scheduled for five-thirty. If Lynn isn't ready, I won't wait.'

'May I come with you?'

'It's pointless for you to wait there. It will be hours until there's any news.'

'If Lynn can go with you, so can I,' Beth said in a voice that shook with anger.

Dean peered at her. 'You're annoyed?' '

'Do you wonder?'

'But I was thinking of *you*! It won't be pleasant having to wait at the hospital.'

'I want to be with you,' she repeated.

'Very well. I'd no intention of slighting you, but somehow I never thought you'd want to come. You haven't known Cindy that long and—'

'Long enough to care what happens to her,' Beth answered tautly. 'And I haven't known *you* that long either!'

His eyes narrowed. 'I take the point. I can see I owe you an apology.'

She shrugged and turned away, unappeased. 'I'll fetch a wrap.'

When she returned to the lobby Lynn was already there, and wordlessly they went to the car. Dean drove in silence, and only as they reached the hospital entrance did Beth ask the question uppermost in her mind.

'When will we know the result?'

'Not for forty-eight hours. At least that's what Cindy said, but she may have been lying about that too.'

Silent once more they made their way to the waiting- room on the third floor, where Danny —so haggard that he looked ten years older - was pacing the floor.

'Any news?' Lynn asked.

'She's still in the theatre,' Danny said. 'The operation's riskier than she told us.'

'What does that mean?' Dean spoke sharply. 'If you've been listening to nurses' gossip --'

'It was the house doctor. And it's not gossip. He gave it to me straight. He seemed to think I actually knew about it.' Danny clasped his hands together as though one were giving comfort to the other. 'She's got a fifty-fifty chance of being able to walk again.'

'To walk properly, you mean,' Dean amended.

'To walk *at all*,' Danny corrected. 'That's what I've just learned. The operation she agreed to have in the beginning was quite different from this one. It was less dangerous, but there was also a bigger chance it wouldn't succeed. Apparently she saw the surgeon a few weeks ago and told him she wanted the full spinal operation - even though it might mean she. ...' he swallowed and began again. 'If it fails, she'll be paralysed for life!'

There was a short silence, broken only by the whirr of the electric clock on the wall.

'I never thought Cindy had the courage.' It was Lynn, her voice full of admiration. 'But I can see why she took the risk.'

'I can't,' Beth said.

Lynn's full red mouth twisted into a smile of pity. 'That's because you're a romantic and not a realist. I'm sure Cindy felt she'd have no chance of keeping Danny unless she was a hundred per cent fit.'

'That's a foul thing to say!' Danny lunged towards her.

This is hardly the time or place to indulge in frank speaking.' Dean placed himself quickly between them.

'I don't call Lynn's remark frank,' Danny grated. 'It's damned insulting!'

The truth often is.'

'If you're going to start on me too...'

'Relax,' Dean ordered.

'But to blame *me* because Cindy took such a chance... Danny shook his head, and watching him, Beth's anger would not let her remain silent any longer.

'Don't you think you're all overlooking Cindy's point of view? What she did was magnificent - courageous and magnificent.'

'What's magnificent about ending up paralysed?' Danny shouted. 'That's the chance she's taken.' He beat one hand against the other, his face a torment of anguish. 'I'd rather she limped like a one-legged jack rabbit than let herself be talked into taking such a risk! If only I could have spoken to her before - made her change her mind—'

'No one could have changed her mind.' A small, grey-haired man was speaking from the doorway, and at sight of him both Dean and Danny took a pace to his side.

'Dr. Sanger,' Dean said apologetically, 'I hope you'll forgive us. As you can imagine we're all pretty shocked.' His voice became urgent. 'Is Miss Bannenburg out of the theatre?'

'A few moments ago. I've come directly here to see you.' The surgeon looked from one man to the other. 'The operation went extremely well, but we won't know the result for at least forty-eight hours.'

'Will she at least be able to walk?' Danny pleaded. 'I don't care about her limping, but will she be able to *move*?'

'We won't know for forty-eight hours,' Dr Sanger repeated 'All I can tell you is that from a technical point, everything was perfect.'

'Then why the doubt?'

'We are dealing with the spinal cord, Mr. Harding - nerve centres of such intricacy that—'

'Then you shouldn't have done the operation in the first place!' Danny interrupted. 'What's the point of doing something if the outcome is pure chance?'

'Not chance,' Dr. Sanger replied without any trace of irritation, 'but surgeons - and medical practitioners too - often use methods and drugs that work without our knowing *why* they work. This particular operation works often enough for us to do it when we have to.'

'But you didn't have to!' Danny cried. 'That's why the whole thing's so crazy. Why did you let her take the risk?'

'I couldn't stop her. When Miss Bannenburg came to see me several weeks ago and said she wanted this particular operation, I did my very best to dissuade her. But she was adamant. She said if I refused she would go to New York to have it done. I begged her to talk it over with you, but she wouldn't. In fact she made me promise that I wouldn't get in touch with you either. Because of that, my hands were tied.'

'You could still have refused to do it!' Danny reiterated.

'And let her go to someone else? I had enough confidence in my ability to decide that if Miss Bannenburg wanted to take the risk, then I could give her the best possible chance of it being successful.'

With a groan Danny sank on to a chair. 'Forty-eight hours. It's a lifetime!'

'There's no need for you to stay here,' Dr. Sanger said sympathetically. 'We will call you if there's any change in her condition.'

'I want to be with her,' Danny replied. 'She'll be needing me.'

For the first time the surgeon appeared embarrassed. 'I'm afraid that isn't possible. Miss Bannenburg left instructions that she didn't want to see anyone until I had spoken to her myself ... until she knew whether or not she'd be able to walk again.'

'She didn't mean me,' Danny retorted.

'She meant *you* more than anyone else. As a matter of fact she asked me to let you have this after the operation.' Hewithdrew an envelope from the pocket of his white jacket. 'This may explain more than I've been able to.'

The door closed behind him and all eyes focused on Danny. Slowly he took out a sheet of writing paper and bent his head to it.

'Well,' Lynn said at last. 'Does she say why she had the operation without telling us?'

'She didn't... didn't want a fuss.' Danny spoke as if in a dream. 'She says she doesn't want us to pity her. That if she finds she - she can't walk ... she won't see us. Not for months... not till she's learned how to cope.'



'She can't mean it!' Beth expostulated.

For answer Danny held out the letter. 'Read it. You might as well see it for yourself.'

As she did so, Beth's sympathy for Cindy increased. How easy to see the pride which had prompted her action, and the uncanny knowledge of Danny which was inherent in the final paragraph of her letter.

'Don't be angry with me for what I've done,' Cindy had written. 'But I couldn't face two more weeks of your pretence that nothing could go wrong. For things can go very wrong for us if I don't get completely well. I don't blame you for wanting a wife who can share in everything you do, and though you say you don't mind if I can't cope, I know that eventually it would sour our whole relationship. You're too full of energy to have patience with an invalid wife. And that's how I feel at the moment. Like a car running on one cylinder.'

'If all goes well, I'll see you after the operation. But if things don't work out, try and understand why I've told Dr. Sanger I want to be left alone. I'll have so many things to learn - things that are more easily accepted if one is among strangers with whom one doesn't have to pretend. Don't be angry with him either. He's acting entirely on my instructions. You always said I never acted like an heiress, so I hope you won't mind that I've now decided to do so! It isn't that I don't love you - just that I love you too much.'

Wordlessly Beth handed back the letter and Danny put it in his pocket.

'There's no point any of you waiting here,' he said. 'You might as well go home.'

'What about you?' Dean asked.

'I'm staying. But I'd rather be alone.'

'Like Cindy?' Lynn queried.

'Yes. I'm beginning to see what she meant... about not wanting sympathy.'

'Call if you want me,' Dean told him, and opened the door.

The journey back to the dude ranch was even more subdued than the one into Phoenix; over them all loomed the possibility of a tragedy too heartbreaking to be considered, yet still too possible for them to put out of their minds.

'Would you like me to stay at your house?' Beth asked Dean as he swung the car into the drive leading to the ranch. 'I don't like you being alone all evening.'

'I'm not a child, my dear. I'll be fine.'

Hurt by his words, she opened the car door. Did he blame her for Cindy's action? Did he think the girl had guessed that Danny had not loved her and had decided to have the more dangerous operation because she had known that unless she were able to lead a completely normal life she would never be able to hold him? Yet surely Dean knew better than to think such a thing? Didn't he realize that neither by word nor gesture had she allowed Cindy to suspect her earlier relationship with Danny? Whatever the reason behind the girl's decision, she herself was not to blame.

'If you change your mind,' she heard herself say, 'telephone me.'

Not waiting for his reply, not even caring that she was leaving Lynn alone in the car with him, she ran into the lobby.

Unwilling to face anyone, she headed for her bedroom, and was turning the key in the lock when a lean brown hand covered her own. With a gasp of fear she jerked back, looking up to see Dean beside her.

'You!' she stammered. 'What are you doing here?'

'Waiting to apologize. I've been like a bear with a sore head. I'd no right to vent my anger on you.'

Some of her hurt disappeared, though not enough for her to forgive him entirely. 'You've had a worrying time.'

'It wasn't easy for you either.'

She shrugged. 'I haven't known Cindy all that long.'

'Don't! I should never have said that to you.' He caught her hand. 'I have to talk to you. Let's go into your room.'

Nervously she led the way inside. Her nightdress lay on the bed, its diaphanous folds drawing her attention, and hurriedly she shoved it beneath the cover before turning to face him. He had sunk into an armchair, his body relaxed, his face lined with fatigue.

'Cindy gave me a shock,' he began abruptly. 'She's like a sister to me.'

'That was still no reason for making me feel I was in the way.'

'I didn't want you to be embarrassed.'

'By what?' she asked, surprised.

He hesitated. 'I wasn't sure how Danny would react to what Cindy had done. I was afraid he might blame *you*.'

'Why should he?'

'Out of guilt - and because he wouldn't want to blame himself!'

Slowly she began to understand his reasoning. 'I thought *you* were blaming me. That you felt Cindy had guessed about Danny and me and had decided on the more dangerous operation because of it.'

'So that's why you've been so edgy with me?' Dean gave a shake of his head. 'You thought I blamed you for what she'd done?' Seeing the answer in Beth's face, he came over and gathered her into his arms, as if his closeness could eradicate all doubts. 'I wasn't going to let Danny make you his whipping boy. That's why I didn't want you to come to the hospital. Why I didn't want you to come home with me either. If anything happens to Cindy and Danny comes back-'

'He couldn't say anything that would make me regret one single thing I've done!' Beth said passionately. 'From the moment I learned the real reason behind Cindy's accident I haven't given him one thread of hope. You've got to believe me!'

'I do,' Dean said quietly, and placed his lips on hers.

For several minutes they remained close, savouring the pleasure of being alone together, of touching each other and feeling the sensuous need for deeper and more searching kisses. But it was a desire that could not be assuaged by touch alone, and trembling, they drew apart.

'The lounge would have been safer!' Dean sighed. 'I'd better go. If you'd still like to come back with me ...'

'I'll just pack a few things. Shall we have dinner here first? You must be starving.'

'Not enough to face the barrage of questions I'd get here. I'd rather go home.'

An hour later, sitting opposite him in the small dining- room that led off his private sitting-room, she remarked the exotically laden table groaning with delicacies she had normally associated with Fortnum and Mason.

'I never knew you were such a gourmet!'

'This is more than I usually have,' he conceded. 'But Conchita obviously wants to show you what you're missing by not living here!'

'I don't need reminding of that!' Beth helped herself to some caviar and sour cream and took several of the hot yeast pancakes Dean was proffering. 'Delicious,' she enthused, after a mouthful. 'I've never had anything like this.'

'Caviar blini,' he explained. 'One of my connections in Persia keeps me supplied with Beluga. It's the best caviar you can get. Cindy adores it.' He put down his fork, face suddenly bleak. 'Another forty-four hours. If only ...' With an effort he changed the subject. 'Try some of the rice and red pepper too. It's one of our specialities.'

'I can see why you've remained a bachelor,' she laughed. 'With a cook like Conchita, you don't need a wife!'

'I'd never need a wife to do my cooking.' His tone was more serious than she had expected. 'It's an excellent talent, but one which doesn't count overmuch with me. I rate other things much higher. Intelligence, sympathy, understanding ... that's what I want in a wife.'

His words presaged a future whose happiness made her tremble, and she reached out and caught his hand. 'I'm so scared I'll let you down.'

'You could never do that, my darling. If you—' He broke off as the telephone rang, and hurried out to answer it, returning after a moment to tell her it was Danny. 'He's spending the night at the hospital. There's no change in Cindy's position, but he wants to be on hand.' Dean sat down and made an effort to eat. 'Cindy's given him a pretty big jolt. It might even make him come to his senses. When a girl's been too available. ...' He shrugged and half smiled. 'Men are such fools, aren't they?'

'Some,' Beth agreed, and wondered if he were thinking of Lynn. Quickly she pushed the thought aside; it was childish to read more into his words than he had meant.

They had coffee on the patio, but were both too restless to listen to music or even to make much small talk. Memory of Cindy hung heavily between them, and well before midnight Dean suggested they go to bed.

'I've a busy day ahead,' he explained, 'and I want to break the back of it before going into Phoenix. I take it you'll be coming with me?'

She nodded. 'Will you be ready to leave after lunch?'

'About noon. I'll start work as soon as it's light.'

'Must you? You're still recovering from your hand and—'

'I'm perfectly fit,' he said crisply, and gave her a slight slap on the bottom. 'Apart from not wanting my wife to be a cook, I don't want her to be a nurse either! Now come along and I'll show you to your room.'

She followed him into the circular hall that led to his private suite, but instead of taking her upstairs, he pointed to a door opposite them.

Pushing it open Beth found herself in a corridor that led to another wing, enclosing the inevitable patio.

'One of the guest suites,' Dean explained. 'I was going to put you upstairs in the other main bedroom, but I decided not to test my will-power!'

Avoiding his eyes, she stepped into a large, well-appointed bedroom. 'I'll see you in the morning, Dean.'

'Of course.' He remained by the door, too far away for her to read the expression in his eyes, yet near enough for her to see the stillness that seemed to have enveloped him. 'This is the first time you've stayed in my house, Beth. I wish it was under happier circumstances.'

'So do I.'

Still he did not go. 'You're only here because of Cindy. Yet it's appropriate, isn't it? If it hadn't been for Danny's engagement to her, you wouldn't have come to Arizona. Fate plays strange tricks.' Abruptly he went into the corridor. 'Good night, darling. Sleep well.'

But sleep did not come easily to Beth; excited by spending her first night under Dean's roof, and full of fear for Cindy, she relived many of the episodes which had culminated in this long and worrying day. As Dean had so rightly said, she had reason to be grateful to Danny, though with all her heart she wished that he, in his turn, could find the same happiness she had now discovered with Dean --'

Only a few yards away he too was in bed. Was he thinking of her perhaps, and the time when they would be married? She moved restlessly, and a shaft of moonlight shone on to her hand. No engagement ring graced it, and she wondered as she had done many times before, at his oversight. Had he waited until Cindy had her

operation before entering into anything that might savour of a celebration? Or could there be another reason?

Agitation made it impossible for her to remain in bed, and switching on the light she paced the floor. When a man in Dean's position got engaged, surely the first thing he did was introduce his fiancée to his friends? Yet he had done nothing of the sort, and no logic which she could bring to bear was able to dissolve her disquiet.

Slipping on her dressing gown, she tiptoed down the corridor to the living-room. Perhaps she could find a book to read. This looked like being a long night and she had to stop herself from thinking. »

Several novels were stacked on the table near the chair where Dean usually sat, and she glanced through them, undecided.

'Can't you sleep either?'

Startled, Beth dropped the book in her hand, and Dean strode over and picked it up. In a silver-grey dressing gown the same colour as his eyes, he looked particularly handsome, reminding her forcibly that she was alone with him in the middle of the night 'I'm too worried to sleep,' she mumbled, and held out her hand for the book.

He gave it to her and their fingers touched. His breath came sharp and rasping and he held tightly to her hand. 'I've never seen you look more beautiful.'

He went to draw her close, but she resisted. 'It might be better if you don't. Why don't you find a good book too?'

'It seems I've found a good woman instead!' Ruefully he let her go. 'How strong-minded you are!'



'A good thing too. But in place of a kiss, would you settle for a cup of chocolate?'

'How can I say no? You've been aching to show me how domestic you are.'

Catching her hand, he led her to the kitchen. As she had expected, it was a dream of gadgets and the latest in electric equipment, though shining copper pans and gay Mexican pottery gave it a homely aura.

'Where's the chocolate kept?' she asked.

'I've no idea. But the milk's in the ice-box.'

'Thanks. That much I can guess for myself! Do you have a larder?'

'It's the first door on your right.'

Opening it, Beth found herself in a white-tiled room large enough to serve as a kitchen in a normal sized house. Marble shelves ranged from floor to ceiling, each one stacked with provisions.

'Have you found the chocolate?' he called.

'Not yet,' she answered, and wondered how even the redoubtable Conchita found her way round this maze of goods. Why, it was better stocked than a supermarket! However, searching brought success, and she returned triumphant to the kitchen, a large tin of chocolate in her hand.

Aware of Dean watching her, she prepared the drinks, remembering a gourmet tip she had once read, and putting in a dash of cinnamon.

'Two chocolates coming up,' she warned, and set the steaming cups on the white formica table.

Dean picked his up and sipped. 'Delicious! As good as Conchita's. You've put cinnamon in.' Seeing her expression, he laughed. 'Never mind, darling. I'm sure you'll do lots of other things that will leave me guessing!' He stroked her fingers. 'Such lovely hands, too. I'm glad you don't spoil them by wearing blood-red nail polish. They look beautiful as they are.'

'They'd look even better with a—' She stopped, cursing the swiftness of her tongue.

'Better with a ring?' he finished for her, and gave a deep sigh. 'I should have guessed you'd be upset at not having one.'

'Most girls do - when they're engaged.' Deciding that in for a penny, she might as well be in for a pound, she added: 'I assume we *are* engaged? As I mentioned last night, you've never actually asked me to marry you.'

'Some things don't need to be said.'

'A girl still likes to hear them.' She paused, but he did not take the hint, and raising her eyes she saw he was frowning. Her heart beat fast and an unnamed fear took hold of her. 'What's wrong, Dean? Do you regret it? Would you—'

'Don't be such a fool!' With an angry sound he came round the side of the table and pulled her into his arms. 'I didn't realize such things were important to you. I took it for granted that you knew how I felt. It was stupid of me. Once these next few days are over, I'll make it up to you.' He strained her closer, his hands warm through the silk of her gown. 'We've so many things to talk about, Beth. There's so much I want to say.'

'Then say it,' she pleaded. 'Sometimes I feel there's a wall between us.'

'Not a wall,' he corrected, 'a veil. A thin veil that will vanish when the right words are said.' He held her away from him and looked deep into her eyes. 'But not tonight, darling.'

'I understand,' she said quickly, and reaching up, put her hands around his neck. 'Perhaps I'll give you that lass you asked for, after all!'

She kissed him lightly and was just about to move away again when he gave a smothered groan and pulled her fiercely against him, kissing her fiercely, almost angrily. But as soon as she protested his grip slackened.

'I'm sorry,' he muttered, 'I shouldn't have done that.'

'It's all right,' Beth whispered softly. He must not know what an effort it had been not to linger there in his arms, knowing how he felt, realizing that for a man like Dean desire was a very natural part of his love for her. But her own love for him made her realize too that it was up to her not to offer him the sort of temptation he had just had to fight so hard.

She smiled at him nervously.

'You haven't finished your chocolate.'

'Neither have you.' They looked at the cups, then at each other, and then laughed and left the kitchen.

In the circular hall again, Dean stopped, his mouth curved in a mocking smile. 'I won't see you to your door, if you don't mind. I think it'll be safer to say good night here!'

'No more midnight feasts either.'

'Not till there's a ring on your finger-and I don't just mean an engagement one!' He caught her hand, kissed it lightly and dropped it.

'Good night, my dear, strong-minded Beth. Sleep well and dream of our future.'

'And a bright one for Cindy,' she said soberly.

'Yes, he echoed. 'A bright one for Cindy.'

## CHAPTER TEN

THOUGH anticipating Danny to be upset, neither Dean nor Beth had expected him to be so distraught. He spent the entire forty-eight hours at the hospital, refusing even to go outside for a breath of air, and on the morning of the second day, by a ruse which he refused to disclose, but which Beth was certain had been the exercise of his charm on some hapless nurse, he managed to wangle his way into the intensive-care unit where Cindy still remained. Though he gave no details of what had passed between them, Cindy agreed to let him remain with her, and he had also managed to persuade her to promise she would see Beth and Dean and Lynn as soon as she was moved back to her own ward.

'At least that's one hurdle out of the way,' Dean said to Danny. 'If the operation *has* failed we'll at least be on hand to help her over the worst patch. If she finds she can't walk again—'

'Don't!' Danny burst out. 'Don't talk like that.'

'I'm only trying to make you face facts.'

'What do you think I've been facing since the operation? But I daren't think that way. I've got to believe she'll walk again and I've got to make *her* believe it too!' He paced the small waiting-room where they had been sitting for the past hour. 'How time drags. Each minute's like a year.' •

'It won't be long now,' Beth comforted.

'Four more hours,' Danny muttered. 'I suppose Dr. Sanger wasn't kidding us? We *will* know the result by late afternoon?'

'That's what he said when I spoke to him earlier,' Dean replied. 'Now try and relax.'

'I'm going to Cindy. I want to be with her when—'

'Do you think that wise?'

'It will be the first wise thing I've done where she's concerned. If she finds out she can't walk, she'll be needing me.'

'But not only while she's in hospital,' Dean warned, his face unexpectedly hard. 'You might not like what I'm going to say, but I have to say it nonetheless - not because I want to hurt you, but because I don't want *Cindy* hurt. *If* this operation has failed, she'll be an invalid for life. And I can't see you taking care of her. That's why I don't want you to give her false hope. It would be criminal.'

'Dean!' Beth cried. 'How can you talk like that! Danny's doing the only thing he can. He's got to make Cindy Relieve he'll go on loving her no matter whether she can walk or not. If she thought he'd leave her, she wouldn't want to go on living.'

'Her letter didn't—'

'Forget what she wrote. She didn't mean a word of it! She was just making it easy for Danny - giving him a way out - the way women have always done for the men they love.' Tears ran down Beth's cheeks, but she dashed them away. 'But Danny hasn't taken it. Don't you see what that means? For the first time since I've known him, he's acted like a man!'

Unable to continue, she went to stand by the window, and behind her heard footsteps come close.

'Thanks for the defence,' Danny said. 'But Dean didn't make me angry. I deserved what he said!' He swung round to look at his cousin. 'You can leave Cindy to me. From now on I won't fail her. I'm going to marry her the minute she'll agree to it.'

'Even if she's paralysed?' Dean asked.

'Yes.'

'Are you sure? It's fine to act the hero now, but being husband to a girl who might never walk again. ...' Dean moved closer to Danny. 'I appreciate what you're trying to do, but don't get carried away by your emotions into promising more than you'll be able to carry out. And believe me, no one will blame you for *not* being able to carry them out.'

'What would you do if *you* were in my place?' Danny asked. 'If it were Beth and not Cindy?'

Dean's breath came out on a sharp exclamation. 'You know very well what I'd do. Marry her! But I love Beth. And I'm not yet sure about *your* feelings for Cindy. That's why I'm asking you not to be swayed by your emotions.'

'I intend to marry her,' came the firm reply. 'I'm not going to talk about what I'll feel ten years from now. Not because I don't know how I'll feel, but because I wouldn't expect you to believe me! And why should you, anyway, when I've acted like a first-class skunk!' Danny glanced over his shoulder at Beth, a faint smile on his lips. 'I guess you never thought you'd hear me say such a thing! But it's true. The only pity is that Cindy had to go through hell before I had enough sense to realize what she meant to me!'

Beth was too moved to speak, and Dean appeared too surprised. Only Danny was in control of the situation: his shoulders straight, his manner confident. Had tragedy made him grow up at last, Beth wondered, or would he revert to type if Cindy got well? Somehow she did not think so; Danny was not play-acting any more. He had become a man in every sense of the word.

'I'm going to Cindy, if you don't mind,' he said. 'These next few hours will be torture for her.'

'We'll wait here,' Dean answered. 'If you need us....'

Acknowledging the words, Danny left, and Beth sank on to a chair, hands clasped as she prayed for Cindy to get well.

'Are you all right, Beth?'

Lynn's voice, sharp and anxious, made Beth open her eyes. 'I'm fine,' she said quickly. 'I was—' She stopped and changed the subject. 'I didn't hear you come in.'

'I only just got here.' Lynn looked at Dean. 'Any news of Cindy?'

'Not yet. Danny's with her.'

'He's really turned out the way you -said he would,' Lynn continued. 'I must say I had my doubts.'

Puzzled, Beth looked at her. 'You mean Dean knew?'

'Almost to the last gesture. He said he would turn up trumps if it came to the crunch!'

'Too many mixed metaphors,' Dean said crisply. 'Now how about us getting some coffee?'

Walking beside him to the cafeteria on the top floor of the hospital, Beth could not forget what Lynn had said. How astute of Dean to have judged what Danny's reaction would be in this situation. No wonder he had warned her not to give her love to Danny. He must have realized she Would have been let down yet again. With a sigh she moved closer to Dean. How lucky she was to have fallen in love



with *him* instead. Catching his hand, she squeezed it, 'What's the matter, honey?' he drawled.

'Nothing. I just wanted to touch you.'

They reached the cafeteria and Dean led the way to a table. The room was crowded, made more so by several nurses who were busy putting up Christmas decorations.

'Only three more days,' Lynn commented.

'I can't believe it,' Beth said. 'It's the heat that makes it seem so impossible. In England we never have weather like this even in summer!'

Lynn laughed. 'I take it you've done your shopping?' At Beth's nod she looked at Dean, resting a scarlet-tipped hand on his arm. 'What about you, darling? All your shopping done?'

'Why else do you think I employ two secretaries?'

Lynn laughed and turned to Beth. 'He isn't kidding, either. Last year he had a Christmas list a mile long!'

Sipping her coffee, Beth wondered how she could get Dean's present into his home without him seeing it. She had no intention of leaving it under the huge Christmas tree which she had seen one of the Mexicans carrying into the hall as she had been leaving for the hospital. The painting was something she wanted to give him when they were alone, when she could look at his face without being watched, and enjoy her pleasure in his delight. And he *would* be delighted, she thought. The little landscape was a treasure; filled with a charm and happiness that seeped through the very canvas.

'Dollar for your thoughts,' Dean brought her back to the present.

'Not for sale,' she retorted. 'Anyway, that's an inflationary price!'

'No price is too high to know someone's thoughts,' Lynn drawled. 'But then I'm curious.'

'Most, women are,' Dean grinned. 'Aren't you, Beth?'

'I try not to be. I think privacy's important for everyone.'

'Good for you,' he said, standing tip. 'I'll go and settle the check.'

Alone, Lynn gave her a strange smile. 'You really mean that, don't you? Personally, the more I loved someone, the more I'd want to know what they're thinking about. Take Dean, for example. He's so enigmatic it would be fantastic to read *his* thoughts the whole time!'

'You're not very trusting,' Beth replied.

'I'm a realist. You should be too. You won't get hurt that way.'

Aware of an undercurrent in the conversation, and unwilling to continue it, Beth sauntered to the door. But Lynn was close on her heels, continuing the subject with obvious enjoyment.

'You'd be much happier if you learned to simulate, Beth. Going around full of wide-eyed wonder is fine for a teenager, but for you ... well, it's pretty silly. After all, didn't Danny's behaviour teach you anything?'

'It made me even more full of wide-eyed wonder,' Beth said in a flat voice.

'You mean his behaviour today?' Lynn shrugged it aside. '*That* should have turned you into a cynic.'

'Why?'

'Because he was playing to the gallery. The heartbroken lover ready to sacrifice his happiness for his loved one.'

That's not true! He wasn't pretending. He meant every word.'

'It won't last. I'll take a bet on it.'

Returning to the waiting-room, Beth could not forget what Lynn had said; though it did not make her believe that Danny would change his mind, it did make her realise how much she distrusted and disliked the American girl, How strange that Dean, usually so sensitive to people, did not feel the same way.

With tortuous slowness the afternoon crept by. Several times Dean received business calls, making her more than ever aware of his position and the differences between them.

As the end of the forty-eight hours approached, the tension increased, and Dean paced the room, unlighted cigar in hand. Five steps to the window, five to the door. A pause to listen if anyone was coming and then the resumption of walking. Palms damp, Beth forced herself to remain seated, but as the door opened she was on her feet, every nerve tingling as she recognized the surgeon.

With a smile he looked from one to the other. 'She'll walk! I'm delighted to bring you the news.'

He continued with technicalities, but Beth listened without hearing, and not till he had left the room and Dean came over to her did she feel reality return.

'I can't believe it,' she cried. 'So her gamble paid off.'

'But what a risk to take.' Even now Dean's tone was ragged. 'She was crazy. And I'll tell her too!'

'I don't blame her.'

'Indeed?' He looked deep into her eyes, ignoring Lynn who was behind him, watching. 'I suppose that means you would have done the same?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Well, don't.' His hands were like steel bands on her shoulders. 'I don't ever want you taking *any* risk without first consulting *me*. Do you understand that?'

Surprised by his vehemence, she nodded, though her greatest satisfaction came from the look of irritation which she saw on Lynn's face.

'There's no point staying here now,' the girl was saying. 'They won't let us see Cindy, and as long as she's fine...'

'I'll tell Danny we're leaving,' Dean said, and stopped as his cousin entered the room.

Transfigured was the first word that came to Beth's mind as she saw his face. She had seen him look happy many times before, but never with such soul-deep happiness and contentment. At last all was right with Danny's world!

With a cry she ran across and flung herself into his arms. 'I'm so happy for you. So happy!'

Awkwardly he patted her head. 'Cindy wants to see you all tomorrow. They're moving her into a private ward and she's off the danger list.'

'When's the wedding?' Lynn drawled.

'Cindy insists on being mobile for it.' Momentarily he paused, as though aware of what might have been. 'Hang on here a while longer. Then you can be bridesmaid!'

'I wouldn't dream of leaving before the happy event.' Lynn looked at Dean, though she was still talking to Danny. 'It's what I've been waiting for.'

'It's what we've all been waiting for,' Dean answered. 'And like you, I couldn't be more delighted.'

'Sure you won't change your mind and make it a double' wedding?' Danny asked.

'Positive.' Dean slapped his cousin on the shoulder. 'I take it you'll be spending the night here again, but come to the ranch in the morning. It will be better for you *and* Cindy if you don't hang around here all the time. She needs a rest to recover from the emotional shock.'

'Don't we all?' Danny responded dryly, and clasped Dean's arm in a gesture of friendship.

Seeing it, Beth felt tears come into her eyes; all was well with *her* world too.

It was only later, as she sat beside Dean as they drove through the desert on their way home, that she gave thought to her own future. Surely now he would tell her of his plans? Behind her she heard the rustle of Lynn's dress, and bit back a sigh. If only they were alone.

'I'd better go to the hotel,' she murmured. 'There must be a mass of things to do.'

Dean's hands tightened visibly on the wheel, but as though aware of Lynn, he merely nodded. 'I'll talk to you later.'

It was dusk when the car stopped outside the dude ranch and Beth clambered out. Lynn followed, but it was only to transfer herself to the front seat, where she made herself comfortable and gave Dean a warm smile.

'You'll have to put up with my company instead of Beth's,' she said. 'Thank heavens I'm my own boss and not a working girl!'

'It would do you good to work,' he grinned, and leaned across her to look at Beth. 'Any point my driving over later tonight?'

Beth shook her head. 'I'll be too busy to see you.'

'Then we'll leave it till tomorrow.'

Beth waited till the car was out of sight before she climbed the steps and entered the lobby. She had only been away overnight, but even in this short absence the atmosphere had changed completely, and instead of being in an obvious dude ranch set in the middle of Arizona, she could have been in the heart of an English country hotel. What a difference rows of streamers and sparkling baubles could make - especially when it almost completely hid Mexican lamps and wall plates!

'How is Cindy?' Mrs. Mays asked behind her, and Beth swung round, her smile making an answer unnecessary. 'Thank goodness for that,' the older woman continued. 'You must be exhausted from worry.'

'We all are!'

'Dean not with you?'

'He's gone home.'

'You should have gone with him. I'm sure he wanted to celebrate.'

'I've been away long enough as it is.'

'Don't be silly, child. If I weren't selfish I would have told you to stop working last week. I'm sure Dean wants you to.' She smiled. 'Everything's running so smoothly I honestly don't think you need stay here. Come back to sleep if you wish, but feel free to come and go whenever you like.'

'I couldn't take advantage of you like that,' Beth protested.

'Nonsense. As you're the future wife of our wealthiest citizen, I'm merely being diplomatic!'

Beth laughed and gave her a hug. 'If you're quite sure, then I'll go over and see Dean tonight.'

'I'll get Miguel to drive you.'

'That would be wonderful. Then I can give Dean a surprise.' Beth paused. 'As a matter of fact I won't let him know I'm coming. I want to hide his Christmas present in the library.'

'Get Miguel to let you into Dean's house through the kitchen garden. He used to work there, and he knows the way.'

An hour and a half later, after a refreshing shower and change of clothes, Beth found herself standing in the lush green grass bordering the pink-washed walls of Dean's home. A few yards away soft light filtered from the wide windows of his library, while beyond it brighter lights shone from the sitting-room, where a murmur of voices could be heard. Dean and Lynn must be taking their pre-dinner drinks there and she would have to tread quietly if she did not want to be discovered. Once she had hidden the picture she would return to the garden and enter the house by the front door.

'You want me to carry the parcel?' Miguel whispered.

'I can manage on my own, thanks.'

'Then I go to see Conchita. *Adios.*'

He edged away and Beth moved closer to the sliding windows. They were closed against the cool night air and with bated breath she inched them open, thankful that they moved without sound. In the library itself she looked around for somewhere to hide the painting. First she tried the bookshelves, but they were too narrow; then she tried behind the settee, but it moved so smoothly on its castors that she was afraid it would slide forward if someone sat on it and cause the picture to fall into view. All the while she heard Dean and Lynn talking, but the door to the sitting-room was half-closed and their voices were indistinct. Hurriedly she looked round the library again. She had to find a place to hide the picture. But where?

The clatter of high heels on the tiled floor next door sent her in a panic to hide behind the curtains at the window. Lynn seemed about to enter the room, her voice clearly heard as she paused on the other side of the doorway.

'You should have told Beth the truth as soon as you knew Cindy was going to get well,' she said. 'If I'd been in your place, nothing could have stopped me.'

'I've a great deal to say to Beth,' Dean replied, 'and I don't need telling when and where to say it.'

In the act of tiptoeing into the garden, Beth stopped. Realizing she was eavesdropping, her first reaction had been to move out of earshot, but the gravity in Dean's voice held her back and a nameless fear started to permeate her whole body. Dean and Lynn were talking



about her in terms she did not understand: she had to find out what it meant.

'How hoity-toity you are, darling,' Lynn was saying.

'Considering I was the one who dreamed up the whole scheme, you can't blame me for wanting to know how you're going to end it.' There was amusement in the melodious voice.

'You've got to admit it was very clever of me. After all, I guessed her type as soon as I set eyes on her.'

'You did?' Dean's voice was without expression, but Beth could almost see his raised eyebrow.

'You know very well I did. The minute *you* came on the scene, Danny didn't count with her any more. Of course she didn't realize it herself, but I was positive. You bowled her over, darling. She fell for you like a ton of bricks!' Lynn giggled. 'Mind you, I didn't reckon on you getting engaged to her. That was carrying the charade a bit too far. I guess I forgot what a perfectionist you are.'

'I guess you did,' Dean agreed.

Beth did not wait to hear more. With a whimper she spun round, seeking blindly for the exit. The painting fell from her hand, but she did not stop to retrieve it. She had to escape. Dean did not love her; had never loved her. It had all been a pretence, built up to ensure she left Danny alone.

She was out in the garden now, running wildly along the path in the direction of the kitchen wing. Behind her she heard Dean call her name and guessed he had heard the clatter as the painting fell to the ground.

'Beth!' he shouted. 'Come back. I want to talk to you!'

Ignoring his cry, she raced into the kitchen. Miguel jumped up as he saw her, alarmed by her flushed face and panting breath.

'Take me back to the hotel,' she gasped. 'At once.'

Outside Dean was still calling her name and she knew he had not guessed she had headed towards the kitchen. She must get out of here without being seen: must reach the car before he found her.

'Is there another way out?' she pleaded. 'I don't want to talk to... I don't want to be seen.'

Miguel glanced at the plump cook, who pointed with her hand. 'Conchita will take you through the servants' quarters to the far side of the pool,' he said. 'I fetch the car and meet you there.'

'If you see Mr. Harding, don't tell him where I am,' Beth ordered. 'You understand?'

'*Si, si*. You no worry. I say nothing.' He loped away, enjoying the cloak and dagger secrecy, and Beth followed Conchita through a maze of small rooms that led to a part of the garden she had not seen before. It was dark here, with no lamps in the trees, and only the moon to give illumination. It made Beth more conscious of the desert around her and of the strange animal sounds that could be clearly heard in the still, cool air.

The vibrant hum of an engine brought her from behind the bush where she had been crouching, and Conchita's husky whisper confirmed that it was Miguel, valiantly driving without any lights in order not to attract attention. Running forward, Beth wrenched open the door and jumped in, sinking as far down in the seat as she could.

With a roar he sent the car leaping forward, headlights now blazing as they swept down the curving drive. Behind her another set of lights flashed and she turned and saw Dean leap across a balustrade and run towards a large station wagon. He was coming after her!

'Can you go faster?' she begged.

'Not in this car. But I take short cut across desert. Not good for tyres, but quicker.'

'Do it,' she urged, and sat tense and nervous as they bumped and swayed their way across scrubland.

They had several minutes' start on Dean, and taking the rough way instead of the road they were completely out of his sight by the time he roared down the drive in pursuit of them. But even so she would only have a short while before he finally caught up with her, and she clenched her hands in an agony of fear as she wondered how she would find the courage to face him without breaking down. Yet courage she must find. And the ability to make him believe she had known he had only been playacting. Yes, she must convince him she had known he had been pretending. Convince him that she too had pretended - partly out of devilment and partly out of a desire to break off with Danny. Thought of Danny brought a bitter smile to her lips. Would he find the story of Dean's deception amusing, or would he think she had only got what she deserved? Somehow she knew he would not think either: would not even care about anyone else's emotional problems for months to come; his world was Cindy and likely to remain so for a long time. And when he finally came down to reality, his love for Beth would be a distant memory.

Nervously she peered through the rear window. But all was dark outside and she relaxed. If she could get to the hotel and the safety of her room, she might be able to avoid Dean entirely. She would take the first plane back to New York in the morning and - No, she said to

herself, she was not going to run away. If she did, it would make nonsense of her determination to show Dean she did not love him. And to do that, she would have to brazen out the next few weeks. But what an effort it would be.

Perspiration beaded her forehead and with a shaking hand she wiped it away. A two-time loser. The phrase came into her mind and remained there like the refrain from a melody. Danny and Dean. Two men who had let her down. Yet of the two, she could more easily forgive Danny. As he was the weaker, she could understand his letting her down; but with Dean she had expected so much more. Dependability and honesty. How strongly this aura had emanated from him, and how false it had proved to be!

'We safe now,' Miguel advised, and screeched to a halt at the bottom of the steps.

From the corner of her eye Beth saw a station wagon racing along the driveway, and she scrambled out and ran into the lobby, precipitating herself almost directly into the arms of a serious-looking man in a grey suit.

'Beth!' he said in delight. How good to see you. Mrs. Mays just told me I'd have to go over to Harding's place if I wanted to talk to you.'

'Bill! What are *you* doing here? Is anything wrong with Lois?'

'She's fine,' he assured her. 'You'll see her yourself tomorrow night. She's coming down here for a week's holiday.' ,,

'She never told me. In her last letter she didn't even mention it. Are you sure she's all right?'

He chuckled. Why should I be the harbinger of bad news? As a matter of fact it's the exact opposite.' Drawing Beth to one side, he

continued: 'My wife has left me. She went to South America a month ago and isn't coming back. Fell in love with a man she met on the boat.'

'Your *wife*? But I thought she wasn't the type to—'

'He's rich,' Bill Saunders said dryly. 'Rich enough to make her decide she didn't want me or the children any more.'

Despite her own state of shock Beth could appreciate what this must have meant to him. 'I'm sorry for your children,' she said soberly, 'but at least you and Lois will be happy.'

'So will the boys,' he replied. 'Lois will be more of a mother to them than Margery ever was.' He braced his • shoulders. 'I can still hardly believe it. It's happened so fast. But with Christmas coming up I couldn't face New York on my "own. Lois wants to get to know the boys properly, so I suggested we came here for a vacation. In that way we can all be together!'

'I'm so pleased for you,' Beth choked, and tears flowed down her cheeks.

'Hey,' Bill teased, 'there's no need to cry about it!'

'I'm sorry,' she gulped, 'but it's just been one of those days.' Over his shoulder she saw Dean enter the lobby and she clutched Bill's arm. 'You've got to help me,' she cried. 'Please, it's most important...*help me.*'

'Of course. What do you want me to do?'

'Go along with anything I say, no matter what it is ... how crazy it sounds. Just agree with it.'

'Beth!' Dean was upon her, white-faced and furious. 'Why did you run off like that? I've got to talk to you, to explain.'

'I hate explanations,' she said, marvelling at the coolness of her tone, and clinging to Bill's arm like a drowning person clutching a straw. 'Besides, it isn't necessary.'

'Yes, it is.' He went to catch hold of her and noticed the man at her side.

'I'd like you to meet Bill Saunders,' she said quickly. 'He was - he arranged for me to come down here.'

'I remember.' Dean was perfunctory. 'You're a friend of Mrs. Mays.'

'And of mine,' Beth added. 'But more than a friend. Though we were afraid to say so until now, weren't we, darling?' She smiled at Bill widely, the pressure of her hand warning him to be careful. With an effort she turned to Dean. 'That's what I came over to tell you tonight. But hearing you and Lynn talking made it - made it unnecessary for me to explain.'

'I don't understand you/ Dean made no attempt to lighten his manner. 'I want to talk to you alone.'

'Bill won't like that,' she chided. 'That's what I'm trying to tell you. We're - we're in love. We have been for months. That's why I came down here - to get away from him. It • had nothing whatever to do with Danny.'

'You're lying!' Dean said.

'Ask Bill if you don't believe me.' Again she swung round to look at Bill, her eyes begging him not to let her down. 'Go on, Bill, tell him the truth - that you hadn't a hope of getting free, so I decided to come

here and make a new life for myself.' Before Bill could answer she was looking at Dean. That's why I didn't accept your offer of going back to New York. Because I didn't want to be in the same city as Bill. I'd have told you the truth in the beginning except that you automatically assumed I'd come after Danny, and I was so furious with you I decided to let you believe it.'

'Was getting engaged to me part of the act too?'

She shrugged. 'I wanted to make you sorry for the way you'd acted towards me; and also because I found you very—' She caught her breath. 'Because I found you attractive and - and rich, of course. Beyond my wildest dreams.'

'Don't talk like a fool, darling,' Bill came into the conversation for the first time. 'There's no point maligning yourself for nothing. Just tell Harding the truth.' He put his arm on Beth's shoulder, the gesture casual, as though he had done it many times before. 'Beth got engaged to you because she'd given up believing *we* would ever be able to marry. It had nothing to do with your money. She's not that type of girl. She genuinely thought she could make a new life for herself. You can't blame her for trying.'

The words, spoken in Bill's soft voice, were more effective than anything Beth herself could have said, and she saw all vestige of warmth die out of Dean's face.

'Don't be angry with me,' she murmured, forcing herself to speak. 'After all, we were both playing a game.'

The anger left his face and he nodded. 'I guess I didn't like discovering you'd taken me for a ride too! But you're right, -though. All that's happened is I've been hoist with my own petard. It's not as amusing as I had thought.'

'You're too used to getting your own way,' she said lightly.

'That's what Lynn always says.'

Mention of Lynn was like salt in the depths of Beth's wounded pride, but as with all wounds it had to be cauterized in order to be healed, and Beth attempted to do so. Was it really her idea - your pretending to love me? Or was she only being clever after the event?'

'No, she thought of it entirely. It seemed to be the best way out.'

'And I fooled you instead.' Beth clutched at Bill's arm as though her life depended on it. 'I hope there's no hard feelings, Dean?'

'None. You're a good actress. I almost believed you.'

'Let's have a drink to show there's no hard feelings,' Bill suggested, and moved ahead of them to the bar.

Misery kept Beth rooted to the spot, but pride forced her into conversation. 'I can see now why you never set a date for our wedding. It could have been tricky for you.'

'Just as tricky for you.' The grey eyes were amused. 'Think how you would have felt if you'd married me and then found that Saunders was free!'

'But I wouldn't have married you,' she replied. 'There was a limit to how far I'd have gone.'

He grinned openly. That's a relief to hear. I've been a bachelor for so long, I wouldn't fancy giving up my freedom now.'

'I'm sure you'll give it up one day.'

'You never know.'



He shrugged and held out his hand. 'I haven't time to accept Saunders' offer of a drink. Lynn's waiting for me back home. Would you make my apologies?'

'Of course.' Bravely she smiled good-bye, keeping her lips stretched until the swing doors hid him from sight. Only then did she move in search of Bill.

'I suppose you know what you're doing?' he asked as she came abreast of him. 'I'd hoped that if you were left alone together. ...'

£No,' she sighed, 'we didn't. Would you mind if I don't talk about it now?'

'Of course not. I've a pretty good idea what it was all about, anyway.' He handed her a cherry brandy. 'You look although you need this.'

'I do.' She drained the glass at a gulp and handed it back to him.

*'That* won't help you forget,' he said.

'Nothing will help me to forget. It might make it bearable, though.'

'Only time will do that.'

'Then let's drink to the passing of time.' Her voice broke. 'I give you a toast, Bill. To Rip Van Winkle. The human being I would most like to be!'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

WAITING to greet Lois at the airport the following afternoon, Beth marvelled at the strength she had discovered in herself to pretend to be a carefree young woman when inside she felt bereft of feeling. Her first test had come early that morning when she had encountered Lynn.

'I'm sorry about last night,' the girl said, not looking in the least sorry. 'I'd no idea you were hiding in the library.'

'I was hiding a present for Dean,' Beth corrected, 'not myself.'

Lynn shrugged. 'Anyway, you overheard. Though apparently it wasn't such a blow to you as I thought. You were play-acting too!'

Beth looked at Lynn squarely. 'You must have been disappointed I wasn't hurt?'

'I think you were hurt.' The dark eyes narrowed. 'Dean might believe your story, but I don't.'

Beth made to walk away, but found her path blocked.

'Don't look so worried,' Lynn said. 'Your secret's quite safe with me.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'That you love Dean. That's what I'm talking about. Not that I blame you for wanting to protect your pride. In your place I'd have done the same. But how are you going to keep up the lie? Or do you intend actually marrying this Mr. Saunders?'

Beth hesitated. If Lynn remained at the dude ranch she would certainly see Lois, and one glimpse of her cousin with Bill would put paid to her own pretence. Yet would Lynn rush to tell Dean? Beth

doubted it. Despite the despicable trick he had played on her, she had to admit that his motive had been laudable - the desire to protect Cindy. But if he learned that in doing so he had seriously hurt Beth, his conscience would force him to try and make amends. And this was something Lynn would not want.

'No,' she admitted, 'I'm not going to marry Bill. But I'm going to New York immediately after Christmas, so there's no chance of Dean finding out.'

'So you *are* in love with him!' Lynn could not keep the pleasure from her voice. 'You really thought he'd marry you?'

Too tired to prevaricate, Beth nodded, though a remnant of pride made her say: 'But you'll be too scared to tell him, won't you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Yes, you do. But if you want to pretend, that's all right with me.'

'There's the plane now!' Bill's voice brought Beth back to the present, and she forced a smile to her face, determined not to spoil Lois's happiness.

Soon she found herself being hugged and exclaimed over, examined as carefully as a peach taken from its wrapping. 'How marvellous you look,' Lois bubbled. 'Your hair's like silver. And you're so tanned! No wonder Dean Harding fell for you. I can't wait to meet him!'

'Let's talk about you first,' Beth said quickly. 'I nearly collapsed when I saw Bill last night. I thought something terrible had happened.'

'Something fabulous,' Lois corrected, and wound her arm through Bill's. 'Where are the boys?'

'I left them by the pool. I thought you and Beth would have a lot to talk about.'

'We have.' Lois hugged Beth again. 'When *will* I meet Dean? From all you wrote about him—'

'It's over,' Beth said lightly, and launched into her well rehearsed story. On the rebound from loving Danny ... such a handsome man ... so sought after that it had been a feather in her cap blinding her to the reality that every engagement rightfully ended in marriage.

'And marriage wasn't for me,' she concluded. 'At least not with Dean. He's too demanding ... too overpowering. So if you'll have me back at the flat...'

'I can't believe it,' was all Lois could say. 'Your letters were so ecstatic. Are you certain you haven't made a mistake?'

'Let's get to the car before I get a parking ticket,' Bill intervened, divining from Beth's face that she was at the end of her tether.

Happily Lois obeyed, and as Bill skilfully steered them through the hustle of traffic he equally skilfully steered the conversation into other channels.

At the dude ranch they were greeted by his children, two well-behaved boys of nine and ten who obviously adored Lois already, and watching the way they all spoke together and laughed and interrupted each other, Beth knew she was witnessing the beginning of a family relationship. It brought with it such a deep pang of sorrow that she could not remain with them, and murmuring that she had work to do, she went into the office.

'You look dreadful,' Mrs. Mays expostulated. 'And don't bother looking for a reason. Bill's already told me about Dean - and so has Lynn!'

'I bet she has.'

'I'd like to give that man a piece of my mind,' Mrs. Mays went on. 'I could have understood it if Danny had acted that way, but Dean... it's incredible.'

'He was protecting Cindy.'

'Rubbish! The girl should have been left alone to find out the truth for herself. She may be young, but she had more spunk than any of you gave her credit for.'

Remembering Cindy's courage over the operation, Beth conceded the point, yet believing she was loved by Danny had given her this courage. 'Dean did what he thought was best,' she replied.

'Best for Cindy perhaps, but not for you. Leading you on like that ...He'd better not come here in a hurry!'

'You mustn't say anything to him,' urged Beth. 'I don't want him to know the truth.'

'I don't see—'

*'Please?'* Beth begged. 'Pride's all I've got; at least let me keep it.'

Giving her promise, though not without some demure, Mrs. Mays went on her way, and Beth busied herself with some accounts.

'A call for you,' Sam said, interrupting her. 'I've switched it through for you.'

With pounding heart she picked up the receiver, anticipation dying as she heard Cindy's voice.

'Why haven't you been to see me?' came the question. 'I asked after you, but everyone kept telling me different stories.'

'I thought you should take things easy,' Beth said, her throat still dry. 'And you shouldn't be talking on the phone either.'

'I'm fine,' Cindy said. 'Never felt better. It's marvellous about me, isn't it?'

'I'm delighted.' For the first time Beth was able to feel enthusiasm.

'Well, come along and tell me so properly. I'm all alone.'

'Isn't Danny with you?'

'Dean collected him an hour ago. I think they've gone to Tucson.'

Beth hesitated. These last few hours had made her realize the impossibility of facing Christmas surrounded by festive-minded holidaymakers. She would have to go back to New York on the next available plane. Yet she could not leave without saying good-bye to Cindy; and with Dean and Danny both out of town, this was her only chance.

'I'll come and see you now,' she promised. 'I won't be able to make it over Christmas.'

'I hadn't expected you to. You'll want to be with Dean.'

Only then did Beth realize that Cindy knew nothing of what had happened last night. She still thought she was engaged to Dean. Obviously he had not wanted her to learn the truth yet.

'Are you still there?' Cindy asked.

'I'm on my way over,' Beth answered, and put down the phone.

Unable to drive she was obliged to commandeer Miguel, and not wishing him to know her plans, she let him deposit her at the hospital and, as soon as he had driven off in search of the inevitable cup of coffee, she hailed a taxi and drove to the nearest travel agency to book a seat on the next afternoon flight to New York.

'Going home for the holiday?' the booking clerk asked.

She nodded and put the ticket in her bag. How angry Mrs. Mays and Lois would be when they learned what she was going to do! But nothing they said would stop her. If only she had had the sense to do this weeks ago, when she had first realized she was in love with Dean. Anger gave impetus to her footsteps, and she raced into the hospital and along the corridor to Cindy's room.

On the threshold she stopped aghast, the smile leaving her face as Dean rose from a chair beside the bed. 'You!' she gasped. 'Cindy said you were in Tucson.'

'I changed my plans and Danny went on his own.'

'So Dean came back to cheer me up,' Cindy beamed. 'Aren't you pleased you came over? You never expected to see him, did you?'

'No.' Beth moved to the bed, careful to keep as far away from Dean as possible. 'You look fine,' she said, focusing her attention on the girl. 'Far too well to get grapes and books.'

'You shouldn't!' Cindy exclaimed, and reached out to look at the titles Beth had brought for her. 'Maigret and Father Brown - my two favourites. You can both go!' She caught Beth's hand and pressed it to

her cheek. 'I didn't mean that. I'm so happy to have you here - both of you. Isn't the future going to be wonderful for us? I'm so glad *you're* marrying Dean and not - you know who!'

Scarlet with embarrassment, Beth turned away, ostensibly to sit down. Dean had not moved since she had come in and she was aware of him watching her, his face grave, his eyes cold. Quickly she began to talk, saying anything that came into her head, and not giving Cindy a chance to include Dean in the conversation. At last, when she thought she had stayed long enough, she got up to go, trying to talk herself out of the room. But Cindy was not having it.

'You can't go and leave Dean here. That's ridiculous!'

'But Miguel brought me,' Beth explained, 'and I have to get back to the ranch. We've stacks of visitors.'

'You told me Beth was giving up working,' Cindy accused Dean.

'So she is,' he agreed amiably, 'but after the holidays.'

'I must get back,' Beth murmured. 'Take care of yourself, Cindy.'

'When will you come again?'

'I'm not sure. Some time soon.'

'Do go with her,' Cindy said to Dean. 'I won't have you stay on here sulking.'

'Who's sulking?' he asked cheerfully.

'You will if I let Beth go off without you! Take her back yourself. Miguel can go on his own.' She blew them both a kiss. 'Aren't I being tactful?'



'Extremely,' Dean said dryly, and gave Beth a warning look.

Dutifully she waited until he had kissed Cindy good-bye, and together they left the room. But immediately the door was closed she stepped away from him and quickened her pace.

'I'd no idea you would be here,' she explained, 'or I wouldn't have come.'

'There's no need to apologize.' He walked beside her. 'I didn't want to tell Cindy about us - not yet. She's fond of you and I thought it would upset her.'

'There's no need to tell her the real truth, is there?' Beth asked. 'That we got engaged to stop Danny from—'

'Of course not,' Dean said swiftly. 'I'd no intention of - telling her *that!* I'll just say we both realized it was moonlight and magic. Not the real thing.'

Each word was like a stab wound, but no pain showed in Beth's face, and the glance she gave him as they entered the lift was as bright and shining as a beacon. 'I'm glad you're not annoyed at - at the way I deceived you.'

'I have no right to be. I was doing the same thing!' He rested negligently against the wall. 'When are you planning on marrying Saunders?'

'As soon as he's free.'

'No jumping the gun?'

For an instant she did not comprehend. Then she blushed and avoided his eyes, furious to hear him chuckle.

'Poor Beth, still old-fashioned enough to turn pink!'

The lift doors opened and they went towards the entrance. 'Is Miguel really here?' Dean asked.

'Of course.' Eyes wide, she looked at him. 'I didn't make it up so that you wouldn't have to drive me back. I'm not afraid of being with you.'

'I never thought you would be. Only too annoyed.'

She shrugged with seeming indifference, and aware of his watching her, walked to the car. She climbed in beside Miguel, and only as they moved off did she turn and give Dean a casual wave, turning away again almost at once.

'You friends again with Mr. Harding?' Miguel asked.

'Yes,' she replied, and closed her eyes to prevent further conversation.

Not until dinner was over and she was sitting with Bill and Lois in the lounge did she tell them she was returning to New York the next day.

'You can't stay in the flat on your own!' Lois screeched. 'Not on Christmas.'

'I can't stay here. All these people ... the excitement and fun... I couldn't take it.'

Lois glanced at Bill. He had told her as much as he knew of the situation between Beth and Dean, and though she had decided to contain her curiosity until Beth herself felt able # to confide in her, she could not let Beth go off to spend Christmas on her own.

'I won't let you go,' she said flatly. 'I'd worry the whole time.'

'Don't be silly. I'm not a child.'

'Then have the courage to stay here until we can all go back together.'

'I can't. I've got to get away. You don't understand what it's like.'

'Don't I?' Lois reminded her.

'At least you didn't feel such a fool. You weren't deceived.' Beth clenched her hands. 'Even when you weren't with Bill you could still go on respecting him. You didn't hate yourself for loving him!'

Clutching on to the last vestige of her control, she ran out, and only in the safety of her bedroom did she give way to tears. They were the first she had shed since learning the truth about Dean, but they brought no relief and with an effort she forced herself to wash her face and commence her packing.

One suitcase was already filled when Lois came in to see her.

'So you're definitely going?' she said.

'Don't try and stop me,' Beth warned.

'I won't. Bill's just been lambasting me for interfering.' Lois perched on the bed. 'If it weren't for the boys we'd come back with you. But they'd be so disappointed if we left before they'd had their holiday.'

'I wouldn't dream of letting you leave,' Beth said. 'And you needn't worry about me. I won't do anything silly. I just want to be alone for a few days.'

'Are you quite sure it's over between you and Dean? It's not something that could be patched up?'

'He doesn't love me.' How bald the words sounded, giving no indication of his tenderness, his kisses, his passion. *Only* passion, she reminded herself. Not love. 'It was *his* way, of making sure I didn't

encourage Danny,' she went on. 'He knew I was attracted to him and he took advantage of it.' Beth snapped the second case shut. 'It was lucky Bill arrived when he did. I was at least able to save my pride.' /

'Bill told me about it,' Lois said briefly, and put her arms round Beth. 'The Harding men have given you a rough time, darling. The sooner you get clear of them, the better.'

Arizona was at its most beautiful when Beth walked across the tarmac the following afternoon. Refusing Lois and Bill's offer to take her to the airport, she had come with Miguel instead, and turned to give him a final wave before climbing the steps of the silver-winged jet. There were no other people in front of her, only a smiling stewardess beside the hatch.

'Don't tell me I'm the only passenger?' she joked as she stepped inside.

'Most people are *coming* from New York,' came the admission. 'That's why we aren't full.'

This was the understatement of the year, Beth thought as she entered the aircraft and sat down, for the interior was completely empty. Stranger still, it did not have the appearance of a commercial airliner, for the decor was far more elaborate, with large leather chairs and crocodile seat belts.

Nervously she looked around. The stewardess was behind her, mouthing for her to fasten herself in, and hastily she did so, staring through the window as they taxied across the airfield. All at once the engines roared, and almost before she was aware of it, they were airborne.

Only as the sprawling mass of the city fell away from sight did she relax, and undoing her belt, settle back more comfortably. How weird it was to be the sole passenger. Almost as though the plane was her own. The thought reminded her of Danny's departure from New York, when he had blithely informed her he was travelling in one of his own jets. Now she knew how it felt to have an aircraft at one's command. She might not be Dean's fiancée any longer, but she was certainly feeling like it! Bitterness returned and with it all joy vanished. Would every thought lead to Dean? Was he going to haunt her for the rest of her life?

He was. Indeed he was; for even now he was coming down the aisle tall and dark and smiling cruelly as though enjoying a joke at her expense. She closed her eyes and opened them again but he was still there only now he was closer, and taking the seat opposite.

'I'm not a ghost,' he said, divining her thoughts.

'What are *you* doing here?'

'Taking you to New York. I presume that's where you want to go?'

'You know very well it is,' she choked. 'But what are — where am I? What plane...?'

'Mine.' He crossed one leg nonchalantly over the other. 'The least I could do was see you left Phoenix in style.'

'I suppose Mrs. Mays told you I was leaving?'

'It was your cousin, as a matter of fact - Lois. A most intelligent young woman. She'll make Saunders an excellent wife.'

Beth sat completely still. So Dean knew the truth. All her subterfuge and lies had been for nothing!

'Don't blame your cousin for telling me,' Dean continued. 'She was lunching with Saunders when I went over to talk to him. It didn't take me long to learn the truth.' The glint in his eye bespoke an anger that surprised her. 'Why did you spin me such a yarn about yourself and Saunders? No, don't answer me. It's perfectly clear why you did so.'

'Then stop taunting me!' she flared. 'Or does it give you pleasure to know that ...' Turning away, she fumbled for her handkerchief, but before she could find it a large white one was put into her hand.

'Don't cry,' Dean said. 'I don't want you to cry.'

'Then go away and leave me alone!'

'A bit difficult, I'm afraid. Unless I bail out!'

'Now you're making fun of me again!'

'It's either that, or putting you over my knee and walloping you! When I think of the misery you've caused me in the past twelve hours I could...' Bending over her, he forced her round to face him. 'If only you'd told me the truth when I followed you back to the hotel. But seeing you with Saunders ... and he was just as plausible as you!'

Listening to him, she knew the impossibility of maintaining her story. He had far too subtle a mind, and it was useless for her to go on pretending.

'I hadn't intended to lie to you,' she said quietly. 'When I overheard you and Lynn I - I - my one aim was never to see you again. I'd no idea Bill was at the hotel. When I got back and saw him ...' She flung out her hands. 'You can't blame me for what I did.'

'I blame you very much.' His smile was razor thin. 'You showed a remarkable lack of judgment in your assessment of me! The very

least you should have done was to let me speak. It would have saved you the necessity of lying and saved both of us a lot of pain. How you could have thought the whole thing was just an act on my part,...' Words failed him and he glared at her. 'Say something, can't you?'

Wildly she sought for words, but none came. With all her heart she longed to believe she was not imagining what she had just heard, but logic warned her to be careful. What had Dean said to make her think he loved her? This time it would require much more than implication to convince her of his feelings.

'I've always been proud of my good name,' Dean was speaking again. 'I never make promises I can't keep and I never make statements I don't mean. Having you think that what I'd said to you was a total lie was intolerable. Intolerable! And knowing other people would think the same—'

'So you came to make amends,' Beth concluded. 'But you needn't worry about your reputation. No one knows what happened between us except Bill and Lois and Mrs. Mays.' Clasp ing her hands together to hide their shaking, she continued: 'So you could have saved yourself the trouble of kidnapping me. As far as your friends are concerned, our engagement was a mistake that we both discovered before it was too late. Nothing more than that.'

'Nothing more than that,' he echoed, and rubbed his cheek with one lean hand, a gesture so familiar and endearing that Beth closed her eyes to shut out the sight. 'So you think I got you here in order to concoct a satisfactory explanation for ending our engagement?'

'Yes,' she said firmly, 'I do. I'm sure you wouldn't have had a bad conscience if you could have gone on thinking I'd lied to you the same way that you did to me. But finding out I - I was - I was in love with you made you see how badly you'd acted.'

'At least you give credit for being able to have a bad conscience,' he drawled.

Unable to face him, she walked over to the window on the far side. Below lay the desert, flat and smooth and golden, giving no indication of its variety. Would distance flatten the intensity of her love for Dean, blurring the pain and smoothing away the memory, or would she always feel the same deep loss and loneliness?

'I'm sure you're genuinely sorry for what happened,' she murmured, 'and I can see why you did it. So there's no need for you to worry about me. Once I start work again I'll be fine.' With an immense effort she turned to look at him. He was still in his chair, thin and austere in a suit the same pale grey as his eyes. 'I only wish the - that the idea hadn't been Lynn's. I've never liked her.'

'My becoming engaged to you *was* her idea, but not my falling in *love* with you. That happened without anyone telling me!' He came towards her. 'And until I did fall in love with you, I had no intention whatever of taking her advice about an engagement.'

Uncomprehending, Beth stared at him, and he came nearer still, though he did not make a move to touch her. 'You're not only singularly beautiful, but also singularly dumb! Don't you know what I'm trying to tell you? What I've already told you a hundred times before? I love you, Beth. I love you!'

Still she could not accept it. 'But you - you said you didn't. That it was moonlight and magic....'

'Pride isn't only a woman's prerogative!'

Happiness stirred in her, but she was afraid to accept it, suspicious lest - like a mirage - it vanished when she tried to grasp it. 'But you



were willing to let me go out of your life. When we left Cindy's yesterday you were so cruel. If you'd loved me. ..

'For heaven's sake!' He went to take her in his arms, but she evaded him.

'No, Dean. It's no use, I want to believe you, but I can't.' --\

'Why should I pretend? You don't think I really care what people say about me?'

'I only said that to hurt you,' she conceded.

'Then for heaven's sake tell me why I should pretend to be in love with you?'

'Out of kindness. When you found out Lois was going to marry Bill and not me...'

'You *do* see me as kind,' he said cruelly. 'A veritable Santa Claus! Honestly, Beth!' Words seemed to fail him and he leaned against the side of a chair, steadying himself as the plane lurched in a sudden pocket of hot air. 'Everything I've ever said to you - about the way I felt for you - has been true. I did fall in love with you at first sight and I did fight against it. When Lynn suggested I try and make you fall in love with me, I refused. I wanted to help Cindy, but there were limits to how far I'd go. And I can assure you that getting myself engaged - even if only temporarily - to someone I didn't love was completely out of the question. I'd also like to add that I made that perfectly clear to Lynn.' His brows lowered in a frown. 'When I knew for certain that I could never let you go out of my life, I did the logical thing. I asked you to marry me. I didn't buy you an engagement ring or set a wedding date because I was afraid.'

'Of what?' she asked.

'That I'd got you on the rebound. That if I let you know how much you meant to me, I'd scare you away. So I played it cool. As coolly as I could,' he amended. 'Seeing you wandering round my house in a negligee put something of a strain on my will power!' He paused for a moment, and when he resumed his words were barely audible, as though it pained him to utter them. 'Once Cindy had her operation I intended to marry you and take you away for a long honeymoon. I was determined to make you forget Danny completely.'

'But I told you I didn't love him!'

'Neither of us were very trusting,' he said dryly.

Scarlet-faced, she took a step towards him. 'You needn't say any more.'

'I must. We've got to bring everything out into the open. I see it's the only way. That night when we left the hospital and Lynn came home with me, I realized she thought I'd got engaged to you because of what *she* had said. It never entered her mind that I really loved you. You overheard the beginning of the conversation - when I was trying to break it to her gently. Before I could get around to telling her, you ran off.' He sighed. 'The rest you know.'

Beth was now close beside him, but something still prevented her from moving into his arms. 'What would have happened if you hadn't seen Lois with Bill? Would you have gone on believing what I had said and—'

'On the contrary,' he interrupted. 'I went to the hotel this morning prepared to do battle for you!' His smile was self-mocking. 'That's the state you'd got me in. A demented lover ready to kidnap you!'

'You're joking.'

'I was deadly serious.' His look bolstered his words. 'I planned on taking you into the desert and keeping you there until I'd made you see sense. When I couldn't find you in the hotel, I collared Saunders. I was all set to knock him down when Lois came over and told me the truth. That fool of a man was ready to have his teeth knocked out rather than admit he'd backed you up in a lie!'

'Poor Bill,' Beth could not help laughing: That's what comes of being loyal.' Unaware of moving, she found herself in Dean's arms. 'I'm glad you told me this.'

'Does it give you a sense of power to know how much I love you?'

Tower's the wrong word to use. You've made me feel ashamed for ever doubting you. I should have known the sort of man you were.' Half crying, she tried to explain what she was thinking. 'If I hadn't been so hurt I would have given you a chance to explain ... Oh, Dean, I was such a fool.'

'We both were. I was just as stupid to believe all those lies *you* said!'

Fearfully she stared into his eyes. 'Will it happen again? Will we go on hurting each other and saying things we don't, mean?'

There's only one way of making sure we don't. We'll get married! When you're mine completely there won't be room for doubts. Not for either of us.'

She rested her head in the curve of his shoulder, hearing the heavy thudding of his heart as her nearness stirred him to desire. Murmuring her name, he kissed her eyelids, his lips travelling down across her cheek until they rested on her mouth. Only then did the lightness vanish and the pressure increase until her body was bent back against the chair, and his arms alone prevented her from falling.

'Dean,' she gasped, 'let me go.'

Slowly he complied, but held on to her hands as if afraid she would disappear. 'I want to give you your Christmas present,' he said.

'Not until tomorrow,' she protested. 'Or wait till tonight, when it's Christmas Eve.'

'I'll have another present for you by then! I'd like you to have this one now.'

He took the envelope from his pocket and gave it to her. Puzzled, she opened it, her cheeks flaming as she saw it was a marriage licence.

'Dean! When?'

He glanced at his watch, then moved over to the wall and pressed a buzzer. Seconds later the plane began to descend and warning lights flashed on. 'In about twenty minutes from now,' he replied, pushing her into a seat and fastening her safety belt. 'I'm not taking a chance on your running out on me again!'

Overwhelmed, she could only hang on to his hand, feeling she was drowning in a sea of happiness. 'You once promised me a few hours' notice,' she reminded him.

'Do you mind my breaking the promise?'

She shook her head and, suddenly shy, averted her gaze.

'We can still spend the holiday with your cousin,' he said. 'I know you're fond of her and—'

'Not on our honeymoon!' she retorted, and pulled his head down until their cheeks were touching. 'I love you, my darling,' she whispered. 'I want to be alone with you.'

'Then I'll have the pilot stand by and we can take off again straight after we're married.'

'Not to New York?' she asked in dismay.

'To Mexico.' He stroked her hair with a hand that trembled. 'I've a house on the sea near Acapulco. It has a freezer stocked with food and a houseboy to do the work.'

'I can cook too,' she protested, lifting her head to look at him.

'I've other plans that will keep you busy!' His eyes glinted. 'Do you want me to enumerate them?'

'Sometimes words aren't necessary.'

'How true,' he said, and gathered her close to his heart.