

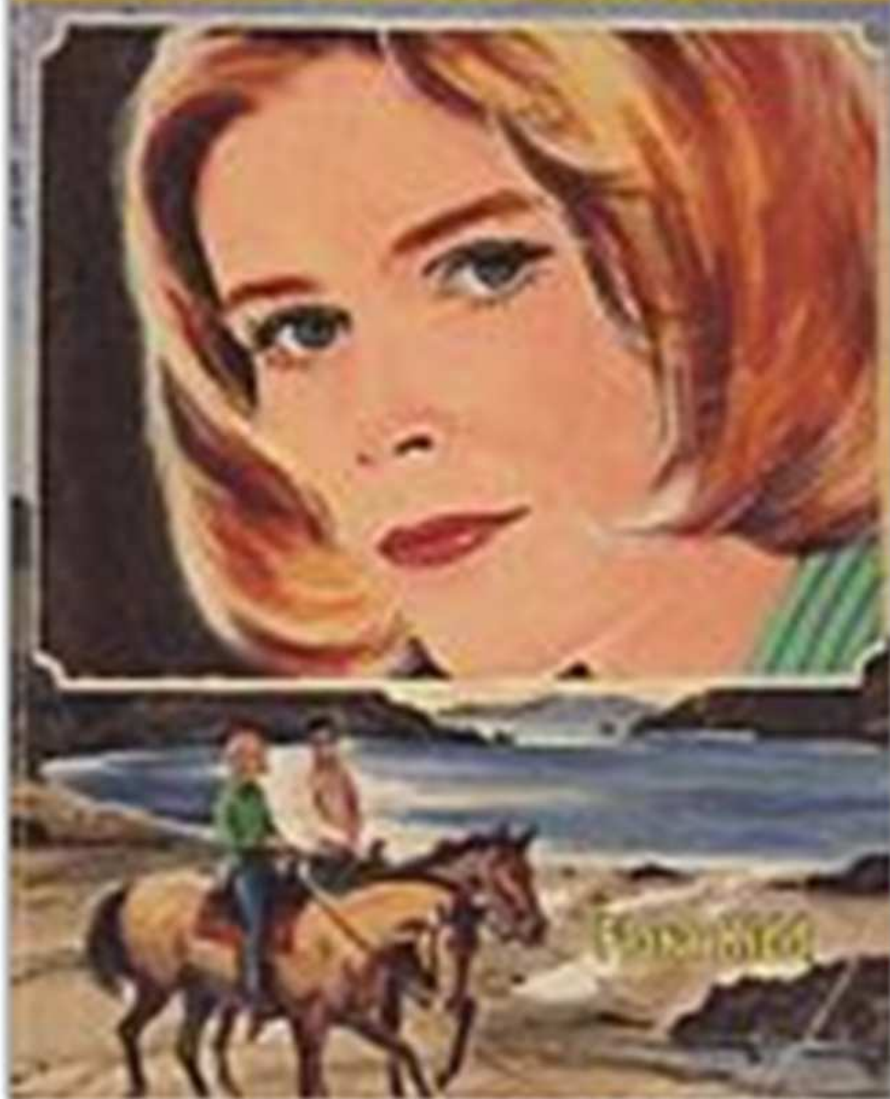


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A HORSEBOY ROMANCE

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# THE DAZZLE ON THE SEA



# **THE DAZZLE ON THE SEA**

**Flora Kidd**

Joanna didn't like Steve Millar and his overbearing ways one little bit -- but she loved his horse, Changeling.

And as the only way she could ride Changeling was by keeping more or less on the right side of Steve, she supposed she would have to put up with the situation . . .

## CHAPTER ONE

HORSE and rider moved through the sun-shot haze of a very early morning in June, crossing a meadow sprinkled with golden buttercups, jumping a low hawthorn hedge which divided the meadow from the next and then walking carefully along a narrow rutted path to a white five-barred gate set in a grey stone wall.

Opening the gate, Joanna Frost, who was riding the small grey mare Minette, affectionately known as Minnie, guided the horse through the gate and on to the firm sandy beach. Closing the gate behind her, she sat still in the saddle for a few minutes and gazed with pleasure at the scene before her. Thin wreaths of pearl grey mist were rising slowly from the calm sea, revealing the distant mysterious ramparts of the mountainous island of Arran.

As she breathed in the fresh tangy air and watched the wavelets lap the yellow sand Joanna marvelled, not for the first time that week, at the lucky chance which had brought her to that peaceful stretch of the Ayrshire coast. It was incredible to realise that only last week she had been struggling to earn her living as a sales assistant in a large department store in Reading, enduring the boredom of a job which did not suit her, fixing her mind resolutely on the week-end when she could escape into the Berkshire countryside to go riding.

And now, thanks to Marjorie Cowan, the one friend she had made when she had been taking a course in horsemastership at Follybridge Riding School, she was able to ride and to be with and care for horses all day and every day for the whole summer.

The little mare shifted restlessly and lifting the reins Joanna squeezed gently with her knees and the small animal, whose dappled coat rippled glossily with every move it made started to walk and then, urged by its rider, broke willingly into a canter and then into a full

gallop as it sensed the limitless space of the beach stretching before it, and felt the resilience of the sand beneath its hoofs.

Not thinking, conscious only of the movement of the horse beneath her and the cool air on her face and hands, Joanna did not see another horse and rider come through a door set in a high stone wall which guarded the grounds of an elegant eighteenth-century house, which was set on rising ground overlooking the shore and the sea.

The newcomer to the beach bent down and closed the door behind him and sat motionless for a few seconds watching the distant galloping grey mare and its graceful rider. Then with a slight shrug of his shoulders he turned and rode off in the opposite direction.

Exhilarated by her ride, her fair hair ruffled, her cheeks pink from contact with the fresh air, a faint smile of satisfaction curving her mouth and warming her blue eyes, Joanna allowed the mare to dawdle back the way they had come. By now the mist had dispersed completely and the island across the water could be seen clearly, its blue-grey peaks glittering in the sunlight, its deep green glens shadowed and mysterious.

One day, thought Joanna, she would take a ferryboat and visit the island. One day, when Marjorie was back in the saddle and when her services were required no longer. The thought caused her smile to vanish and an expression of wistfulness shadowed her eyes. In an effort to banish wishful thinking from her mind she looked away from the island to the house which she could just see above the grey wall, acknowledging the symmetry of its classical proportions and the perfection of its setting against the green woodland behind it. It must be wonderful to live in a house like that on the edge of the sea. She must remember to ask Marjorie or Bill who owned it.

Straightening in the saddle, aware that she was hungry, she urged Minette into a trot and following the grey wall made for the white

gate through which she had come to the beach. To her surprise a big bay horse ridden by a man was standing in front of the gate completely barring the way.

The manner in which the strange rider and horse maintained their position across the gate as she approached disturbed Joanna and she felt surprisingly guilty as if she had been found doing something she should not have done.

Shrugging off the feeling as being ridiculous, she continued on her way and did not rein in until she was as close to the bay as she dared to go. She was about to say politely: 'Good morning. Please may I pass?' but before she could speak the man asked curtly,

'Are you from Gilcroft Riding Stables?'

Joanna was a quiet girl. Too quiet and gentle for her own good, her Aunt Phyl had always said, and although the curtness of his question upset her and she experienced an unusual desire to reply just as rudely, she was quite incapable of doing so. Looking up at him she said what she had intended to say originally.

'Good morning. Please may I pass?'

His eyes were as grey and as stormy as the sea in winter. They were wide set under well-shaped dark eyebrows. Aunt Phyl would have described his nose as aristocratic and would no doubt have called the jut of his chin determined, thought Joanna with an inward giggle, remembering her aunt's love of describing people in minute detail. And there was pride and hauteur in the set of his straight shoulders.

At her quiet response his eyes narrowed dangerously.

'No, you may not,' he replied bluntly. 'You can go back to Gilcroft by way of the road.'

She stared at him disbelievingly. If she could not go back the way she had come she would have to ride almost two miles along the beach to the small seaside resort of Seakirk, and find her way through its maze of bungalows to the road which wound into the countryside.

'You must be joking,' she said hopefully, although judging by the stem set of his mouth he was very far from being humorous. 'What right have you to prevent me from going back the way I came?'

A frown of exasperation pulled his eyebrows together and his grey eyes grew stormier than ever. Joanna guessed that he was not used to having his right to do anything questioned and she quaked a little.

'The right of ownership,' he said in frost-bitten tones. 'To reach this beach you've had to cross my fields. Mrs Cowan knows that on no account is she or anyone riding her horses to trespass on my land.'

'Oh, I see. I'm sorry. I didn't know, Marjorie didn't tell me,' apologised Joanna sincerely. And then to her surprise the urge to prick his arrogance got the better of her and she protested quietly, 'Isn't it rather selfish of you to want to keep this part of the beach to yourself?'

His eyes narrowed unpleasantly again and she wished she had kept quiet.

'Possibly it is,' he agreed coolly. 'But I prefer to have it to myself.'

'I've always thought that the foreshore was Crown property and open to the public,' she argued.

'You're right again,' he agreed with a slight mocking inclination of his head. 'Below the water line it is. However, the land adjacent to the shore and above the water line as far as the outskirts of Seakirk belongs to me, and I prefer not to have anyone, particularly groups of giggling girls on horses they're incapable of controlling, traipsing

across fields in which grain is growing or in which valuable horses or other livestock are grazing: I think you will agree my attitude is not unreasonable. Anyone who wishes to ride on the beach or to picnic on it is welcome to do so provided they approach it by the public road.'

She could see the point he was making very clearly and was inclined to agree with it, but his reference to giggling girls on horseback flicked at a sensitive spot and she said defensively:

'I was very careful to keep to the paths at the sides of the fields and I closed all the gates.'

For a moment she thought he was going to smile and she found herself holding her breath quite ridiculously as she waited for the transformation. But although the storminess faded from his eyes and the stern lines around his mouth relaxed, the smile did not appear.

'I've no doubt you did. And I've no doubt either that *you* had your horse under complete control,' he observed. 'But that doesn't mean I shall break my own rule and allow you to return across the fields.'

Joanna glanced at the wall which was lower here than it was in front of the house and the wild idea of jumping Minette over its four feet flashed through her mind.

'I wouldn't try if I were you,' said the man, and this time she was sure that he was amused and she glanced at him quickly. He was watching her steadily, almost curiously, sizing her up as if she was a two-year-old filly.

Minette started to shift around in her usual restless fashion and Joanna, rather mortified by the man's reading of her mind, gave in. It would be a waste of breath to persist in arguing with him and she was feeling very hungry.

'Very well, I'll go back by the road,' she submitted with as much dignity as she could. 'Perhaps you would be good enough when you return to your house to phone Mrs Cowan for me and tell her why I'll be late for breakfast. She might worry when I don't turn up by eight o'clock.'

Once again she thought he was going to smile, but he seemed to have the same iron control over himself as he had over his horse which was waiting patiently in the same position as when she had approached him.

'That won't be possible, because I intend to ride with you as far as the village.'

'Oh!'

She could say nothing else. Apparently he did not trust her. He was going to make sure she did not cut across his fields further along. Unusual anger shook Joanna. Being a person who always kept her word she was not accustomed to not being trusted. Then her anger faded as quickly as it had flared. How would this man know what she was like? After all, he was only reciprocating. He had been angry when she had questioned his right to stop her from riding over his land, something she would never have done if she had known he owned it.

Without another word she turned the mare and started off towards Seakirk. The creak of the leather saddle warned her that the other horse had moved after her and gradually it caught up and walked beside Minette.

Before them the curve of yellow sand sparkled and shimmered in the sunlight, and on their right a dazzle of light glittered on the sea. In the distance the village of Seakirk crouched under its guardian hill, its back to the sun. To Joanna's left a row of ragged wind-bent Scots

piners peered over the grey wall and beyond them she could see sleek brown and white cattle scattered over the green fields.

The two horses moved together rhythmically in a quick trot, although occasionally Minette revealed a tendency to show off by tossing her head and cavorting sideways as if she would have preferred to travel faster.

'Are you staying with the Cowans?' asked the man casually.

'Yes,' she replied briefly. There was really no reason why she should tell him anything.

'I guessed that you weren't one of Marjorie's regular riders. You ride too well to be one of them,' he observed.

She could not help being pleased by his comment on her riding, but she was quick to notice the disparaging note in his voice when he referred to Marjorie's pupils who were now her pupils.

'They do their best,' she defended. 'After all, they're only learning.'

'They all look remarkably like sacks of potatoes wearing riding hats. Her horses aren't much better,' he mocked.

Joanna could not remember having been roused to anger so easily and so often before, but then she had never been in the company of anyone who stated his opinions as forthrightly and as succinctly as this man. She wished she had had more experience in dealing with arrogant people. She had to admit she knew more about horses than about people. So she said nothing and stared ahead, hoping that by ignoring him she would put a stop to his comments.

'I'm glad you haven't attempted to defend them further,' he said in the same derisive manner. 'Which part of England do you come from?'

She told him, and to her surprise he commented idly,

'Good riding country. I've often been down there.'

The horses had slowed to a walk, and Joanna glanced sideways at the man riding beside her. If she rode well he rode better, as if he had been riding all his life. She supposed he must be wealthy because he owned all the land and he probably lived in the beautiful house she had seen, and he had that faintly insolent manner of one accustomed to wealth.

Yet there was no sign of wealth in the clothes he was wearing. Faded blue jeans and a rather dilapidated turtle-necked sweater, which appeared to be hand-knitted in thick cream-coloured wool, were not the sort of clothes she expected a wealthy landowner to wear when out riding.

His hands holding the reins were good—strong and muscular yet sensitive. In profile his nose was just as straight and as aristocratic as she had thought it to be and his hair, which was a dark reddish-brown, was well brushed and gleamed like old polished mahogany. Joanna did not normally stare at men. In fact she had never been sufficiently interested in a man other than her father to want to stare. But the man at her side had roused her anger twice within half an hour, and she was alone with him on a beautiful morning in June on a deserted beach beside the sunlit sea. The circumstances were so unusual and unexpected that it was no wonder she was behaving oddly.

Minette stumbled and Joanna became aware that she had not been looking where she was going. She steadied the mare, patting her neck and talking to her, and noticed that they were approaching a jumble of red sandstone rocks, a small jagged reef which stretched across the sand out into the water.

They crossed the rocks carefully to the next curve of sand. They were now close enough to Seakirk for her to see a grey double-decker bus trundling slowly up the incline of the nearest road.

'Are you staying long at Gilcroft?' Again the question was casual as if he did not much care whether she answered or not.

'All summer, maybe longer.'

She sensed rather than saw his surprise.

'Don't tell me that the Cowans are making enough out of their riding school to employ someone who knows what she's doing on a horse to teach riding?'

The disparaging note was back, but this time Joanna refused to be angered and she answered in her usual quiet way.

'Marjorie and I were at Follybridge Riding School together and she took the examination for her Preliminary Instructor's Certificate of the British Horse Society when I did. She asked me to come and help out at Gilcroft because she's expecting her first baby in August and the doctor says she mustn't ride. She and Bill are counting on the income from the summer season to finish building an indoor ring so that she can continue to teach riding during the winter.'

She -could tell by the lift of his eyebrows that he was surprised by the information she had just given him. But the -surprise did not last long and was soon obliterated by a slightly cynical expression.

'Bill would do better to attend to his farming and you would do better to return to Berkshire than to stay here and work for your keep,' he said caustically. 'Gilcroft Riding School is so much pie in the sky. It will never make much profit and Marjorie and Bill will be lucky if they can get themselves out of debt.'

She wanted to blurt but what did it matter about profit as long as you were doing something you liked; what did it matter about working only for your keep when all you wanted to do was work with horses and children and this was your chance to do it. It was all very well for him. He had land and property and was riding the most beautiful horse she had ever seen. He probably had everything including a wife and young children.

But she didn't. She kept her feelings to herself, bottling them up as usual, thinking that she had said too much already and that she must not tell him any more.

By way of showing that she had nothing more to say she urged Minette to a canter. The bay followed and for the next few minutes all that mattered was the pleasure of riding on a lovely morning.

With its longer strides the bay soon passed Minette. When it reached the place marked by two wooden stumps where the first road ended at the beach, its rider reined in and waited, watching the approach of the fussy grey mare and its slim rider whose cheeks were touched by a delicate rose colour and whose blue eyes sparkled with delight.

The hard lines of the man's face softened slightly as Joanna reined in and he almost smiled as he said quietly, almost diffidently,

'I could mount you on a much more interesting horse ... more suited to your capabilities than that old bag of bones.'

She was confused by his strange offer and was slightly knocked off balance by his change of manner. Blinking at him she could only defend Minette.

'Minnie may be old and unattractive, but she goes well enough.'

'Yes ... sideways mostly,' he jibed.

'You're very unkind and unpleasant,' admonished Joanna gently. She could not bear it when anyone slandered a horse.

His face hardened immediately. She had an uneasy feeling that for a moment when he had offered to provide her with another horse he had stepped out of the usual line of conduct which he followed, and she had repulsed him so that he had withdrawn quickly, sharply like someone who has touched something red- hot, and he had stepped back into line again. Regret was a pain which made her nerves quiver.

'I ... I thank you for the offer,' she said awkwardly, 'but I don't think I should...'

He had half-turned away from her and was looking up the road which was bordered on one side by neat white red-roofed bungalows and on the other side by one of his fields. When she hesitated he glanced back at her and said tersely,

'Forget I made it.' He waved a hand in the direction of the road and added coldly, 'If you follow this road to the top of the hill you'll find that it joins the main road to Glasgow and that road will take you to another road which goes to Gilcroft and Lanry.'

With this instruction he turned his horse and rode back the way they had come, urging the bay to a full gallop as if glad to get away from her.

Joanna slipped off Minette's back and bent to examine one of the mare's forelegs. She hadn't handled the situation very well, she thought ruefully, but it had been difficult to know what to do. She just wasn't the sort of girl who accepted offers of horses from men she didn't know.

Her feeling fingers found a slight swelling on the horse's leg and she felt the animal wince. A strained tendon.. Had it happened when Minette had stumbled ... or was it an old injury? Whatever the cause it

meant that she would have to walk all the way back to Gilcroft leading a limping Minette.

Trying to ignore the pangs of hunger, she set off along the road. All the way up the hill she puzzled about the man she had met and his obvious knowledge of Bill and Marjorie and his forthright criticisms of their stables and their horses. That he knew a great deal about riding and horse-flesh had been very apparent by the way he rode and by the quality of his horse and its condition, but in the riding school world which Joanna knew anyone who rode or who dealt with horses was usually tolerant towards other people who rode and who had dealings with horses, so she was at a loss to account for the man's open antipathy to Gilcroft Riding School and its owners.

She patted the mare, who was already beginning to tire, and murmured,

'He called you an old bag of bones, Minnie, and made you walk all this way. He was horrid and cruel. He didn't have to punish us so hard. He could have given us a warning and let us return over his fields. We wouldn't have trespassed again, would we?'

The little mare snorted and twitched her ears in answer as if she wholly agreed with Joanna just as they topped the hill where the road joined another wider road which came out from the centre of the village. Several children were skipping or walking or straggling along the road now on their way to school. On seeing Minnie with her rider some of them came over to pat the horse and to talk to Joanna who took the opportunity to stop and rest.

When she moved on past the old stone school behind its iron railings she noticed that Minnie's limp was worse, and as she recalled the man on the beach saying that Bill and Marjorie were in debt she began to worry in case the horse was badly damaged.

From the school the road inclined steeply and was bordered by high grassy banks. At the bottom of the hill it turned sharply left and passed through the old part of the village where one-storeyed cottages huddled together and the remains of a fortified manor house stood on a hillock among clustering elms in which black crows squawked.

About two hundred yards from the last house the road divided again at a triangle of grass. The main part curved round to sweep over the moors to the town of Duncraig and then to Glasgow. The other narrower part continued straight, parallel to the coast, and the signpost said that it went to Lanry.

Joanna followed the narrower road, recognising that it was the one on which Gilcroft Farm was situated. On one side of it was a familiar grey stone wall over which she could see well-cultivated fields stretching down to the dazzling sea. Soon she came to the gate in the wall through which she had started her early morning ride across those fields and opposite the gate was the entrance to the narrow farm road leading to Gilcroft.

As she walked slowly up the farm road she admired once more the old farmhouse, built of stone with mul- lioned windows, which Marjorie's father had bought his daughter as a wedding present so that she could start a riding school. It would be a pity if Marjorie and Bill were to lose the farm and the stables through bad management. She hoped that the man on the beach had been exaggerating when he had hinted that the young couple would be lucky if they ever made a profit and got out of debt. But on deeper consideration she decided he was not the sort of person who would exaggerate. On the contrary he had struck her as being very businesslike in a hard sort of way.

When she walked into the farmyard a young man with light curly brown hair came out of one of the barns. He was of medium height and had wide thick shoulders. He was dressed in blue denim trousers

and a shirt of the same material. When he saw Joanna his face lost its worried expression and he smiled with relief.

'Och, I told Marj she was worrying unduly and that you'd turn up,' he said. He spoke with a burring singsong accent which Joanna was learning was typical of Ayrshire speech. 'What happened to Minnie? Is it that tendon again?'

He squatted down and rubbed a hand over Minnie's foreleg.

'That's it. She strained it last summer and I suppose there's a weakness there.'

'Sorry, Bill. The blame is mine ... she tripped. But if it hadn't been for that horrid man.

'Which horrid man?' demanded a woman's voice. 'Och, Jo, I thought you'd had an accident. I was just thinking of asking Bill to go and look for you.'

Marjorie Cowan was a small dark-haired girl whose turned-up nose was liberally sprinkled with freckles. Normally she dressed in breeches and shirt and Joanna had only ever seen her in a dress once ... at her wedding. Now she was wearing a cotton shift to cover the bulge below her waist.

'I met him on the beach,' Joanna explained. 'He wouldn't let me come back across the fields because he said to do so would break his rule not to let anyone traipse over them. So I had to come back by the road which did Minnie's damaged tendon no good at all. He was very autocratic.'

'That would be Steve Millar, I'm thinking,' said Bill with a sidelong glance at Marjorie. 'Didn't you warn Jo not to go across his land?'

'Oh, help, I forgot,' replied Marjorie, hand to her mouth. 'You must be starving, Jo ... and poor Minnie, she looks very miserable. Will we have to get the vet again, Bill?'

There was a touch of anxiety in the question, and in the light of her new knowledge about affairs at Gilcroft, Joe guessed that the anxiety was about the expense involved in having to call in the vet.

'I'll get Archie to have a look at it,' said Bill soothingly. Archie was the elderly man who helped in the stables and who was considered by the Cowans to know all there was to know about the horses. 'You go and have your breakfast, Jo. I'll unsaddle Minnie.'

He led the mare off to the stables and Joanna followed her friend into the big kitchen of the old farmhouse. She washed her hands at the sink, enjoying the smell of cooking bacon. Marjorie turned from the cooker and said,

'There's plenty of tea in the pot. I wish I could share it with you, but it still disagrees with me. I'll be glad when the lump is born and my appetite goes back to normal. So you had a run in with Lord Muck, did you?'

'You mean the man on the beach? Why do you call him that?' asked Joanna as she poured tea into a cup, added milk and sugar and sat down at the big table.

'Because Steve has always behaved as if he's lord of all he surveys—which he is now, of course, and has been for eighteen months.'

'But who is he?' persisted Joanna. 'And why should he behave like that?'

Marjorie put a plate full of food in front of Joanna and sat down. Then having thoroughly settled herself in a chair with her feet up on

another she launched on her favourite pastime, which was talking about other people.

'Do you remember me telling you that the local laird hereabouts was Sir Henry Millar and that he owned lots of land, had pots of money, was an important agriculturist and that he owned and bred horses and that he was a distant cousin several times removed of my mother?'

She paused for breath and Joanna nodded rather vaguely. During their summer at Follybridge Riding School, the garrulous Marjorie had told her many stories about her family and about this part of Ayrshire, but Joanna couldn't remember all of them.

'Sir Henry was knighted for his contribution to British agriculture. I forget exactly what he did ... something to do with pedigree cattle.' Her breath back, Marjorie was rattling on again. 'He wasn't made a baronet, just an ordinary knighthood for services rendered sort of thing, so it wasn't hereditary. Well, he died the Christmas before last and his son Steve, the man you met on the beach, inherited the land, the house, the cattle and the horses ... but not all the money.'

Marjorie leaned back in her chair and paused for dramatic effect, and as usual Joanna fell for it.

'Oh, why not?' she asked, really interested by now and sensing a family drama.

'That, dear Jo, is a long story of which I intend to give you only the bare but very interesting bones ... later,' replied Marjorie. 'Och, it's warm this morning ... and my legs are aching. Tell me, how did Steve look?'

'Look?' Joanna was startled and puzzled 'I ... I ... don't know,' she stuttered, and stopped as she tried to remember how the man on the beach looked and found she could visualise him very clearly. Stormy grey eyes in a lean weather-beaten face; a lithe compact physique,

strong sinewy hands controlling the big bay horse. The memory was so clear that she felt herself blushing quite stupidly, and in order to cover her confusion she said, sharply for her,

'I couldn't tell you how he looked, I was so angry.'

'You! Angry?' Marjorie's eyes were too quick and noticed too much. 'Well, well, he must have been on his worst behaviour. I don't think I've ever seen you upset or angry. What did he say to annoy you?'

Glad to confide the morning's events, Joanna told her inquisitive friend all that had happened on the beach, leaving out only the strange offer the arrogant Mr Millar had made to mount her on a better horse.

When she had finished Marjorie looked rather contrite.

'I should have warned you not to try to get down to the beach that way. I know it's tempting. I suppose it's just as well it was Steve who caught you and not someone else from the Lanry estate or you might have been prosecuted. It's not the first time someone from these stables has trespassed, you see, so we can't say we haven't been warned.'

'But if, as you say, you're distantly related to him why shouldn't he let you ride across his land?' protested Joanna, and Marjorie laughed and rolled her eyes comically.

'The emphasis is on the word distant, Jo dear. So distant that Sir Henry never spoke to my mother and I doubt very much if he knew of my existence. I met Steve several times when I was younger, at horse shows, but I expect he's forgotten me by now. Anyway, the rule about trespassing is quite right really because the cattle and the horses are valuable. But I'm sorry you've been upset by Steve and hope it won't put you off staying with us.'

'Of course it won't. But you're wrong about Mr Millar having forgotten you. He knows you and Bill own the riding stables. He was very rude about them and about Minnie...'

'Yes, I can imagine,' said Marjorie dryly. 'I expect he thinks we're wasting our time ... as a lot of other people do ... just because Bill and I don't come from farming stock and because they think a riding school is unnecessary here.'

'Why should anyone think that?'

'We're a little off the beaten track here and there are other well established riding schools nearer to the centres of population such as Ayr or Kilmarnock. What no one seems to understand is that Bill and I hope to offer riding to young people and school children who can't afford to go to those places where you have to have all the right clothing before you can even get into the place. It's true we haven't as many bookings for lessons as we would like ... but with you here to help us this summer everything is going to be fine. It will have to be,' she added with a defiant lift of her chin.

'It will be,' said Joanna, encouragingly, and she vowed silently that she would work her hardest to make the riding school a success just to show the unpleasant Mr Millar that he was not always right.

'I'll always be grateful to you, Marj, for thinking of me when you needed help. I was -slowly going mad in that department store.'

'I was so surprised when I got your letter saying that you weren't teaching riding. What happened? Wasn't it possible for you to get a position in a riding school at all? You're so good, Jo, with children, as well as with horses. You were the best of our lot at Follybridge.'

'I worked at a school for over a year after my father was killed, which was just after passing the B.H.S. exam. It was a husband and wife, business like yours. Unfortunately the man wasn't like your Bill, and

he was always trying to get me to meet him on the sly. Anyway, in the end his wife had the idea that I was trying to attract her husband away from her, which was stupid because I'd never noticed him as a man, only as a rider and employer. He wasn't very good at either as well as not being a very good husband. But she wouldn't listen to me, and fired me, and wouldn't give me a reference. You can imagine that after that it wasn't easy to find another job. I went to live with my father's sister, my Aunt Phyl, but I couldn't sponge on her, so I took the job in the department store to tide me over. I helped out at the nearest stables at the weekend.'

'Poor Jo,' sympathised Marjorie. 'You haven't had a very good time since your father died and your mother married again. Now if all that had happened to me I'd be as bitter as a lemon or I'd have a bump on my shoulder as big as a tree. But not you. You're as gentle and as cheerful as you ever were.'

Jo smiled, 'Oh, I've had my down moments, but Aunt Phyl has been wonderful. Whenever I've felt low she's always come up with some salty comment which has put everything in its right perspective again. And now I feel with this opportunity to help you ... and to do some real teaching of riding at the same time ... that luck is with me for a change.'

'I sincerely hope so.' Marjorie glanced thoughtfully at her friend. 'You know you and Steve have quite a lot in common.'

Joanna was worried. What could she possibly have in common with the hard-bitten rider she had met that morning and who had jeered so cruelly at her horse and at her friend?

'I hope that riding horses is the only thing we have in common,' she replied. 'He was most unpleasant. He made fun of Minnie.'

'Och, I don't mean you're alike in disposition. I mean you've had a similar experience. His mother was killed in a riding accident, as your father was. She was Martha Hemmings before she married Sir Henry and was a champion show-jumper in England. Steve was only about ten when the accident happened. He used to be keen on show jumping at one time, and that's how I met him. But he hasn't done any for about six years ... not since his father married again. Suddenly out of the blue sixteen years after Steve's mother was killed Sir Henry married Consuelo.'

'What an exotic name. Who was she?'

'A woman Sir Henry met when he went on a holiday to the Argentine for the good of his health. He went to visit a friend who owned a big hacienda out there. Steve went with him, but returned after three weeks to look after the estate here. Six weeks later Sir Henry came back married to this woman, who is half English and half Argentinian. Her name is really Kate, but she likes to play up the Argentinian blood and prefers to be called Consuelo.'

Remembering how badly she had felt when her mother had married again, Joanna wondered how the strong-willed Steve had reacted to his stepmother.

'What's she like?'

'Same age as Steve. Curvaceous, creamy-skinned, dark hair, eyes like purple pansies and one of those deep seductive voices. Anyone with an ounce of sense could tell she'd caught Sir Henry at a vulnerable time in his life and had married him for his money.'

'And what did Steve do?'

'On the surface he seemed to accept her as his stepmother. Everything seemed fine. Consuelo was a good housekeeper and excellent hostess. Sir Henry's health improved. Steve took more and more of

the administration of the estate into his hands, leaving Sir Henry to go gallivanting to the races with his young and beautiful wife. Then he had another and very severe heart attack and couldn't travel, and Consuelo accompanied Steve to the races. In no time rumours were flying about them. One day Sir Henry blew his top and accused Steve of trying to steal his wife. Steve left Lanry House ... and guess what? Consuelo followed him.'

'So there was truth in the rumours after all/ murmured Joanna, -feeling slightly disappointed. Even though she had disliked the autocratic manner of the man there had been nothing about him to suggest that he was the sort who ran after women or enticed women away from their husbands.

'I suppose so ... although I hate to think that Steve would be like that. However, Consuelo couldn't stay the course with him. She was back within three weeks. I expect she began to think about the money. All was quiet for a while, although the horse breeding business suffered from Steve's absence because Sir Henry was unable to take such an active interest in it. Then he was ill again. Steve came back and all was forgiven. Sir Henry died over a year later. Steve inherited all the property, but after the death duties had been paid, Consuelo received the bulk of his private fortune.'

'Does Consuelo live at Lanry House now?'

'No. She went back to the Argentine for a year, then returned and bought a house in Lanry a few months ago. Since he inherited, Steve has had to economise in various ways by selling land and by letting the house. This year an American diplomat has rented it as a holiday home to use when he can get away from London. Steve has been concentrating on breeding horses, which were always his first love, and he's had quite a lot of success on the turf in recent years. But Mother says she thinks he'll marry Consuelo.'

'Marry his stepmother?' exclaimed Joanna.

'Why not? They're not blood relations, and it would be one way of ensuring that the Millar fortune returned to the Millar family.'

'But how cold-blooded and calculating!' objected Joanna.

'That's my own reaction, and the Steve I knew wasn't like that. He was always helpful at the horse shows, but of course his experiences with Consuelo might have hardened him. That's why I asked you how he looked.'

'He looked ----' began Joanna, then hesitated for the right words. 'He looked as tough as leather. I should imagine it would be very hard for anyone to penetrate to his heart, if he has one.'

Marjorie tipped her head to one side and studied Joanna's expressive face.

'He's certainly made an impression on you this morning, a bad one. He has a heart, all right, or at least he used to have. I'm willing to believe it's still there, in the right place, if only someone with enough perserverance and love can be bothered to find it before he marries Consuelo for the money.'

Joanna had to admit that she could see what Marjorie had meant when she had said she had something in common with Steve Millar. They had both known what it was to lose a beloved parent and they both had known what it was to see the other parent, equally well loved, marry someone else who had brought trouble to a previously harmonious relationship.

But she really had very little time to ponder the complications of Steve Millar's life because caring for the horses and taking riding lessons every evening for people who wanted to use the long June twilights to improve their riding took up all her time.

The first week-end she was at Gilcroft was particularly busy and she was glad of the assistance of Wendy Hillen, a girl from the town of Lanry who was a good rider and who wanted to make riding her career when she left school.

When the week-end was over, however, and she inspected the horses on Monday morning she realised ruefully that Steve Millar's criticisms of them were right. If Bill and Marjorie were hoping to build up a regular good clientele they would have to buy some more horses of better quality; horses which would be reliable and not likely to break down with some sort of injury as soon as they had been subjected to hard work. For while Joanna loved all horses and ponies irrespective of whether they were lazy, or temperamental or just weak, she found it frustrating not to be able to mount a child who had come for a lesson because a horse was sick or to waste another child's time because a pony would not budge for a whole afternoon.

She also felt that some older patrons might be attracted to the riding school if there were some big hacks suitable for trekking, and she was already planning to hold weekly camps for children during the school holidays. These camps would involve groups of young people living-in at the farm and learning to muck out the stables and to groom the horses and feed them as well as<sup>^</sup>to ride them. She knew there were enough rooms in the old house to make her plan possible and it would not take Bill long to make some bunk beds with the help of Archie.

She put her ideas to the Cowans one evening. Although they were both enthusiastic about the camp idea, they could not see how they could afford any more horses at the present time. Their credit was already extended to the limit and they wanted to clear off all outstanding debts before buying any more stock. Joanna could see their point, and knowing that Marjorie possessed her full share of stubborn Scottish pride, she did not attempt to persuade them to accept a loan from her small amount of savings.

But she tussled with the problem every day, racking her brains, trying to think of a way she could acquire at least one other horse without offending her friend's pride.

Every morning wet or fine she rode alone, but she was confined to the Cowans' fields or to the road. Often she would look across the grey walls which marked the limit of the Lanry House estate and watched young horses moving together, long-legged and infinitely graceful. If only there was some communication, between Marjorie and her distant horse-owning cousin. Surely not all his horses were suitable for racing. There must be some which did not possess the necessary speed and stamina, and which would be quiet enough for hacking.

But then she supposed since he was in breeding for a profit he would want good prices for them. Still, wasn't it possible that the Cowans might listen to his advice and criticisms? But how could she bring them together?

So Joanna argued with herself throughout the days which followed, fairly quiet days because the school holidays did not start until the end of June and so there were not many children wanting riding lessons.

One morning after finishing her chores in the stables she was surprised to see a large estate car of foreign make swing into the farmyard. A tall woman with blonde hair got out of it followed by a girl of about ten who also had blonde hair which was tied back in a pony tail. The woman was wearing white pants topped by an immaculate white turtle-necked sweater and the girl was wearing beige jodhpurs, a white sweater and a black riding hat.

'Hi,' said the woman, and smiled widely, revealing sparkling white teeth. 'Are you the owner of the stables?'

Her accent was unmistakably American and on closer inspection Joanna realised her snowy-white well- fitting clothes were too.

'No, but I teach riding here. Can I help you?'

'Yeah, I guess you can. I'm Jackie Carson, and this is my daughter Karen. And your name is...?'

Joanna told her.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Joanna. Karen, say hello to Joanna.'

'Hi,' said the girl gruffly, and her cornflower-blue eyes glowered up at Joanna from under dark eyebrows.

'Hello, Karen,' said Joanna with a smile. 'Have you come% learn how to ride?'

'I know,' asserted the girl.

'She's had some lessons, at a riding school in New England, and I'd like her to continue with them while we're there. I couldn't believe my good luck when Steve ... Mr Millar from Lanry House said a relative of his owned a school here. I'd like her to have a lesson right now if that's possible, and to come every day.'

Mentally Joanna went over the ponies wondering which one would be most suitable for the ferocious- looking Karen. It would have to be the best the stables owned if the right impression was to be made on this obviously wealthy client and if the stables were to live up to Steve Millar's recommendation. Whatever had caused him to send his tenant to patronise a riding school of which he disapproved? He had not struck her as being the sort of person who indulged in chivalrous impulses.

'Yes, of course that's possible,' she replied. 'Shall we go and saddle up now, Karen? I think we've just the pony for you. Her name is Rebel.'

A glint of interest lit the sulky blue eyes.

'That's what Grandpa calls me. Let's go and see her, Mom.'

Rebel was a Welsh pony and possessed the classic beauty of head and the gay tail of the breed. She was dark brown in colour and when Joanna led her out of the stables her small pointed ears laid back against her head and her bold eyes rolled as she noticed the strangers: But she allowed Karen to climb into the saddle, and with deceptive meekness allowed Joanna to lead her into the paddock.

'Now, Karen, for the first part of the lesson I'm going to let you show me what you can do with a pony and then I'll know how much more instruction you'll need,' said Joanna, using the gentle but firm technique which made her a favourite with children everywhere she went. 'You can start by walking Rebel round the paddock.'

As she had guessed, Rebel would not move when Karen lifted her hands, shortened the reins and squeezed with her knees. The pony stood stock still twitching her ears and swishing her tail. Karen scowled, clucked with her tongue, but Rebel ignored her.

'Come on, Rebel, walk,' muttered the girl, and squeezed with her knees again, and rather disdainfully the pony began to walk slowly round the paddock.

Joanna pulled herself up to the top rail of the paddock fence and Mrs Carson leaned beside her.

'That pony doesn't look particularly docile,' commented Jackie with a mother's usual anxiety when watching her only child on a horse and being unable to interfere.

'Rebel's all right,' comforted Joanna, 'but she has to respect her rider before she'll perform. Your daughter says she can ride, but this is the only way I'll find out if she can or not. If she can't make Rebel go next time, I'll put her on a more suitable pony. But I've a feeling that Karen will make Rebel go or burst in the attempt.'

Jackie smiled up at her.

'O.K., you win. I can see you've got the measure of my daughter. Good for you! Challenge is what Karen needs, and I'm not able to give it to her, not at present.'

The smile faded from her face, leaving her looking older and rather sad. She wasn't beautiful. Her mouth was too big and her nose was too long, but her blonde hair and blue eyes combined with a wonderful golden tan plus a know-how concerning clothes and make-up gave her an eye-catching attraction.

Rebel, having made the round of the paddock, was coming towards them. Karen was still on the pony's back, looking alert as the animal shook her head up and down.

'Trot!' called Joanna.

Karen shortened rein and squeezed with her knees again. Immediately Rebel pushed her forefeet into the turf of the paddock and bucked, raising her back feet in the air. Karen clung on with all her strength and Jackie gave a squeak of alarm. Rebel's legs came down and she looked round as if surprised to find Karen still on her back.

'Try again!' called Joanna encouragingly. The child had stayed on as she had expected she would. Once again ^Karen shortened rein and urged the pony forward.

'Come on, you dumb pony, trot!' she ordered.

Up came Rebel's hind legs again and this time Karen was unseated and landed on the ground. In a flash she was up and back in the saddle.

'Well done!' cried Joanna. 'Now go.'

'Oh, Karen honey, are you O.K.?'

But Karen; did not stay to reply. Using her advantage over the surprised pony, she made it trot and posted gaily round the paddock. When the time came to make the pony canter she used her crop without hesitation and Rebel cantered round merrily as if delighted to have a young rider who would stand no nonsense.

By the end of the lesson Joanna knew that in taking the chance of putting the newcomer on the most awkward pony in the stable she had won the girl's respect and that she had gained a new pupil. Arrangements were made for Karen to come again the next day and mother and daughter departed full of smiles.

By the end of the week Karen was part of the scene at Gilcroft and she came for lessons on Saturday and Sunday as well. But with another busy week-end over, another Monday morning found Joanna doubly anxious about the state of the horses and unable to mount a disappointed Karen.

'I'm sorry, Mrs Carson, but all the horses need resting. We just haven't any spares. I promise Karen'll have her ride tomorrow.'

'I understand, Jo,' said the friendly American. 'And will you please call me Jackie? I can't stand this Miss and Mr business you go in for over here.'

'Can't you buy some new horses?' asked the forthright Karen. 'Mr Millar has some. I asked him if he'd let me ride one. He didn't say yes and he didn't say no. Just looked at me as if I were a dummy. He's the

one who's dumb. Fancy having all those horses and not letting anyone ride them!'

'Don't be rude, Karen. Steve's horses are very valuable and he couldn't allow a learner like you to ride one of them,' rebuked her mother.

'I don't like him,' muttered Karen darkly. 'He's always saying don't and stopping me from going places I want to go.'

Joanna could not help smiling to herself at the picture of Karen and Steve Millar snarling at one another. She could guess that the haughty, disciplined Steve would have difficulty in understanding Karen, who had obviously been brought up by very permissive parents.

But the fact that there was no pony available for Karen to ride that morning brought home to her the urgency of the problem. She must get at least one more horse for the stable. She had a little money saved up, but she wasn't sure whether it was enough. And then she was not sure where to go to buy horses in this part of the country. If she had been in her home county she would have known where to go without hesitation. She had to have advice, and it was no use consulting Marjorie and Bill because they would only say they could not afford a new horse and their pride would not let them agree to help buying one for them. She would have to acquire the horse secretly and then present them with the *fait accompli*. And there was only one person she knew whom she could consult and that was Steve Millar. It was going to take all her courage to go to him and ask advice after having refused his offer of a mount that morning on the sands.

The knowledge that Rebel had developed a cold by Monday night overcame Joanna's hesitation, and on Tuesday morning she borrowed Marjorie's old bicycle and rode the few miles along the road to Lanry House.

It was the first time she had been through the big gateway set in the grey stone wall. The driveway was almost two miles long winding between huge rhododendron bushes and over-arched by the interlacing branches of tall beech trees. Here and there the bushes and trees gave way to white wooden fences from behind which either cattle or horses peered at her.

Eventually the drive widened into a courtyard and in front of her was the house built of grey dressed sandstone, small but wholly classical in its simplicity with its short sash windows on the ground floor for solidity, very tall sash windows on the first floor for grandeur and completely square windows at the top of the house, a subtlety of design in which Georgian architects had excelled. In the courtyard the large estate car which Jackie Carson drove was parked and next to it was a shiny red expensive-looking sports car.

Joanna hesitated, standing astride the old bike, wondering where she should look for Steve Millar. At that moment a young man with blond hair who was wearing striped jeans topped by a brightly-coloured shirt came round the side of the house.

'Hi. Looking for someone?' he called, and came up to her. The blond hair and the twinkling blue eyes told Joanna that he was related to Jackie Carson and she guessed him to be Karen's beloved Uncle Tom.

'I'm looking for Mr Millar, Mr Steve Millar.'

'Ain't he the lucky guy to have you looking for him? I often wonder why it is these quiet off-hand guys have all the girls looking for them. There's Jackie, now. She's so smitten she keeps thinking up excuses to get him into the house. This morning it's the plumbing that's wrong and I guess we'll find them in the lounge drinking coffee together. I'm Tom Hilroy.'

He held out a large hand and engulfed Joanna's with it.

'And you, judging by your riding breeches, must be Joanna Frost,' he added speculatively. And when Joanna nodded he went on, 'Glad to meet you, Joanna. Karen didn't tell me how pretty you are.'

Unused to receiving blatant compliments, Joanna blushed and removed her hand from his. The blue eyes twinkled knowingly.

'Let's go and gate-crash the coffee party,' suggested Tom. 'I've been looking for an excuse to annoy Jackie.'

Joanna decided that she did not want to annoy Steve Millar, if she could help it. At least not before she had asked for his help.

'I'm not sure ...' she began.

'I am,' insisted Tom. 'Here, park your old boneshaker against these railings. If you don't let me take you to Steve now ... you'll not see him because I believe he's going away today.'

The urgency of finding an answer to the problem of the horses for Gilcroft overcame Joanna's reluctance and she allowed him to wheel the bike over to the wrought-iron railings which guarded a small border of flowers in front of the walls of the house. Then with a friendly gesture Tom waved her in front of him to-, wards the generous delicately panelled front door, leaning round her to turn the knob and push it open so that she could enter the cool elegant entrance hall from which an oval staircase led upwards, balustraded in finely wrought iron.

To her surprise Tom led Joanna up the staircase and along a passage to a room overlooking the sea. It was comfortably furnished as a sitting room and on a big chesterfield facing the long windows sat Jackie, in white as usual, with a bright yellow sleeveless cardigan over her long-sleeved blouse. In front of her on a low table was a tray set with a silver coffee pot, cream jug^ and sugar bowl. In her hand she was holding a cup of coffee while she talked animatedly to Steve

Millar who was sitting in a high-backed winged chair set at right angles to the chesterfield.

'Look what I found in the courtyard,' announced Tom, pulling Joanna forward to stand in front of Jackie, who stopped talking while Steve rose politely to his feet and set his empty coffee cup down on the tray.

'Why, it's Jo!' exclaimed Jackie. 'I hope you haven't come to tell me that Karen's lesson is off today. She'll be so miserable if it is. She was unbearable all yesterday.'

'No, nothing like that. She's come to see Steve,' said Tom. He was still holding her hand and Joanna noticed that Steve glanced at the linked hands before looking directly at her.

'Why do you want to see me?' he asked coldly.

Aware that Jackie and Tom were watching and listening curiously, Joanna stammered, 'I can't explain here. It's a private matter.'

If he was surprised he did not show it. Turning to Jackie, he smiled and murmured,

'Please excuse me. Thank you for the coffee. I'll arrange for someone to inspect the drain in the main bathroom.'

'Thank you,' gushed Jackie, who seemed most unlike her usual casual self, as if she was trying to make an impression. 'It was kind of you to come and look at it yourself. We'll look forward to seeing you when you come back. Perhaps you'd like to come and have dinner on Sunday? My father will be here then.'

Steve smiled again. 'I should like to meet him again,' he said. Then glancing at his watch he added curtly, looking at Joanna, 'We'll talk in the office. I haven't much time to spare.'

'Don't think you've seen the last of me today,' Tom whispered in Joanna's ear as she pulled her hand from his, smiled at Jackie and began to follow Steve from the room. 'I'll see you after you've discussed your private matter.'

She caught up with Steve as he opened the front door and they went down the short flight of stone steps together. He walked briskly across the courtyard following the curve of the driveway where it continued past the house and ended in front of another smaller stone building which had obviously been the coachhouse and stables in olden times. The building had been altered into a garage and glancing at the windows above the garage Joanna saw curtains moving slightly in the breeze and guessed that this was where Steve Millar lived when Lanry House was occupied by a tenant.

Beside the garage a door painted red was set into the wall of the building. Steve opened it. She followed him into a big room which was furnished as an office and whose wide window overlooked the fields and a big yard where the white-painted loose-boxes for the horses were situated.

There was a big desk in the room and on the walls there were some fine prints of racing horses. Steve sat on a corner of the desk and told her to sit in an armchair facing it. Although he was dressed differently this morning in a suit of finely checked tweed, a cream shirt and a dark discreet tie patterned with a motif and which Joanna guessed could be worn only by the members of a certain select club, the clothes served only to emphasise her original estimation of him as someone aloof and hard.

'You were right about the horses,' she said.

The exasperated frown she remembered darkened his face.

'I hope you haven't come here just to tell me that?' he grated. 'As an excuse to see me it almost beats a complaint about the plumbing.'

So he had seen through Jackie's ruse to get him into Lanry House. But she couldn't have him thinking that she had to have an excuse to see him when he was really the last person she wanted to see and from whom she wanted help.

'If I knew anyone else in this district whom I could consult I certainly wouldn't have come to you for advice,' she retorted. 'But you seem to be the obvious person for me to ask because you own horses and because you're distantly related to Marjorie and used to help and encourage her when she was learning to jump.'

He shot an under-browed sardonic glance at her and said,

'What on earth has my being a distant relation of Marjorie's and having helped her when she was learning to jump got to do with you wanting to see me on a private matter?'

Joanna felt a little flicker of triumph. She had caught his interest. Now she must make the most of it. She licked her lips and began the speech she had rehearsed all morning.

'If the riding school is to be successful this summer we must have more and better horses. I'm having to refuse rides and lessons because there aren't enough and because as you know the ones we have are not all of the best quality. I've told Marjorie and Bill this and they say they can't afford any more horses until they've paid off their debts.'

'And you thought that I might make a present of some horses to them, did you? All because Marjorie's mother was a Millar before she married and because I once gave a few helpful hints to a girl who hadn't a clue how to jump a horse ... some years ago. You must be very naive if you think those are good reasons for me to give away

several hundred guineas' worth of horses.' His voice was scornful and his mouth twisted unpleasantly.

'Oh, no, I didn't think that. But I thought you might be willing to help in another way,' said Joanna quickly, appealingly.

'Why should I help at all?' he asked curtly.

Quite suddenly Joanna lost all her patience and stamped a booted foot on the floor.

'Can't you see, I'm not a tenant trying to get something out of you which you're not willing to provide, nor one of your cunning horse-racing associates trying to pull a fast one over you. I'm trying to help a friend who needs help. Have you no sympathy for others less fortunate than yourself, no goodwill? I thought ... Marjorie said that once you were...'

Her voice trailed away. His head bent, he was doodling with a pencil on a pad of paper near the telephone. He wasn't listening to her appeal. He had deliberately closed his mind to what she was saying. How could she expect otherwise? Once he had offered her a horse and she had refused. After that episode she could hardly expect him to fall over himself to help her.

Outside a car's horn honked twice, urgently. Steve looked at his watch and said impatiently,

'Hurry up. Say what you have to say and this time leave out the sentiment. I have to catch a plane from Abbotsinch for London in an hour's time and it's time I left.'

He hadn't been like this with Jackie Carson. He had smiled at her and had been polite. But then Jackie's father was paying rent for Lanry House. Perhaps a more businesslike approach would have more success.

'I've a little money saved up, enough, I think, to buy one or two decent horses. If you have any in your stables which you think aren't suitable for riding, I know that happens sometimes, I'd buy one from you and...'

'I haven't any horses like that,' he interrupted tersely. 'All my horses have racing potential. I can usually sell them for prices you couldn't afford.'

He seemed adamant. There was no way of moving him. He didn't want to help Marjorie or anyone else. It had been a waste of time coming to see him. Feeling thoroughly defeated, Joanna stood up and mumbled,

'I'm sorry I've taken up your time.'

He spoke again as if she hadn't moved, as if she hadn't said anything, as if he was continuing from where he had left off speaking.

'But I know a place where you might be able to pick up a good hack for a reasonable price.'

She whirled round from the door and blurted impulsively, 'Where, oh, where? Please tell me.'

'I assume you don't want the Cowans to know of your intention to buy a horse and use it for their benefit?' he asked.

'No. At least not until they're presented with it.'

'You realise that if you own one of the horses and are using it for the riding school you will have a share in their business?'

'Oh, I don't care about that. I'll give the stables the use of the horse.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'All right, that's your affair, I'll have to take you to the place myself. Think you could stand my company for the best part of a day?'

His glance was shrewd and questioning and she wasn't sure how to take his remark, but this time she wasn't going to refuse any offer he made.

'I could even do that if I believed that by having to put up with you I could help Marjorie and Bill,' she replied dryly. 'When do we go?'

'You're determined not to flatter me, aren't you?' he retorted with a grin. 'And possibly that's why I'm willing to take you. I'm on my way to Ascot now for the Royal meeting and I won't be back until Saturday.'

Ascot. The roar of the crowd as her father had ridden in after winning the Gold Cup. The sudden rearing of his horse as it took fright when another horse pushed it from behind. Her father, whose feet had been out of the stirrups as he had relaxed after the race, unexpectedly falling. The sickening crunch as a horse's hoof had connected with his skull. Memory swept unbidden through Joanna turning her pale and making her feel a little sick. Steve who had been watching her curiously noticed the change and said gently,

'Something wrong?'

'I... I'm sorry. I felt a little queer for a moment. You see, my father was killed at Ascot.'

He was no longer indifferent or hard but intensely interested.

'Who was he?' he asked. 'Do you realise I don't know your name? I heard Jackie call you Joanna. She must have assumed that we knew each other or she'd have introduced us.'

He spoke quickly as he slid off the desk and moved about the room picking up a set of binoculars in their leather case and slinging the strap over one shoulder, leafing through some unopened mail and stuffing some into his jacket pocket and the rest into the waste-paper basket.

'He was Charlie Frost, the jockey,' replied Joanna, responding to his change of manner. He glanced up sharply, his grey eyes neither frosty nor stormy but warm with sympathy.

'No wonder you dislike horse-racing,' he commented quietly. 'That was a sad accident.'

'You remember it?' She was surprised.

'I was there when it happened.'

How strange that this man whom she had met only recently should have been present when her father was killed. How odd that she should receive such quick and instinctive understanding of her own feelings from him, the last person from whom she would have expected any sympathy.

'I'll take you to look at horses on Monday next,' he continued, and the moment of sympathy was over. 'I'll pick you up at the triangle of grass where the road forks beyond Gilcroft. Be there at nine-thirty.'

The door opened suddenly. A small man with a much creased long-jawed face looked in. He glared at Joanna and snarled at Steve,

'Come away, sir. We'll be missing the plane if ye don't.'

At that moment the telephone on the desk shrilled. Steve glanced at it and hesitated. The small man snarled again,

'Och, leave it. Let the lassie take the call.'

'All right, Johnnie. Answer it, please, Joanna, and write any message for me on the pad. I'll see you on Monday.'

## CHAPTER TWO

As the door banged behind the two men Joanna picked up the receiver of the still ringing telephone. She felt wholly confused. Had she really achieved what she had set out to do that morning? Or was she having a dream?

She spoke absently into the mouthpiece and a warm female voice answered her.

'Hello. This is Consuelo Millar speaking. I should like to speak to Mr Steve Millar, please.'

Joanna was conscious of a strange reaction to the smooth seductive voice. She wanted to replace the receiver without replying. Suddenly hypersensitive, she had an odd impression that to answer would involve her with a woman who could bring her pain and unhappiness. Exasperated by her own unusual behaviour, she shook her head impatiently and said crisply,

'I'm afraid he isn't here. He's gone away.'

'When will he be back?'

'On Saturday. Can I take a message?'

There was a brief silence. Then the creamy voice asked, 'Who are you?'

'Joanna Frost. Mr Millar asked me to answer the phone.'

'I don't understand. You say he's not there but that he asked you to answer the phone.'

This time the woman sounded very annoyed as if she suspected she was being put off.

'He couldn't wait to answer it,' explained Joanna carefully. 'He had to catch a plane.'

'Where has he gone?'

Joanna hesitated. Was she really free to tell this woman the whereabouts of Steve? Quickly she brushed aside her hesitation. The relationship between Steve and the woman on the other end of the line was no affair of hers, so she answered honestly,

'To Ascot.'

Again there was a brief silence. Then the woman said on a sigh,

'He might have told me. I'd have liked to have gone too. Thank you. Miss Frost. The message is that I called him and would like him to call back as soon as he returns on Saturday on an urgent business matter. Tell me, are you working for Mr Millar? His secretary, perhaps?'

'Oh no, I hardly know him. I just called to see him about some horses, and he had to hurry away.'

'Good, good.' The voice had regained its original warmth. 'I'm glad you don't work for him. Your voice is too soft and gentle. Good-bye.'

The line went dead and Joanna replaced the receiver. She wrote the message on the pad. Consuelo Millar. The name looked strange when written. Should she put Lady Millar or Mrs? She wasn't sure, so she left out both.

When she left the office she found Tom Hilroy waiting for her in the yard.

'Business finished?' he queried pleasantly. 'The landlord was in a hurry. Scorched past me in that two-seater of his as if all hell was after him.'

'He had to catch a plane.'

'Off to the races, I suppose,' said Tom as they walked up the drive to the house. 'I can't understand what people see in a lot of horses racing round a course.'

'Many of them only see money, including Mr Millar,' replied Joanna rather caustically as she looked for Marjorie's old bike which was no longer leaning against the railings in front of the house.

'Your bike's in the station wagon ... sorry, estate car to you,' said Tom, interpreting her look correctly. 'Say, you don't seem to like Steve, or horse-racing.'

'I certainly don't like horse-racing. My father was killed by a racehorse. As for Mr Millar, I haven't known him long enough to decide whether I like him or not.'

Tom's grin was wide and knowledgeable.

'Oho, I think I suspect a little clash of temperament between you and him,' he scoffed. 'Why don't you like horse-racing?'

'I think it's cruel.'

'To the horse?'

'Yes, and to some of the people. Why is my bicycle in the estate car?'

'Because I'm driving you back to your stables. I have a great urge to learn riding and I'd like to start my lessons, pronto.'

His admiring glance left her in no doubt as to why he wanted to learn riding, and Joanna could not help feeling boost to her morale by this obvious liking for her.

'I'll be glad of the lift because the way back is uphill all the way, but I'm afraid you can't start riding today. We haven't a suitable horse for you. We haven't one big enough.'

'Hey, are you making a crack at me? I know I'm a beanpole, but ' Tom started to object good-humouredly.

'No, I'm serious. We haven't a horse strong enough to carry you.'

'Too bad!'

'But if you're really keen to learn you could come and help to muck out.'

'Muck what?'

'Clean out the stables. Then you could help to groom the horses and feed them, clean the bridles and check the saddles to see that they're all in good condition. It's all part of learning to ride.'

They had reached the estate car and Tom turned to grin at her.

'I suspect you're making fun of me,' he accused. 'There's a twinkle in your eyes. You believe I couldn't do any of those things you've just mentioned, don't you? Well, I'm going to prove that I can. Starting today, Joanna, you've got yourself a new stable-hand.'

During the next few days Tom was true to his word. After the first day when she had shown him what to do he appeared early every morning to help with the stable work and stayed most of the rest of

each day watching with interest while Joanna taught Karen or anyone else who came for a lesson. He mucked out and forked hay cheerfully, carrying on a conversation with the partially deaf Archie, although Joanna was convinced that neither he nor Archie understood a word the other was saying. He fed and watered the horses, saddled and unsaddled them. He joined Marjorie and Bill and Joanna for lunch, fitting in happily. He told them that he was on vacation from Edinburgh University where he had been doing a post-graduate course in medicine. When his father had been posted to Britain, Tom had jumped at the chance to come with him and to further his education at the university which his grandfather had once attended, and Jackie had come over to stay at Lanry for the good of her mental health, having just gone through rather a difficult period in her marriage.

'She's thinking of separating from Glen,' he told Joanna one day when they were feeding the horses. 'What I've seen of her marriage is enough to put me off the institution for the rest of my life.'

'Not all marriages are like that. I'm sure Marjorie and Bill will never reach that stage.'

'Yeah, I guess not,' he agreed. 'But then Marjorie doesn't nag at Bill when he makes a mistake. She accepts him for what he is. She isn't trying to make him over to suit some preconceived notion she might have of what a husband should be. And he doesn't carp when she does or says something foolish. Jackie and Glen are always picking on one another. They don't have a nice clean fight and get it over. They go on and on, in front of others too. Not content with making their own hell they drag the rest of us into it too.'

'Perhaps they were foolish to marry in the first place,' said Joanna placidly.

Tom laughed, placed his hands on her shoulders and shook her gently.

'Oh, Joanna, how innocent you are I How could they know about each other until they'd lived together, and how could they live together until they were married? That's why the whole idea seems pretty crazy to me. You marry someone you hardly know and are expected to live with them for the rest of your life in complete harmony.'

'I should have thought not knowing everything about each other makes marriage more interesting. There would always be the excitement of discovering something new,' remarked Joanna. 'But they must have known something. Weren't they engaged?'

'Sure; for a couple of months, I guess. But they spent the time going to parties in New York, going to the theatre, the usual social round. I guess all that they knew about each other was they both had wealthy parent^ and they both dressed well.'

'Poor Karen,' murmured Joanna, moving on to the next stall.

'Yeah, it's the child who suffers most. I guess that's why she's a little beast most of the time.'

'She's a little beast only when people aren't firm and consistent. She'll do anything for Marjorie or me because she knows we mean what we say. If her mother treated her more consistently Karen would be much happier. Like a pony, she has to respect the person who's telling her what to do.'

'She does what Steve tells her, and how, although I guess I'd do what he says if he looked at me the way he looks at her. So it works with kids the way it does with ponies. But not with adults, Joanna. I bet you'd be resentful if some man started to order you about, insisting that you did everything his way and bullying you when you didn't.'

'Yes, I expect I should,' answered Joanna vaguely. Was that how Jackie's husband treated her? She found herself remembering the way Steve Millar had ordered her to go back to Gilcroft by way of the road instead of across his fields and how after her initial rebellion she had given in and had done as he had asked.

'To get back to this marriage thing,' persisted Tom. 'My guess is that it fails because the couple know they're tied, and that it's one hell of an expense to get untied. Now if they weren't legally tied to each other, if they knew they were free to walk out when they felt like it they'd be more prepared to stick together. What do you think?'

'I can't agree with you. If I found someone I liked enough to want to live with him I'd want it to be for ever. I couldn't make all those physical and emotional adjustments knowing that one day he might want to walk out on me. I suppose I must seem a bit of a square to you, but as far as I'm concerned, marriage is for keeps,' said Joanna quietly.

'Joanna, her creed,' remarked Tom softly. 'I had a feeling that you'd be like that.'

'But most of the time I don't think about marriage at all,' she said lightly, aware that they had become unusually serious. 'I know more about horses than people.'

'Afraid?'

The challenging question halted her in her tracks and she looked up to find him studying her seriously.

'Of marriage?' she asked.

'No. Afraid of people, and of having your feelings lacerated? Afraid of caring deeply and being hurt?'

Joanna knew about caring deeply and being hurt as a result. She recognised the truth about herself, that she avoided being involved and hurt at all costs.

Tom leaned towards her and murmured, 'A horse is no substitute for another human being, Joanna.'

She looked away quickly, not wanting him to see that he had come close to the truth. She unhooked a bridle from the wall on which they hung.

'I think I'll take Minnie for some exercise. I'm glad to know your views on marriage. Maybe one day I'll remind you of them, when you're well and truly tied, sitting smugly with your children round your knees while you tell them fairy tales,' she teased, and skipped lightly out of the stable before he could retaliate.

Tom's assistance was particularly noticeable on Saturday when Joanna took four group lessons lasting an hour each and when she needed someone to help with the tacking up of the horses as well as with the feeding of them. When the last lesson was over and they were attending to the horses for the last time that day Tom invited her to have dinner with him at a well-known hotel in a big seaside resort north of Lanry. Feeling she had earned such entertainment, she agreed willingly to go with him, and took pleasure in dressing up for the occasion.

They drove along the coast road in Tom's red sports car, passing close to the shore of the wide Firth of Clyde and enjoying the spectacular view of islands and mountains. The resort boasted several hotels along its sea-front and Joanna was not surprised when Tom drove into the car-park of the largest. Inside the hotel, which was ornately decorated in baronial style, they went straight to the big dining room,

passing the much advertised ballroom where the usual Saturday evening dance was just beginning.

Tom chose a table near the windows and they were able to watch the people strolling about on the grassy banks which sloped down to the water's edge where the local sailing club's dinghies were parked, their aluminium masts glinting in the rays of the westering sun. Beyond them was the shining expanse of the Firth on which many small open fishing boats made dark blobs.

Tom had ordered the meal and they were both sipping a preliminary drink and engaging in the sort of facetious small talk which he enjoyed when he stiffened as he glanced past her.

'Turn your head gradually as if you were looking for someone and over in the corner farthest from the door you'll see someone you know,' he murmured.

Joanna did as he suggested, glancing past the intervening crowded tables. In the far corner, at a table for two, she saw the unmistakable straight shoulders and well-shaped head of Steve Millar. Opposite to him sat an apparition, or so Joanna thought: a dark-haired, creamy-skinned woman whose face was perfectly oval. She was talking with many hand gestures and Steve seemed to be listening attentively. Remembering Marjorie's description, Joanna knew that the woman could be no other than Consuelo Millar.

'Wait till I tell Jackie,' Tom was saying. 'She'll be positively green. What a dolly I wonder where he found her? He's a dark horse, if you'll pardon the obvious figure of speech. He came back from Ascot with two successes which must have made him a load of money. If it had been me I'd have stayed down, there to live it up or would have thrown a champagne party when I returned. But not him. He's a hard guy to get to know, kind of reserved, don't you think?'

'I'd told you, I don't know him very well. He's distantly related to Marjorie, and she told me that his father's second wife was half Argentinian. And I think the ... er ... doll must be her.'

As she expected Tom's round blue eyes grew rounder.

'You mean she's his stepmother?'

Joanna nodded, smiling at his astonishment.

'You've got to be kidding,' he accused. Then when she shook her head he added, 'Well, there's only one way to be sure. I'll go over and ask them to join us.'

'Oh, no. Tom, please don't!' The words burst out spontaneously and he looked at her curiously.

'Why not? I'd like to meet the woman, wouldn't you?'

'I ... I ... Mr Millar mightn't be pleased if you interrupt them.'

'I'm damned sure he won't be pleased, but he can't expect to keep someone like that to himself.'

He stood up and stepped between the tables before Joanna could remonstrate further and she sat and watched him go, twining her hands on her lap, hoping that Steve would refuse.

She saw him smile as only Tom could smile as he spoke to the couple. The woman smiled back and held out her hand. Tom held it in his for a few seconds. A few more words were spoken. Tom half-turned and pointed in Joanna's direction. The woman looked over and nodded graciously. Steve didn't turn to look. The conversation continued for a few more minutes and then to Joanna's relief Tom made his way back alone.

'No dice,' he said as he slid into his seat. 'They're discussing business, or so he says. Does that guy never talk about anything else? You're right, she's Lady Millar. I guess it must be something to have a stepmother like that left to you as a legacy!'

The food and the wine arrived and he seemed to forget the couple in the corner and devoted himself to entertaining Joanna. They were both laughing rather immoderately at one of Tom's jokes when they realised that Consuelo was approaching their table. Apparently she and Steve had finished their meal and were leaving. Steve was a few steps behind the exotic-looking beauty, but when she stopped beside Tom he passed by and went on towards the entrance hall without even looking at Joanna and Tom.

As Tom started to rise politely to his feet Consuelo placed a heavily-ringed hand on his shoulder and murmured with a lovely smile,

'Please don't bother. I came over to meet Miss Frost. You remember we spoke over the phone a few days ago? You were kind enough to take a message for me. How are you?'

Marjorie had been right. The eyes were like purple pansies; purple black with yellow flecks at the centre round the pupils. Their expression was soft and languorous yet Joanna had a feeling she was being assessed shrewdly.

'I'm very well, thank you,' she replied. 'I'm pleased to meet you.'

'You have a face to match your voice. So kind and gentile. Don't you think so, Mr Hilroy?'

'The name is Tom, and you're right every time about Joanna/ said the young man.

The pansy eyes studied them both carefully.

'Then you're very lucky to have found each other. A perfect match,' Consuelo purred. 'I hope you'll both forgive Steve for being unsociable,' she sighed. 'He's often like that. I have to be very patient with him. Maybe we'll meet another time and have a little party. Au revoir for now.'

She glided on, and many heads turned to watch the tall graceful woman in her red white-sprinkled dress with its high waist-line and long skirt.

'Some flower to find blossoming in the cool climate of Scotland,' commented Tom. 'Exotic is the word, I think. She seems very interested in you. I wonder what she meant about us being lucky to have found each other?'

Joanna avoided his intent gaze. With Consuelo's comment her relationship with Tom had entered a new phase; a phase which she was not sure was welcome.

'I expect she's one of those people who likes to think she can analyse people on her first meeting with them,' she replied airily. 'D'you think I could have one of those delicious-looking chocolate eclairs for my dessert ?'

She diverted his attention to food again and the dangerous moment passed. The rest of the evening was pleasant and uneventful, and when he left her at Gilcroft she was glad he didn't make any attempt to kiss her good-night. She liked Tom and was glad of his help and his company, but she didn't want any amorous complications to develop out of their friendship.

Next morning at breakfast she told Marjorie about her meeting with the glamorous Consuelo.

'What did you think of her?' asked Marjorie.

'She's very beautiful.'

'Och, I know that. What do you think of her as a person?'

'Since I spoke to her for only a few minutes ... or rather she spoke to me ... how can you expect me to know what she's like?' laughed Joanna.

'You must have formed some sort of opinion. How did she behave towards Steve? Was she possessive about him?'

'No, I think it was the other way round. Tom wanted them to join us for dinner, and Steve refused as if he wanted to keep her to himself.' Marjorie, bright-eyed and inquisitive, nodded in agreement almost as if she knew that was the case.

'I expect he does want to keep her to himself. He won't want anyone else marrying her if he wants the money.'

'I can't say I was sorry when he refused to join us,' murmured Joanna.

'I Relieve you're frightened of him,' scoffed Marjorie.

'I believe I am too,' admitted Joanna. 'Oh, and I nearly forgot to tell you, Lady Millar went to a lot of trouble to say how lucky Tom and I are to have met each other, and that we're a perfect match. Now what do you make of that?'

'Interesting, very interesting,' drawled Marjorie.

'Sounds as if she wants to push you into each other's arms.' She cocked her head to one side and smiled cheekily. 'Any chance of that happening?'

'Marj,' said Bill warningly, 'you're getting carried away.'

'I know, I know,' she replied. 'And I think Consuelo is wrong. Tom and Joanna are far too amiable to one another for it to be a lasting friendship. Remember how you and I used to skirmish when we first met, trying each other out? But I'd love to know why she made such a comment to someone she'd only just met.'

Joanna said nothing, not wanting to pursue the subject further because to do so she would have to tell her friends she had spoken to Consuelo previously over the phone, and she didn't want them to know of her visit to Lanry House to see Steve about horses.

Having made sure that there would be no lessons on Monday she asked Bill and Marjorie if she could have the day off to go shopping. They agreed, and when Monday morning came Bill even offered to take her into Ayr in the Land-Rover. She was soon able to persuade him that she was quite capable of walking to the fork in the road to catch the bus, and to her relief he didn't persist in his offer.

It was cool and windy when she set off along the road in the direction of the village and she was glad she had decided to wear a tweed skirt and thin sweater under her raincoat. In a small bag she had packed her jodhpurs and riding hat in case the opportunity to ride came her way.

She had not been waiting very long at the triangle of grass when she heard the roar of a high-powered engine and very soon the green two-seater sports car which Steve Millar drove breasted the top of the hill and came towards her.

When she opened the door and sat down beside him he greeted her briefly and unsmilingly, told her to lock her door and fasten the safety belt and then set off along the road to the village. He did not go through the village, however, but followed a road which went over the hill at the back of the council estate and which wound itself past farm fields to the coast road.

Today there was no magical view of the island because it was shrouded in misty rain, but Joanna could just make out the dark hull and white superstructure of the motor ferry boat as it ploughed its way across the Firth. Then abruptly all view of the sea was cut off as they made their way through a series of small towns as the road curved away from the coast. Eventually they were able to turn off on to a wide dual carriage road which by-passed the county town of Ayr and which led them to a cross-country road which twisted through undulating countryside composed of rich farmland and wooded estates.

Gradually the prosperous-looking fields and parkland gave way to more rugged and barren land. They passed through two small dingy mining towns, past a craggy heap of spoil from the coalmines, and then the road narrowed and they were beside a swift-flowing river which they followed through a narrow steep-sided glen.

Finding the glen with its soaring outcrops of dark glistening rock rather awesome on that dank and dismal morning, Joanna turned to look at her companion. He was as casually dressed as he had been when she had first met him, this time in a pair of old breeches and a different sweater. He hadn't spoken a word during the drive and she was beginning to feel a little resentful. He might have given her a little information about their destination, she thought, and was just about to ask him where they were going when he observed critically as if she was at fault,

'You're very quiet. What are you thinking about?'

'I'm thinking how unflattering your own silence has been\*' She replied honestly.

'Unflattering? Why?' Surprise lilted through his voice.

'You seem to have so little interest in where we're going and in what we're going to do that you've not bothered to tell me.'

He flashed her an alert sidelong glance and a dent appeared in his lean cheek as he smiled slightly.

'My mind was on something else. I'm not used to being sociable in the morning. Anyway, I might say the same about you. You haven't shown any interest either. If you'd asked the right questions you'd have found me ready to answer them. Most women would have bombarded me with questions and trivial small talk by now.'

They had left the glen and the road was rising slowly in a series of bends. On either side unfenced moorland covered with green bracken and tussocks of reeds extended as far as Joanna could see, sloping up gradually to rounded hills. Shaggy sheep stood by the roadside or made sudden sorties across from one side to the other, causing Steve to slow down until they had passed.

'Then where are we going?' asked Joanna. 'This place is so totally different from the coast I feel we must be in another county altogether.'

'We're on the boundary of Ayrshire and Kirkcudbrightshire,' he informed her briefly as the road dipped unexpectedly, turned sharply across a narrow bridge and soared up a steep incline. When he had negotiated this difficult part, Steve continued with his explanation.

'We're going to see Alan Drummond, a friend of mine who has a sheep farm. He also breeds horses, mostly hunters and hacks. He's a great point-to-point rider and used to do some show jumping.'

'Marjorie says you used to ride in horse shows yourself. Why did you give up?' asked Joanna.

'I decided to concentrate on breeding horses for racing. You don't approve, do you?'

The sudden question disconcerted her and it was her turn to glance warily at him, but she could learn nothing from his face.

'No, I don't,' she answered at last.

'Because of the way in which your father died?'

'Yes. Oh, I used to enjoy racing at one time, especially when he won. And if the race was near home I always went to watch. I loved the excitement and the crowds, and once I had an ambition to be a woman jockey. But as I grew older I began to notice the effect racing had on the people who participated in it, on the owners, and the trainers and the jockeys. I began to realise how tough and hard they all were, and I began to dislike it. My father, who was the kindest father anyone could have, became an entirely different person on the racecourse. And the people with whom he had to mix all seemed so grasping, so jealous and so indifferent to the horses.'

She stopped talking and glanced apprehensively at her companion as she realised she had been talking very freely to this comparative stranger about her own feelings. It was very unlike her to be so unreserved.

'And so now you brand anyone associated with horse- racing as tough, mean and totally without scruple,' he said.

'I suppose I do,' she admitted.

'Including me?'

Joanna shifted uneasily in her seat. She didn't want to annoy him too much because if she did he was quite capable of returning to Gilcroft without ever taking her to see the horses.

'Well, you did make Minnie and me walk round by the road, and she had a strained tendon,' she defended weakly, and was relieved to see the dent appear in his cheek as he smiled again.

'I've not forgotten ... although I was unaware of the strained tendon. You were a stranger and I had to make sure you wouldn't trespass again.' Then as if the subject had lost interest for him he changed it by saying inconsequently,

'How are you getting on with Karen Carson?'

This was a much more comfortable subject, so Joanna told him the story of Karen's first meeting with Rebel, and was both surprised and glad when he laughed at her description. Having shaken off his early morning bad humour he was proving much more approachable than she had ever imagined he would be.

'Karen has talent,' she said, 'and that's why I need another pony.'

'I thought she might have the makings of a good rider, but I could see she was badly disciplined and might be difficult to handle,' he explained. 'I could have recommended a plush riding school to Jackie, but then I remembered you. I thought you might take the measure of Karen quickly. Apparently you did the right thing by putting her on Rebel and as a result you're popular not only with Karen but also with her mother, and incidentally with her Uncle Tom.'

Immediately Joanna, who by now was completely at her ease, launched into enthusiastic praise for Tom and the help he had given her at Gilcroft.

'Then the admiration is mutual. I didn't realise when I recommended you to Jackie that I might be sowing the seeds of romance between you and her brother. Maybe you'll acquire a wealthy husband before

die summer is over. Do you fancy living in the States?' said Steve, and the light jeering note in his voice flicked like a whip.

Joanna managed to keep calm and to reply honestly,

'Such a thought has never entered my head. There's no romance. I've only known Tom for a few days.'

'That's all the time some women require to make their catch and land it,' he remarked cynically.

If the story which Marjorie had told her about Consuelo marrying Sir Henry Millar for his money was true, his unpleasant remark was based on experience, thought Joanna, but even so she couldn't let it pass without a gentle rebuke.

'You've accused me of generalising about people who are connected with horse-racing. Aren't you doing a little generalising yourself about women? We aren't all waiting to marry the first wealthy man who happens to come our way.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' he replied coolly. 'But it'll be interesting to watch events this summer to see whether you'll be able to resist the temptation offered by Tom Hilroy and remain true to your convictions.\*She managed to keep her cool although she had to clench her hands in her raincoat pockets to do so. When she was quite sure she had control of herself she said quietly,

'Then I'm afraid you're in for a very dull summer.'

He "laughed spontaneously and her heart did a little flip as she noticed how merriment changed his face completely, laughter lines breaking up the taut severity of mouth and cheek.

'Another soft answer. All right, gentle Jo, I agree, I wasn't very pleasant to you just now.'

She supposed that was as near to an apology as he ever came.

'I wasn't sure whether you knew you were being unpleasant,' she said.

'I always know.'

His answer troubled her. She was fast discovering that when he was being unpleasant or aloof he had a warmth of manner which was dangerously attractive.

'But why are you deliberately unpleasant? Don't you want people to like you?'

They had reached the end of the bends. The road straightened, following a ridge of land on one side of which rock-scattered moorland sloped down to a long lake and on the Other side sloped upwards, stretching apparently interminably, mile upon mile of bleak windswept bracken, grass and rock.

Steve slowed the car and glided into a lay-by and turned off the engine.

'We've made good time and I don't want to arrive too early, so we may as well stop and admire the view and stretch our legs,' he said. 'And in answer to your question, I'm unpleasant when I feel like being unpleasant, in other words I say what I think and if people don't like what I think they know what to do.'

'Then you must be very lonely.'

He was opening the car door and preparing to get out, but at her words he turned to stare at her in puzzlement.

'What makes you think that?'

'If you're often unpleasant and you don't care whether people like you or not you can't have many friends.'

He continued to stare at her, and gradually his eyes narrowed and crinkled at the corners as he smiled. Now that he was full face she could see that his smile created a dent in the other cheek too and once again she was very aware of how attractive he could be when he wasn't being difficult.

'I've a suspicion, gentle Jo, that you're trying to reform me, to get me to mend my ways. Better watch out or I'll be unpleasant to you again,' he warned softly. 'Being unpleasant certainly keeps people away and gives me a chance to be alone, which I like. But I'm never lonely. And one day I hope you'll learn as I have that your true friends are those who go on liking you even when you've been unpleasant to them.'

He opened the door and got out of the car, and feeling as if she had been thoroughly put in her place, Joanna scrambled out after him and stood beside him looking over the rough stone wall at the lake. The clouds which had hovered all morning were lifting and a faint cool breeze from the north was slicing through the mist, dispersing it so that the shoulders of brown and blue hills were visible on the other side of the lake. Even as they looked the colour of the water changed, becoming more blue, and looking up, Joanna saw that a patch of blue sky had appeared through the disintegrating clouds.

It was very quiet, the only noise being the call of a peewit. There was no visible sign of habitation, yet Joanna knew that man had inhabited the area for a long time and was responsible for the many rough dry-stone walls which criss-crossed the moorland.

"What's the name of the lake?' she asked.

'Loch, not lake,' he corrected. 'It's Loch Doon. The river which we followed farther back along the road is the River Doon.'

'You mean the one in the poem?'

He frowned rather impatiently as if he hadn't much time for poetry.

'Which poem?'

'The one by Robert Burns. Oh, you must know it. It goes like this: "Ye banks and braes o' Bonnie Doon ..." I learned to sing it at school when I was in the choir.'

The expression on his face changed from impatience to indulgence.

'Yes, it's that Doon. Does the fact that Robert Burns wrote about it make it more interesting?'

'Yes, of course.'

'If you're so interested in Burns you should visit the cottage where he was born. It's in the village of Alloway just outside Ayr. Maybe...' He stopped speaking and shrugged his shoulders.

'Maybe what?'

'I was going to suggest that maybe Tom Hilroy, being an American and therefore possibly a professional tourist, would take you there, then I decided you'd think I was being unpleasant again,' he replied easily and with a touch of mockery, so that she had a distinct impression that wasn't what he'd intended to say at all.

'I don't think Tom would be very good as a guide,' she replied. 'I expect Marjorie or Bill will take me there if I decide to go.'

He didn't reply and she concluded he had lost interest in her. She looked down to the loch again. The sun was almost out and the water was a limpid blue and the hills on the other side were no longer grey

but pale green touched with purple where a cloud hovered above them.

'There's a castle on the other side of the loch,' Steve surprised her by saying. 'It's seen some excitement in its time.-' Those mountains over there were once the hiding place of Robert the Bruce's army.' He stopped abruptly again, then added with a touch of diffidence and another shrug, 'But if you're interested in that sort of thing yUan can tell you more than I can. It isn't far from here to his farm.'

He turned away to the car. Joanna followed thoughtfully. For a few minutes he had stepped out of the usual line of conduct in the same way as when he'd offered her a horse when they had first met. This time he had tried to give information, to show an interest in her interest. Then he had withdrawn again as if he had been unsure of how to proceed. Advance and retreat. Tantalising. Calculated to lead anyone on, especially a woman. But was it calculated? Glancing at his aloof profile as the car sped along the road, she decided it wasn't calculated. He was naturally that way.

Her attention was attracted by the sight of some horses in a field. The car slowed down and turned right. It bounced down a rutted farm road which wound across some fairly flat land. At one point a wood of gloomy Scotch pines crowded close, cutting off the daylight temporarily, then they were past and moorland stretched before them, its bleakness tempered by the pale sunlight.

The road turned left round a big outcrop of stone and there was a large white farmhouse set among its fields and backed by numerous outbuildings whose white paint contrasted strongly with the dark green of the clumps of conifers which acted as a windbreak to the north of the house.

In the farmyard a tall thin man of about forty-five was standing. He was apparently waiting for them, for when the car stopped he came

forward to greet Steve as he got out of the car. He had a square-jawed face and the firm line of his long thin mouth was softened by a moustache. Steve introduced him as Alan Drummond and Joanna felt her hand clasped strongly by a large bony one while fierce blue eyes set deeply under shaggy eyebrows appraised her.

'Good morning, Miss Frost. Welcome to Drumlee. I'm told ye're wantin' to see some horses with a view to purchasin' one or two. If ye'd like to come this way I'll show ye the stables.'

Pleased by his businesslike approach, Joanna mentally catalogued all the features of both horses and stables she must observe before making a choice. The stable buildings, although old, seemed in good repair and had been painted recently. Alan swung open a door and she entered the dim building which smelt of horses, hay and leather. Peeping in the nearest stall, she noticed that it was scrupulously clean and dry and that the horse which was in it, a neat chestnut cob, had been groomed that morning and that its coat was smooth and glossy.

'Walk through and take yer time, lassie, Have a good look and if there's anything that takes yer fancy we'll have it led out and ye can see how it performs. I've a couple of ponies on the left that might interest ye. All those on the right are fairly big hacks. But ye'll be knowing yerself what ye're after, so if ye'll excuse me I'll away to do some other work. Joe here'll answer any questions and will take the horses out for ye.'

He pointed to a small grey-haired man who smiled toothlessly at Joanna and touched his fingers to his cap.

'And ye're both invited to have yer midday meal with the wife and me,' added Alan, turning to speak to the silent Steve who was leaning against the jamb of the stable door. 'So be at the house about twelve-thirty. We can catch up on the news and gossip then.' A slight

smile lifted the bristly pepper-and-salt moustache and then with a wave of his hand he left the stable.

Joanna took her time as Alan had suggested, beginning her observations of each horse by spending a few minutes outside each stall to watch the animal at rest, knowing that the type of horse she required should be relaxed and unconcerned in its stall yet not completely oblivious to her presence.

There were eight animals in the stable altogether and three of those, she noticed, were nervous and restless in their stalls, so she eliminated them from her mental list. That left the two Welsh ponies and three horses, one of which was the chestnut cob in the first stall and two hacks which obviously had thoroughbred blood in them, judging by their refined heads and elegant necks. The problem would be in making a choice between the two ponies and the two horses because she decided that the cob was too staid and heavy for her requirements.

She studied the four animals again, trying to make up her mind which one she would have led out so that she could watch its conduct and movement in the paddock, and as she moved from stall to stall she became very conscious of Steve watching her as much as the horses. And as soon as she became aware of him all her ability to judge seemed to desert her and she became completely unable to remember the points she should observe in the horses.

Irritated at having her concentration disturbed and even more irritated by the knowledge that he had the power to disturb her, she turned to look at him. He was leaning against the upright of a stall and he was watching her in the same curious way that he had watched that first morning on the sands, as if there was something about her which baffled him.

'Having problems in coming to a decision?' he asked, and she was sure amusement flickered momentarily in his eyes.

'Yes,' she sighed.

He stood up straight.

'I'll remove myself,' he offered lazily.

'Oh, no, don't go, please.' To her annoyance she blushed when he raised a mocking eyebrow at her urgent appeal. Immediately she took herself in hand and added as coolly as she could, 'I'd like your opinion on which of these two horses I should have haltered and led out.'

'You're sure you want my opinion?' he asked.

And Joanna, who was becoming more, and more unnerved by her own peculiar reactions, snapped crossly,

'Of course I'm sure. I wouldn't ask you otherwise.'

'Not such a soft answer this time,' he commented dryly. 'And there was I thinking that my advice wouldn't be needed after all. You've made a good job of assessing them and you've reduced the number in exactly the same way as I would have done myself.'

Feeling unduly pleased by his rather back-handed compliment, Joanna took her turn at watching him survey the brown mare and then saunter on to the stall where the grey gelding stood, twitching its tail and occasionally stamping one foot.

'The mare,' Steve announced briefly, 'and both the ponies.'

'Why the mare?'

'Look at the grey's neck. The angle between its head and its neck is too sharp. Possibly it would have breathing problems later.'

Joanna looked at the set of the gelding's head where it joined its neck. Certainly the angle was acute, whereas the chestnut's head and neck formed a clean broad angle.

'I see,' she murmured. 'I prefer the chestnut's eyes too.'

'Yes, they're set farther apart than the grey's. Shall I tell Joe that you want the chestnut haltering?'

'Yes, please.'

The chestnut, which was called Bonnie Lass, accepted the halter willingly and walked quietly from the stall and out into the paddock. Walking a little to one side of the horse, Joanna noted how it placed its feet straight ahead without the interference or the sideways movement which often marred Minnie's action.

Out in the paddock Joe led Bonnie Lass round the paddock so that the mare's natural carriage could be seen without the encumbrances of saddle and girth. The horse performed well, moving from the shoulder easily, and when it stood still Joanna was able to see that it was as well balanced as she had hoped from her initial judgement of the mare's muscular well-defined chest and shoulders. Fore and hind quarters both possessed the soundness and solidity to tolerate punishing use and plenty of jumping without damage. There was no doubt in Joanna's mind that the mare was exactly the horse she required for Gilcroft.

'Do you think I could see her being ridden?' she asked Steve.

He glanced at his watch before answering.

'Let's see the ponies led out first. Then it will be time for lunch and we can ask Alan if we can ride this afternoon.'

Both ponies were sized up in the same way as Bonnie Lass. There was little to choose between them, but in the end Joanna chose the slimmer of the two, a dark brown one called Cindy.

'How much do you think Mr Drummond will want for Bonnie Lass?' she asked Steve as they walked towards the farmhouse.

'About two hundred pounds, I should think.'

'It's going to be difficult to choose then between her and Cindy, because I've only two hundred pounds saved up, so that means only one horse .... and I need both badly,' sighed Joanna.

'I've an idea,' said Steve slowly. 'I think I could persuade Jackie to buy the pony for Karen. She could board it at Gilcroft. So I suggest that you buy Bonnie Lass as being a better investment for you. Anyway, think about it while we're having lunch.'

Lunch turned out to be a substantial meal of roast lamb, new potatoes, green peas and mint sauce, all produced by the farm, followed by a home-made blackcurrant pie topped with fresh cream. All the time Alan, whom Joanna had thought would be a reticent man from his appearance, talked, holding forth about the most recent developments in farming, the latest fat- stock prices, the reafforestation he was carrying out on his land, the number of lambs his flock had produced that spring and which farm was up for sale. And Steve was a good listener, putting in the right word of commiseration here or asking a brief but pertinent question there.

In fact, thought Joanna, as she scooped up the last of the delicious blackcurrant pie, she was learning a great deal about Steve Millar today. He was a more complex person than she had first supposed and beneath the hardness there were unplumbed depths only hinted at by

his cynical remarks regarding women and his obvious sincerity when talking about true friends. She guessed that Alan Drummond was one of those true friends.

'So ye've decided on Bonnie Lass, have ye?' boomed Alan, and she started guiltily as she realised he was repeating the question. She met Steve's amused glance across the table.

'Stop dreaming of horses, Joanna,' he mocked, 'and communicate with us mere humans!'

'Och, the poor lassie, she hasna' had a chance to say a word with yon great loon bletherin' away,' put in Mrs Drummond, who was small and plump with dark hair and black eyes. 'Neither have I, for that matter, and I've been dying to ask if it's true that Lady Millar is back in Lanry.'

Steve's face immediately became a smooth mask.

'Yes, it's true.'

'And is she living in yon house, then ?\*' enquired the inquisitive little woman.

'No. I've let it to an American for a year. He's Foster Hilroy. You may have heard of him.'

'Aye, I have. I don't doubt his pockets are well lined.'

'They are,' agreed Steve.

'And you'll be charging him a fine fat rent for that place, if ye've any sense.'

'I am,' said Steve, and looking across at Joanna winked, and cleverly changed the subject by saying, 'Alan says you can have Bonnie Lass for a hundred and fifty. Will that suit you?'

'Yes. But I'd like to see her ridden.'

'Oh, 'that's easily done,' said Alan. 'Steve here will take her through her paces for you and over a few jumps. Ye know, for a young bit of a lass ye've a good eye for a horse. Bonnie Lass is well-bred, thoroughbred and Cleveland blood, and you can't do much better than that. You've got a bargain there.'

Watching Steve put Bonnie Lass through her paces later, Joanna knew that the farmer had been right and she began to wonder how much Steve had had a hand in the bargain. Dare she ask him if he had persuaded Alan to reduce his price? But all idea of asking him was forgotten as she watched him put the mare over the . jumps which Joe had set up. His control of the horse was outstanding considering he had never ridden the animal before, and when he rode up to her she could not help expressing her admiration.

'That was wonderful! Why ever did you give up show jumping?'

Grey eyes regarded her narrowly.

'Maybe I didn't get the right sort of encouragement,' he said almost flippantly, evasively, so that she felt rebuffed again. 'It's your turn now,' he added.

He slid to the ground and handed her the reins, then stood back while she mounted. Although she knew she could not surpass the performance of riding she had just seen, Joanna was on her mettle. After mounting she let Bonnie Lass stand quietly for a minute or so to see how the mare would accept her. Then leaning over she adjusted the stirrups to suit her own comfort and security. That done, she asked the horse to move off at a walk. After a while she halted it, then urged

it to a trot. After another halt she got it to walk again and then to canter. Bonnie Lass stopped easily from any gait and responded willingly to her requests. When she had tested the horse's sense of direction and steering ability she decided to try the jumps and apart from knocking the pole off the last and highest one she managed to clear them all first time.

'Well done,' commented Steve as she halted near him. 'As Alan says, for a wee bit of a lass ye've a good eye for a horse, and you're not bad at riding either. Are you satisfied with Bonnie Lass?'

'Very much. This has been a wonderful day. Thank you for bringing me here,' she replied enthusiastically, her eyes sparkling with pleasure as she expressed her feelings without reserve.

'I've enjoyed it,' he replied briefly. 'But I expect payment.'

Her pleasure died at once like a flower withering under an icy blast.

'What do you mean? Did Mr Drummond want more than a hundred and fifty for Bonnie Lass? Have you planned to pay him the difference between what I can afford and what she really costs and I'll have to pay the difference eventually?' she asked, the words rushing out, tumbling over each other.

He frowned and his eyes grew stormy as he took offence at her accusations.

'No, nothing like that. There's no such arrangement between Alan and me. A hundred and fifty is his price and it has nothing to do with me. I wouldn't think of making such an arrangement anyway, not even for you,' he replied forcibly.

The 'not even for you' slipped out unintentionally because his frown became blacker and he caught his lower lip between his teeth. But Joanna was so relieved that there was no arrangement between him

and Alan that she missed the implication and could only smile sunnily.

'Oh, I'm so glad. You see, I couldn't have accepted such help, not even from you.'

And suddenly they were both laughing at themselves and at one another.

'Well, now that we've cleared up that little misunderstanding I can tell you how you can repay me for bringing you here today. I guess that like me you don't like being under an obligation to anyone. Am I right?' said Steve.

'That's right.'

'And that's why you wouldn't accept my offer of a horse When we first met, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'Would you accept now?'

'I don't know.' She was wary again.

'Then let me take you back to Lanry House, show you the horse and make a suggestion. Somehow, this time, I don't think you'll refuse.'

The drive back to Lanry was even more silent than the drive out had been because Steve was no more communicative than he had been then and because Joanna was content to sit back and look out at the sundrenched countryside and to dream of the hours spent at Drumlee. They had been some of the happiest hours she had ever known and she found herself regretting that the outing was almost over. She was still trying to analyse her feelings to discover the cause of the regret

when the car stopped and she looked up to find out why. To her surprise they were back at Lanry, in front of the old coach-house.

Steve ordered her to get out of the car and to follow him. Like a sleep-walker she did as she was told, walking after his briskly striding figure through a big white five-barred gate in a fence, past white box stalls to a pasture in which a young horse grazed alone.

Steve leaned on the fence of the field and whistled shrilly. Immediately the horse lifted its head and came cantering across the field, moving with easy fluid grace. When it came nearer Joanna could see that it was in fact skinny and awkward-looking. Remembering Steve's remarks about Minnie, she was surprised that he owned such an ungraceful horse. And yet when the animal had cantered towards them it had looked anything but awkward.

"This is Changeling, so named because I think the fairies stole one of my foals and put this one in its place," said Steve. There was quiet affection in his voice as he fondled the horse and Joanna glanced at him with new respect. 'As you can see he is very plain, but I think he has possibilities as a hunter. I would like you to take him to Gilcroft and school him for the Hunter class in the Light Horse Show which will take place at Lanry Fairground early next month, in about two weeks' time. If you could do that it would be repayment for taking you to Drumlee today. Will you?'

Joanna stared at the horse and then at its owner. There was a challenging glint in the alert grey eyes and her hardy spirit which refused no challenge connected with a horse responded immediately.

'Yes, I'll ride him for you.' Then she remembered Marjorie and Bill. 'But I'll have to ask the Cowans if they agree to the arrangement,' she added hesitantly.

The corner of his mouth twisted cynically.

'You're still suspicious of my intentions, aren't you?' he probed.

'I am a little. I can't understand why you want me to ride one of your horses.'

He gave her one of his narrow-eyed glances and she prepared for another rebuff, but instead he shrugged and grinned ruefully,

'I can't understand myself. Maybe it's to try and prove to you that I'm not always unkind or unpleasant.'

Her glance was defensive and his grin widened rather mockingly as he noticed her distress.

'Yes, gentle Jo, I don't like having my faults pointed out to me any more than the next person does. But why worry? Your tactics got results.'

Out of a sudden whirling confusion which made her oblivious to everything except the taunting gaze of storm grey eyes she spoke tremulously.

'I wasn't using any tactics. I... I...'

She couldn't let him go on believing that she had deliberately accused him of being unkind and unpleasant in order to get something from him. The need to convince him was urgent, but she couldn't find the right words. It was unbelievable that she who hated to hurt anyone's feelings had hurt the feelings of this man whom she had thought to be tough and uncaring.

The right words didn't come. He had turned away from her to caress the horse again. He gave it a slap on its hindquarters and sent it cantering away, and beyond his shoulder she saw Tom approaching. Now the explanation would never be made and the barrier which she

had almost breached would be back as insurmountable and as formidable as ever.

'Wondered where you two had gone,' said Tom cheerfully. 'I saw you arrive. Then you seemed to disappear. Consuelo has been here since lunch time, waiting for you, Steve. She sent me in search of you. She wouldn't come herself because she wasn't wearing the right shoes for the stables. Had a good day?'

His bright blue eyes flicked inquisitively from Steve's unrevealing face to Joanna's flushed cheeks and anxious eyes.

'Yes, thank you,' replied Joanna politely.

'Not bad,' said Steve with characteristic indifference.

'When I went up to Gilcroft Marj told me you'd gone shopping,' complained Tom. 'I was hoping you'd be there and would be able to come to lunch and to meet my father.'

'No doubt Consuelo was pleased to act as a substitute for Joanna,' remarked Steve dryly.

Tom blinked puzzled innocent eyes and nodded.

'As a matter of fact she was. She and Pop had plenty to talk about. He was in Buenos Aires for a while and they discovered they had mutual acquaintances out there.'

'That sounds like a familiar approach. Consuelo invariably knows someone you've met,' murmured Steve. 'Perhaps you ought to go back and rescue your father from her clutches. I'll follow when I've finished talking to Jo.'

Tom's eyes hardened and he made no effort to move.

'You can finish talking to her now. I shan't listen,' he retorted coolly. 'Then you can go and rescue Pop if you're so concerned about him. I'd rather take Jo back to Gilcroft.'

The afternoon sunlight dappled the fields and glinted on the white fences. Under the touch of the gentle breeze leaves rustled and grasses stirred. Distant cattle lowed and from the nearby box stalls came the sound of horses blowing and stamping. The scene was peaceful and pleasant, yet the atmosphere around Joanna sizzled as Tom and Steve eyed each other. She stood waiting tensely for an explosion as she watched them. Then to her surprise Steve smiled slightly and said calmly,

'All right, if that's the way you want it.' He turned towards her and added, 'Let me know your decision regarding Changeling, somehow.'

'Yes, I will,' she answered quickly. 'Tomorrow.'

He walked away in the direction of the house, leaving a deflated Tom and a lip-biting, frowning Joanna staring after him.

'For one uncomfortable moment I thought he was going to hit me,' said Tom in an awe-struck voice. 'That's what I call self-control. What did I say to rile him, though?'

'You told him what to do and he's used to giving the orders around here, not taking them,' suggested Joanna, although she had a suspicion that the recent battle of wills she had just witnessed had been caused by something more primitive.

'Yeah, I guess he is. I never thought of that. I just couldn't stand the thought of having to listen to Consuelo. She may be beautiful, but she must be the world's biggest name-dropper. There can't be anyone in the Diplomatic Corps she hasn't met somewhere, some time. She says she and Steve are going to marry in the fall. Yet he didn't act exactly like a man who's head over heels in love, did he?'

'I don't know,' replied Joanna lightly. 'You see, I've no idea how a man who is head over heels in love behaves.'

'O.K., you know more about horses,' said Tom with a grin. 'Well, let's make a comparison. How does a stallion behave when       '       He stopped, because Joanna had started to laugh.

'Oh, Tom, if I'm an innocent about people you're plain green about horses. A stallion doesn't fall in love like a man. All you have to do is introduce him to a mare in the spring, and he knows what to do.'

'Oh.' Tom looked rather embarrassed. 'I see. The comparison isn't suitable, then?'

'Not really.'

'Have you been with Steve all day?' he asked next, and she could see he was bursting with curiosity and decided to tell him exactly where she had been and what she had been doing. By the time she had finished they had reached the courtyard in front of the house and Tom said enthusiastically,

'Sounds great for Karen ... the horse show, I mean. It would give her something to work for.' He opened the door of his car. 'Come on, get in and I'll drive you back to Gilcroft. Or perhaps you should see Jackie first and tell her about the pony?'

'No,' said Joanna firmly. She didn't want to go into the house and risk facing Consuelo just then. 'I think it would be better if Steve told her.'

'Maybe you're right,' he agreed. 'We had Steve over to dinner last night. He and Jackie hit it off pretty well. She got him to open up a little, but she says he still keeps her guessing. Like you keep me.'

'I do?' queried Joanna as she sat down beside him in the red car. She discovered she was having difficulty in suppressing a queer and ugly

flicker of emotion and sudden surge of envy of Jackie because the woman had managed to prise open Steve Millar's clam-tight reserve.

'You sure do. We had a friendly evening together on Saturday and yet you didn't say one word about planning to go out with Steve today.'

'But why should I have told you? It was a business arrangement.'

'Yeah, like all his meetings with women ... including dinner with his future wife. Business I Bah!' Tom almost snorted with disgust. 'Some business!'

## CHAPTER THREE

MARJORIE and Bill listened with interest to Joanna's recital of the day's events, and when she had finished talking they remained quietly stupefied for a few minutes. Then Marjorie, always the first of the couple to speak her mind, said in slow awestruck tones,

'You went and asked Steve to help us and he agreed? But I thought you didn't like him, that you were afraid of him.'

'I had to consult someone, and you and Bill weren't listening to me. He seemed the obvious person, besides being the nearest and also remotely related to you,' explained Joanna anxiously. 'Marj, you don't mind me asking him, do you?'

'I suppose there's no point in me minding now. It's done. I think it's amazing that you managed to persuade him to help. What line did you use, Jo?'

'I didn't use any line, as you call it,' replied Joanna huffily, remembering Steve's cynical reference to her tactics. 'I just went and told him what I wanted and he offered to take me to Alan Drummond's farm.'

Bill nodded as he finished lighting his pipe.

'Whether you like it referred to as a line or not, that was the right one to take, Jo,' he said seriously. 'It gave him the opportunity to make an honest refusal if he'd wanted to. But I'm not sure whether Marj and I can allow you to spend your savings in our interest. We'll have to buy Bonnie Lass from you.'

'Now don't go all proud on me, Bill. The horse is mine. I've always wanted to own one anyway, and Bonnie Lass will do as well as any other. While she's boarded here she can be ridden by anyone wanting

to ride, and if we have a successful summer you can think about buying her then.'

She went on to tell them about Steve's suggestion concerning the pony for Karen Carson and about his wish to enter Changeling in the Hunter class at the local horse show with herself riding.

'I said I'd do it only if you both agreed,' she finished.

'Why shouldn't we agree?' asked Marjorie, her brown eyes dancing with excitement.

'It means that Changeling would be stabled here, and although I suppose a certain amount of credit might reflect on Gilcroft because I would be riding him and I work here, he would be entered under Steve's name.'

'It's not so much whether we agree but whether you want to ride this horse for Millar,' put in Bill. 'You're uncertain, aren't you? That's why you told him you'd consult us first.'

'Yes,' admitted Joanna. 'I want to ride the horse, it's a challenging proposition, but I can't fathom why he's asked me when he could ride it so much better himself.'

'I can't fathom any of it. He helps you to find a horse today, then he asks you to ride one of his in a show,' said Marjorie. Her eyes narrowed and a mischievous gleam lit them as she studied Joanna's face. 'Unless— unless—oh, it's too fanciful for words!' She went off into peals of laughter.

'What's too fanciful?' demanded her exasperated husband. 'Marj, if you laugh like that you'll make the baby come.'

Sobered by this old wives' tale, Marjorie gulped and stopped laughing.

'It's too fanciful to believe that Steve has asked Jo to ride for him because he's fallen for her. No, I expect his reason is very practical if I know anything about him. He's seen Jo ride, he knows the horse has potential and he thinks she can show it to advantage. The class in which he wants her to show happens to have a trophy award, the Millar trophy, presented some years ago by Sir Henry in memory of his first wife. Maybe Steve doesn't want to compete for it himself. Entirely sensible. So why don't we fall in with his suggestion? If you and Changeling are successful it will bring us all credit. Do it, Jo. I've a feeling it's right for you.'

'Och, you'll be claiming you've second sight next,' mocked Bill with an affectionate grin. 'But I agree, if you want to ride the horse, Jo, you ride it. As for Mrs Carson boarding a pony here, we'll be glad to do that, although with extra horses it will mean all our stalls will be full. You know, the boarding of horses for owners isn't a bad idea. Maybe we should soon start thinking about building another stable.'

The rest of the evening passed in making more plans for the future. Next week the first group of youngsters would be arriving to stay for a week of riding. The bunks in which they would sleep were all ready and a good stock of food had been laid in. Wendy Hillen, who had now left school, had agreed to come and help with the teaching and the supervising of the children and Bill's younger sister, who was on holiday from college, had promised to give Marjorie help with the cooking.

When they realised how full the schedule was going to be for the next few weeks Marjorie and Bill were concerned about the amount of time Joanna would have to school Changeling and for coaching Karen for the show, should she get her pony.

'I can ride Changeling in the early morning, and Karen can have an extra lesson in the afternoon,' said Joanna calmly. A tight schedule

never worried her. The more work she had to do the happier she was as long as it was with horses.

Later, in the quietness of her small bedroom beneath the eaves of the old farmhouse, she leaned at the open dormer window and watched late June sunset. She could see straight down the road which went to Lanry, and the broad acres of the Lanry estate. Beyond the massed dark foliage of trees she could just see the darker shapes of the chimneys of Lanry House.

Tomorrow she would tell Steve that she could ride his horse in the local show. The mere thought of telling him, of going to see him in his office in the old coachhouse, made her quiver with apprehension. Why should she be afraid of meeting him again after having spent such a pleasant day with him at Drumlee? Why was she going hot and cold just thinking about what she would say to him?

The sun went at last, but light lingered in the sky, golden-green being inexorably eaten up by slate grey cloud spreading from the south. Gradually the golden glow faded to pearl grey which was soon swallowed by the encroaching jaws of darkness. Newly awakened bats flew by the window in swooping flight, and an owl which was hidden among the elms around the house hooted derisively.

But still Joanna leaned against the window frame, her eyes blind to the sights and her ears deaf to the sounds of the darkening countryside. For she was looking inwardly at herself and listening to the new and strange thoughts. No matter how she tried to divert them her thoughts kept reverting to Steve Millar. Everything about him had touched her sensitivity and she knew that there was' danger in this terrible quivering awareness of another person's moods and opinions, to say nothing of his physical appearance, particularly if that person happened to be a man who possessed not obvious blatant charm but an aloof, leave-me-alone manner which had its own attraction.

The best way to smother the awareness would be to stay away from all contact with him. Having made that decision she felt more at peace with herself and she drew the curtains and prepared for bed where she slept soundly and deeply until morning. As usual she was up early, and when she had done her stable chores and had eaten her breakfast she looked up the phone number of the Lanry estate office and was soon listening to the ringing tone at the other end of the line.

The voice which answered her call was gruff and had a thick Scottish accent and she recognised it as the voice of the little man whom Steve had called Johnnie. He informed her curtly that Mr Millar was away for the day, so she asked him to tell Steve that she would be willing to ride Changeling in the local horse show and he promised to pass on the message.

She did it all in a cool businesslike manner, and it was only when she replaced the receiver that disappointment hit her. She was disappointed because Steve had not answered the phone. After the decision she had made the previous night this was nothing less than a betrayal of herself. Impatient with her suddenly contrary emotions, she stalked out of the house into the farmyard, determined to work hard all day as an antidote to such foolish behaviour. As she closed the kitchen door behind her she was pleased to see Tom arrive in his red car.

'I bring you a reprieve,' he called out cheerfully. 'No Karen this morning. How about giving me a lesson instead?'

'Is she ill?'

'Not Karen. As you so wisely guessed, it needed Steve to handle the business of a pony for Karen. She and Jackie have gone with him this morning to see those ponies you and he looked at yesterday, and now, far from being her *bete noir*, he's her hero. They went in the station wagon and Jackie took a huge picnic hamper full of goodies plus a

bottle of wine. I tell you she's bent on making a day of it with Lord Muck, as Marjorie so kindly calls him. And who can blame her? She hasn't had much fun lately. But I have to hand it to that guy when it comes to mixing business with pleasure.'

The ugly little flicker which she had experienced the previous day when Tom had mentioned that Steve had opened up for Jackie occurred again. Surely it couldn't be jealousy? There was no earthly reason why she should be jealous of Jackie Carson. She brushed the thought aside impatiently.

'I'm afraid we still haven't a horse for you to ride, not until Bonnie Lass arrives,' she told Tom.

'Too bad. But that reminds me, Steve said to tell you that he'd arrange for the moving of Bonnie Lass and the pony today, and also I've to ask you if you've made up your mind about riding his horse in the show. Have you?'

'I've just rung up to tell him. I left a message with that little man called Johnnie.'

'Johnnie Leggat? Say, he's a character. He used to be a jockey, and he has a load of stories to tell. He should write a book. He was hurt badly when riding one of Sir Henry's horses in a race and was given a job in the stables by Steve, and has been the right-hand man there ever since. What are we going to do with this free hour of yours, Jo?'

'You can do what you like, but I'm going to work, to groom Rebel because Karen isn't here,' retorted Joanna, and marched off in the direction of the stables.

Tom hung around all day, getting himself invited to lunch and then to tea. In the evening he took Joanna for a drive along the coast as far north as Gourock where he had been invited to call at the yacht club to meet some new sailing friends he had made. When he took her

back to Gilcroft he stayed to gossip with the Cowans again, until a dry remark from a twinkling-eyed Marjorie that the next time he came he should bring his sleeping bag and a toothbrush made him grin ruefully and depart.

Next morning he was there again soon after breakfast, accompanied by Jackie and Karen. The girl was in a state of great excitement about the pony her mother had bought the previous day.

'She's the cutest thing,' she carolled. 'Her name's Cindy. I can hardly believe she's mine! \*

'When will she be coming to Gilcroft?' asked Bill.

'Today, with Bonnie Lass,' said Jackie. 'Jo, I just love your horse. We had a wonderful day with Steve. After we'd seen the ponies we went and picnicked on the moors and drove home a different way. Now I feel as if I've really seen something of the old Scotland that I've read about.'

Jackie looked happy and relaxed for the first time since Joanna had met her and again she had to douse the ugly flicker of jealousy.

'The other horse is coming today too. Very soon, in fact,' said Tom. 'Johnnie is bringing it. Says he wants to have a word with you. "I want to gie' the lassie a few wee hints about the divil,'" quoted Tom, making them all laugh with his wicked mimicry.

Feeling a contrary mixture of relief and disappointment that Steve wasn't bringing the gelding himself, Joanna took Karen off to the stables to tack up Rebel for the last lesson the girl would have on the pony. As if sensing that she was to be discarded in favour of another pony the rebellious animal behaved abominably, bucking furiously when Karen wanted her to change gait or just stubbornly refusing to move. In the end Joanna gave in and ordered the girl to dismount

while she gave the pony a tongue-lashing and smacked it. Then she led it back to its stable where Karen unsaddled it.

They had just finished putting away the tack when a horse-box, driven by Johnnie, trundled into the yard. The ex-jockey clambered down awkwardly from the cab and touched his cap to Joanna.

'Are ye the lassie who's goin' to ride this divil?' he asked. 'Haven't I seen ye somewhere before?'

'Yes. At Lanry House.'

'Aye, I thought so. The boss says I was to bring the horse over meself. He couldna' come. He says ye've to ride the divil this morning while I'm here to watch ye and I can gie' ye a few words of advice. And he wants me to come back every day this week to see ye jump it. Where he thinks I'm goin' to find the time, I canna tell, but I suppose I'd better do as he says. He's the boss and should know what he's doin' by now. Although I sometimes have me doubts, asking a wee bit lassie like yerself to ride this one.'

From his grudging critical attitude Joanna guessed that she was going to have a hard time convincing this expert that she could ride.

Changeling didn't like being taken out of the horse van because he had to come out backwards. However, a few choice words from Johnnie and a push on its chest and the horse came shuffling down the ramp to stand in front of the assembled people.

'What a funny-looking horse!' exclaimed Marjorie. 'Fancy Steve owning one like that!'

'Ay, he's not the most handsome of beasts, but ye should see the divil jump,' said Johnnie. 'Now if ye'll show me where he's to be stabled we'll take him over and saddle him and ye can take him round the paddock.'

'Do you think it's safe for Jo to ride him?' put in Tom rather anxiously. 'I mean, isn't he a bit wild?'

'Och, he's no wild, just a mite independent and a bit particular about people, ye might say. That's why I'm to stay, to see if he'll let the lassie near him. The boss says he will, and he should know. He's a bit particular about people himself.'

'And that's saying a heap,' muttered Tom in Joanna's ear.

When Changeling was saddled Johnnie stood by the horse's head while Joanna mounted, and as she adjusted the stirrup leathers he said quietly,

'A wee word of warnin', lassie. He might try to dislodge ye. He drops his shoulder and arches his back, so keep your eyes open.'

But the gelding behaved perfectly once Joanna was settled in the saddle, and he responded to every instruction promptly, trotting and cantering to order, then jumping over the few low hurdles which Bill had erected hastily, as if they were ant-hills.

'How well Steve named him,' remarked Marjorie when Joanna reined in beside the group leaning over the paddock rails. 'He changes completely when he starts to move. Who'd have thought he'd be so graceful and amenable?'

As if to give the lie to her words the gelding suddenly dropped one shoulder and arched its back, and Joanna, who had relaxed in the saddle, was jolted from its back to the ground, where she lay and blinked in surprise at the horse who nosed at her curiously.

'Oh, you little devil,' she laughed. 'How dare you!' And with one quick lithe movement she twisted to her feet and bounded back into the saddle.

'That's the way, lass. Show him ye're no afraid,' said Johnnie, a note of new respect in his gruff voice. 'Take him round once more and then we'll put him back in the stable.'

After the ride was over and she was alone in the stable with Johnnie she asked him, 'Will I do to ride Changeling?' and waited anxiously for his reply.

'Aye, ye'll do,' the man conceded. 'But I'm warnin' ye he has a few more tricks. I'll come again tomorrow. What's the best time?'

'I thought I'd ride him in the early morning.'

'That's fine. I'll be here at seven.'

'Did you train him?'

'Och, no. Me ridin' days are over because of me bad leg. The boss trained him himself, in his spare time, ye might say.'

'Why doesn't he hunt him, or ride him in the show?'

'He hasna' hunted nor ridden in a show for years. Says he's no interest any more. Too interested in makin' money, if ye ask me. He tells me ye're Charlie Frost's daughter.'

'Yes. Did you know him?'

'No. I always rode National Hunt meself. But I've heard of him. He was a great jockey. I'll see ye tomorrow mornin' then, lass. And if ye've any problems with this divil here between now and then, just gie' me a tinkle on the phone.'

There was no need for Joanna to give Johnnie a tinkle, as he had called it, because Changeling settled down in the stable surprisingly well. Altogether it was a busy day because there were the other two

horses to settle in as well, and Joanna was glad when she was at last able to relax in a hot bath before going to bed.

Next day she was up at six to join Bill and Archie in the stable. Firstly they fed the horses, then they cleaned out the stalls, removing all the wet soiled straw and manure and sweeping the floor with a stiff brush dipped in disinfectant before spreading clean straw on it.

Once the mucking out was done Joanna groomed Changeling, talking to him all the time as she removed the rugs from his back and started on the offside of his quarters and working the way his coat lay. Changeling obviously loved being groomed, because every now and then he would turn to glance at her, his eyes half-closed with drowsy contentment. Having used the dandy brush, and water brushes on his head, neck and shoulders, legs and midriff, she then sponged out his eyes and nostrils. Tying him up on a fairly tight chain, she used the flat body brush and curry comb and went over the coat again thoroughly, scraping off the scurf collected from the coat with the brush on to the comb. When she had finished the gelding's brown body was glossy, but she went over it once again with a rubbing cloth to put a finishing sheen on his coat.

Then she stood back to admire him.

'Not even your owner could do any better than that for you, Changeling,' she murmured, and the horse nodded twice as if he agreed. Finally she inspected his feet to make sure they were clean, teasing any dirt out with a hoof pick and polishing the hoof with oil. After loosening the chain she went to look at Bonnie Lass and to do exactly the same for her.

The grooming over Joanna glanced at her watch. It was almost seven o'clock. There was just time for her to change before Johnnie arrived. She dashed into the house and emerged ten minutes later spruce and clean in fawn breeches, shiny black boots, white shirt, tweed hacking

jacket and black velvet riding hat. When Johnnie arrived and looked her over critically she felt glad that she had made the effort to wear the correct clothing because she could see he approved of her businesslike appearance.

By the end of the week she had learned not only about Changeling but also about Johnnie, who turned out to be an inveterate talker. She was soon agreeing with Tom that the little man should have written a book about his experiences as a steeplechase jockey.

She also learned more about his boss. That he was attached to Steve there was no doubt, but his attachment did not make him any less critical about the younger man's behaviour and way of life.

One day after Changeling had performed exceptionally well Johnnie admitted in his usual grudging fashion that it was possible that with Joanna on its back the horse might win the Millar Trophy.

'Aye, and it's near enough to eleven years since that fine piece of silver sat in its place in the library at Lanry House,' he observed. 'That was the last, time the boss rode successfully in the Lanry Show. He took part once or twice afterwards, ye ken, but he didna' have the time to practise, so he dropped out of the show jumping, which was a pity, because he was well on his way to achieving the ambition he'd had since he was a boy.'

'What was that?' asked Joanna.

'To follow in his mother's footsteps and represent his country in international show jumping.'

'But why did he give up?'

'In a way ye can blame Sir Henry for that. He was ill—thrombosis—and it made him very touchy. He insisted that Steve stay, at home and take over the running of the Lanry estate since he'd

be inheritin' it one day. After a bit of a shindy, because ye'll guess no one makes Steve Millar alter course willingly, the boss gave in. He buckled to and began to learn the business which had been keepin' him in comfort all his year, ye might say. But it meant givin' up his ambition. He was at Sir Henry's beck and call and if he dared to cross the old man the thrombosis took a turn for the worse, so he learned to keep quiet. Aye, it was a difficult time, and he didna' have a chance to attend the right horse shows to qualify for international competition.'

'Couldn't he have tried again when Sir Henry's health improved?'

'Well now, by then he'd changed his ideas. He'd become interested in breedin' for racin'. He worked hard at it and he began to be lucky with the horses. There's nothin' like a winnin' streak to hook a man for ever when it comes to horse-racin', whether he's an owner, a trainer, a jockey or the man-in-the street havin' a bet. But after all the hard work he'd put in to the estate as well, it came as a sore blow to him when Sir Henry marri&l again, especially when he'd fancied the lass for himself. For all that he should never have continued to associate with her after the marriage.'

'Did he fancy her?'

'Och» aye.. And when Sir Henry was laid low after another heart attack they were as thick as thieves, the pair of them. Then when the old man got wind of what was goin' on and objected, the boss blew up. I reckon he should have held his tongue and bided his time instead of behavin' the way he did. That was no way to treat Henry Millar, as I could have told him. Ye had to walk canny with Henry.'

'Why was that?' asked Joanna, who was beginning to picture Sir Henry as a tyrant who had used his own ill- health to thwart his son's ambitions.

'If he'd thought you'd done somethin' against his interests he'd say nothin', just wait until he could get his own back on ye. Ye can imagine the blow to his pride when his young wife seemed to prefer his son's company to his. Make no mistake about it, lass, they're a proud lot, the Millars.'

'So you think that he got his own back by leaving all the money to his wife and none to his son?'

'Maybe, maybe. She's a canny one and maybe was more than a match for Henry. Aye, there was more to that little arrangement than meets the eye, I'm thinkin'. Anyway, it won't be long before the boss marries her and she'll be back at Lanry House rulin' the roost.'

'And will that be a good thing?'

'For him or for her?' asked Johnnie, giving her a shrewd glance.

'For both of them, of course,' answered Joanna hurriedly. She didn't want him to think she was only interested in Steve.

'Well, now, it'll bring the money back into the family, ye might say.'

'But what about their feelings? Don't they matter?'

'Och, ye're a sensitive lass, and that's why ye're good with the horses. Now, yon Lady Millar hasna any feelin's except for herself. And the boss has learned to put feelin' aside. He's past hurtin' now, so they should do very well together.'

Past hurting. Without heart, had been her own original estimation of Steve. But perhaps Johnnie's description was more correct. Hurt by his father's marriage to Consuelo who, as Johnnie had put it, 'he'd fancied for himself', Steve had learned that there was no point in getting upset and hurt, in the same way that she had learned that

loving a person too much, as she had loved her father, meant getting hurt. His experience would account for his attitude to life now.

As for Consuelo, who according *to* Johnnie was concerned only about herself, the latest news of her was that she was constantly at Lanry House visiting Steve, calling on Jackie, playing tennis with Foster Hilroy, arranging social evenings for the Americans, and generally behaving as if she was still mistress of the house.

Although Joanna did her best to dismiss Steve from her mind again after the talk with Johnnie, telling herself that his future with Consuelo was no concern of hers, she was bothered by a strangely intense feeling of regret which would attack her after riding Changeling. Then she found herself wishing wholeheartedly that the horse's owner was present to see his horse perform: ing so well. She managed to convince herself that this . feeling was purely on behalf of the horse, and so escaped attributing it to any change in her own attitude to Steve. Yet she kept hoping that one morning he would come to lean over the paddock rails and watch the horse jumping.

But he did not come. Presumably he was satisfied with Johnnie's reports on Changeling's progress, because the day of the show arrived without him having been once to Gilcroft and without him having contacted Joanna at all, which was really the way she wanted it, she told herself—although he might have shown more interest in the horse.

'Anyone else but you would have taken umbrage and told him what he could do with his horse,' grumbled Marjorie on the morning of the show as they unloaded the horses at Lanry fairground. Already the day was warm, and Joanna was glad to see that the open stalls assigned to Gilcroft were situated under the shade of a group of trees in a corner of the field.

When she did not answer Marjorie, her friend continued to grumble about Steve.

'It wouldn't have hurt him to have come yesterday to make sure all was in order. He needn't have been afraid I'd have taken advantage of our distant relationship,' she said huffily.

'Oh, what does it matter?' said Joanna. 'I don't mind him not coming. Johnnie has been nearly every day to check on the horse and me. I don't suppose Steve has the time to come.'

'Too busy looking after his interests, making sure someone else doesn't marry Consuelo, I expect. From all accounts she's very friendly with Tom's father. Perhaps she prefers men who are older than herself.'

'It isn't really any of our business, is it?' said Joanna quietly but pointedly.

Marjorie grinned and patted Joanna's arm affectionately.

'All right, I'll say no more. But I can't help being anxious about you.'

'Why ? I'm fine. There's nothing for you to be anxious about.'

'I think otherwise. Here you are riding a horse for a man you hardly know, and whom you dislike. He hasn't shown any interest in the horse or the show since he asked you to ride for him, and yet you can't bear to hear anyone criticise him. That makes me anxious, Jo.'

She gave Joanna's arm another friendly pat and walked away to speak to Bill.

Joanna sighed. Marjorie had just expressed her own thoughts on the matter. Why was she riding a horse for a man who seemed to have lost all interest in it? Why was she so quick to defend Steve? She

hesitated to delve too deeply for the answer to her questions, but she was disturbed because Marjorie had noticed and was questioning too.

A shout from Bill roused her and she went over to help him back Bonnie Lass out of the horse-van, and after that she was too caught up in the excitement and bustle of preparing for the show to have any time for introspection.

Lanry fairground was situated on the outskirts of the little town and for this day was given over entirely to the horse-riding community of the district for the Summer Horse Schooling Show. The big field was bordered on one side by a narrow river edged with willows and alders. A long line of Lombardy poplars whose dainty leaves shimmered in the breeze marked another boundary and a third was bordered by a hawthorn hedge which was overgrown by wild roses and brambles. The field was separated from the road by a white fence.

In the centre of the field was the show ring also bordered by white fences and to one side of it was the collecting ring where competitors would wait their turns to show. Outside the white fences there were small wooden stands on which spectators could sit, and in the midst of them was a wooden platform on which an engineer was rigging up a sound system over which the events could be announced.

As nine o'clock approached the stalls near the clump of trees began to fill with horses as more horse-vans arrived from various stables and farms. Near the row of poplars a line of cars appeared parked there by spectators and competitors. The place seemed to be overrun by girls of all ages and sizes dressed in fawn breeches, white shirts or stocks, and black or tweed hacking jackets. There were a number of boys dressed similarly, but they were outnumbered by the girls by about four to one. Joanna was pleased to see that there were some older riders among the crowd and she began to look forward to competing against them.

Karen arrived in a good humour, accompanied by Tom, who said that Jackie would come later with his father in time to see Karen show in her first class, which would be Junior Equitation. Joanna thought that Cindy might get a place in the event, but knew that the competition was keen because there were several entries from the more established riding schools.

When the time came for Karen and Cindy to enter the ring, however, both girl and pony looked confident. Karen's blonde hair was tucked neatly under her black cap, her back was straight and her chin was up. Cindy's coat shone glossily and she moved gracefully and obediently in response to Karen's instructions.

There were sixteen competitors and they had to show at a walk, a trot and a canter, both ways of the ring. After circling the ring twice, half of them were called into the middle of the ring to stand while the other half circled the ring again. Then the judge called the numbers of two who were going round and asked them to join the group in the middle. The rest were asked very politely to leave the ring and knew that they had not qualified. The remainder paraded round the ring once more, walking and trotting, and gradually the number was reduced to five. To Joanna's delight Karen and Cindy were among the five, and were eventually chosen as second and received a blue rosette which was pinned by the judge on Cindy's bridle.

'Good for you, Jo,' said Tom, as he walked with her to meet the triumphant girl.

'Nothing to do with me. Cindy is a good pony and Karen's a natural rider.'

'Maybe, but without your encouragement she'd never have done it. What's next for Gilcroft?'

'Open Pair. Wendy is riding Crackerjack and I'm riding Bonnie Lass. We'll be judged as a pair with fifty per cent of points for suitability and similarity and the other fifty per cent for performance. We don't stand much of a chance, but it will be fun and good experience for Wendy as well as for the horses. After that Karen is in one of the gymkhana events.'

As she had foretold, she and Wendy had no success in the Open Pair because there were other pairs much more alike in appearance than Crackerjack and Bonnie Lass. After that there were several gymkhana events including a sack race and an obstacle race, but the one which was of most interest to the Gilcroft crowd was the game of musical hats for riders of fourteen years and under, in which Karen was taking part. All the hats of the contestants were placed in the centre of the ring except one. Then music was provided by a pipe and the riders rode round the ring. When the pipes stopped the participants hurled themselves off their horses and dragging the animals after them made for the nearest hat. The rider who did not get a hat had to withdraw.

Karen threw herself heart and soul into this game and was only beaten by one of the two boys who were taking part in it.

'You'd have won if you hadn't been so complacent,' criticised Tom as the girl rode into the stalls and dismounted from her pony. 'You didn't look where the last hat was lying. He did. He kept close to it and when the music stopped he was practically on top of it. But you had to run from the other side of the ring.'

She made a face at him and retorted pugnaciously,

'I'd like to see you do better!'

'Never mind, Karen, you did very well to get another second,' said Joanna placatingly, not wanting her pupil upset. 'It's time for lunch

now, and then you must get ready for the Junior Working Pony class. I believe your grandfather and your mother are here now and are waiting for you by the refreshment tent, so you'd better go and join them.'

Karen needed no second bidding and went off obediently. Tom glanced quizzically at Joanna.

'She does as you tell her every time. How do you manage it?'

'I don't antagonise her.'

'Coming for lunch?'

'No, thanks. I'm staying here with the horses. I've some sandwiches.'

'Oh, come on, Jo, surely you can take some time off and relax,' he wheedled.

'I am relaxed.'

'Don't I know it,' he replied rather sharply. 'I wonder if I'll ever see you worked up and tense about something. Jackie asked me to invite you to join us for lunch. Pop's here, and Consuelo and a few other friends.'

'I appreciate the invitation, but I should really stay here in case one of our competitors needs help. I'll see you after the show, Tom.'

'O.K.,' he said resignedly. 'How long do we have to wait to see you perform on Changeling?'

'The next to last class, Working Hunter, which is all jumping. I'll be riding Bonnie Lass in the class before that, which is Pleasure Hack. Wendy and Crackerjack will be in that too.'

'Then I'll come and see you between classes to boost your morale.' He went off and Joanna went to eat her sandwiches with Bill and Marjorie sitting on the grass under the shade of the trees where some horses were tethered. The shade was welcome because as Joanna had expected the day had grown quite warm.

After lunch Karen returned to the stall and mounting Cindy took the pony for practice jumps over a hurdle which had been set up to one side of the collecting ring so that the little pony would be warmed up and ready to go when the time came for it to enter the show ring. The class was to be judged on performance, manners, suitability and hunting soundness and the competitors were expected to clear a few jumps not exceeding two feet in height. Cindy behaved beautifully and was the only pony to clear the jumps without refusal, and so received the coveted red rosette.

From then on it was difficult to control the fever of excitement in the Gilcroft stalls. Jackie came round with her father, a tall handsome man with greying hair and twinkling blue eyes, and was closely followed by Consuelo, attractively dressed in a flowered summer dress with a low neckline, big puffed sleeves and a wide-brimmed sun hat to match. She smiled graciously if distantly at Joanna and said how much she was enjoying the show. Then she gave her full attention to Foster Hilroy.

With all the extra people gathered round the stalls and all the conversation Joanna and Wendy found it difficult to get mounted for the Pleasure Hack class, and they were late entering the collecting ring. But as Joanna had hoped, Bonnie Lass behaved impeccably, showing that she was the ideal horse for pleasure riding, and so won another red rosette for Gilcroft Riding School.

Then came the Green Working Pony Hunter class in which Karen and Cindy won third place, followed by the Working Hunter Hack class in which Bonnie Lass and Joanna achieved a fourth place. When that

class was over Joanna did not have much time to return to the stalls, take the saddle off Bonnie Lass and put it on Changeling. She knew that the contingent from Gilcroft were too busy talking over the successes to hurry back to help her, so she was pleasantly surprised to see Johnnie waiting beside Changeling.

'Ye're doin' well, lass,' he complimented her as he deftly removed the saddle from one horse and heaved it on to the other.

'And look as cool as a cucumber,' observed Tom, arriving at that moment as he had promised. He gave her a hand up into the saddle. She inspected the stirrup leathers and then settled her feet in the stirrups. For the first time that day she felt nervous. It had been easy to keep cool watching Karen and Wendy perform because she had not expected too much from either of them. It had been easy to keep cool when riding Bonnie Lass because she had been confident the horse would do its best and would achieve some success.

But this was Steve's horse and she wanted desperately to win, so she was nervous. She pulled her hat on more securely, brushed minute flecks of straw from her jacket and fiddled with her number card.

'I take back what I said,' murmured Tom. 'You *are* nervous.' She nodded reluctantly and his eyes narrowed speculatively. 'I wonder why?' he asked.

Aware that his gaze was far too shrewd and penetrating, she glanced around. They had left the stalls and were approaching the collecting ring. Now that the show was in full swing there were crowds of people lining the rails enjoying the Sunday afternoon sunshine. Johnnie had disappeared. There was no one familiar in sight. No sign of a man with reddish brown hair, an aristocratic nose and straight proud shoulders.

'He's not here.' Tom's usually drawling voice was sharp again, almost vicious, and it brought her gaze back to him. The expression in his eyes was strange.

'Who isn't?' she asked, trying to be casual.

'Steve Millar. So you can stop looking. You'd have thought the guy would have come to see his own horse compete, wouldn't you? But I guess he doesn't care enough one way or the other if it wins or loses. There isn't any big money in this sort of show. Makes you wonder why he bothered to enter it, doesn't it?'

She said nothing, although she wondered vaguely why Tom was being so sarcastic about Steve. She told herself it didn't really matter if Steve wasn't there. She didn't want to see him particularly. Yet at the back of her mind disappointment on Changeling's behalf niggled persistently.

She patted the gelding's neck and said,

'Shall we go, boy?' and turning to look at Tom she smiled and said, 'I'll see you later.'

As she rode at a gentle lope towards the practice hurdle she strove to empty her mind. It was no use allowing Tom's strange behaviour to upset her now. She would think about it later. Now she must be cool and think only of the test to come. She put Changeling over the practice jump a few times, then went to the collecting ring to survey the course and to watch the other competitors who were jumping before her.

The whole idea of the event was to show rider and horse working together, keeping an even pace between each jump and clearing the jumps without knocking any part of them down. The first competitor entered the collecting ring and approached the first jump, which was a brush, representing a field hedge. From there the course went

straight to a post and rails, then turned in a wide curve to approach the parallel bars. Then it struck in a diagonal line to a gate. From the gate the horse and rider had to turn back sharply to jump a bank of hay bales topped by a rail and then make another wider curve to jump in quick succession over a chicken coop, which was really a triangular box, and the triple bars.

The first competitor knocked one of the triple bars down and the usual sharp crescendoing 'Oh!' went up from the crowd, which was drawn out into a groan as the disturbed horse knocked a brick out of the wall which was the last jump.

As the desultory clapping of the spectators showed their respect but not their enthusiasm for the first horse and rider Joanna decided that the only jump which might give Changeling trouble was the bank and rail because he hadn't seen it before, and turning him away from the rails she trotted him round the collecting ring with some of the other contestants to give him some preliminary exercise.

At last her turn came and she rode into the ring, vaguely conscious of the announcer's voice giving the name of the horse and its owner and her own name being drowned in the buzz of conversation which the announcement of Steve's name caused.

Then Changeling was moving forward with that lovely fluid action. The brush jump loomed, Joanna pressed with her knees. Changeling's front legs came up and he went forward, and hand low on his neck she moved forward with him and together they cleared it and went at a steady pace towards the next jump. Over they went, turning immediately but without haste into the shallow curve, clearing the parallel bars without mishap, taking the gate easily, turning sharply and keeping going, still with that steady pace towards the unknown quantity, the bale and rails. She noticed the gelding's ears prick forward as it sensed the strangeness of the jump and whispered

encouragingly, 'Keep going, 'boy. Don't stop now. We can do it!' And they did.

With a stupendous feeling of relief Joanna turned the horse to the two jumps which were close together, and Changeling, well schooled to take such jumps, never once altering his steady pace, took them easily, the first competitor to do so without mishap so that the crowd clapped encouragingly becoming silent for the last and most difficult jump, the wall.

The applause as the gelding cleared the wall without knocking it was loud and there were a few cheers which Joanna guessed were from her friends. Pleased with the horse, she patted his neck as they left the show ring and went to wait until the remaining competitors had been round the course.

When all was over the choice for first place lay between Changeling and a lovely bay horse which had also achieved a: clear round. The bay's rider was also feminine, an older woman who was the owner of a very superior riding school and who had won the trophy the previous year.

For a short time the atmosphere was tense in the collecting ring as they waited for the judge's decision. At last the ringmaster went up to the announcer and whispered to him, then handed him a piece of paper. The announcer read out the result. The Millar Trophy had been won by Changeling, owned by Mr Steven Millar and ridden by Miss Joanna Frost of Gilcroft Riding School. To the accompaniment of noisy applause and loud shouts from Karen and Tom, Joanna rode into the ring and received the beautiful silver trophy from the hands of the gracious Lady Millar herself.

Happy because Changeling had won Joanna smilingly received the congratulations of her fellow-competitors in the collecting ring and of her friends from Gilcroft who crowded round to admire the cup. Then

the next event was announced and she was able to break away and make for the Gilcroft stalls, passing Wendy who was on her way on Crackerjack to take part in the Working Hunter Hack class.

Sunlight filtered through the fluttering leaves. Horses tethered to some of the trees munched quietly at the grass. Here behind the stalls it was quiet, the noise of the crowd around the show ring was cut off. Holding the silver cup in the crook of her arm, Joanna allowed Changeling to wander slowly in order to cool off after his great effort. She was happy, filled with a sense of achievement. At that moment she wanted nothing else than to savour success here quietly, alone with Changeling.

Then quite suddenly the balloon of her happiness burst, pricked by sharp disappointment as she remembered that Steve had not been there to watch his horse jump to victory. If only he had been among the crowd which had applauded, the day would have been perfect.

The disappointment was like a flood sweeping over her and she let the gelding go where it wished while she wallowed out of her depth and struggled to keep the tears at bay. When she looked up at last she discovered that the horse was making his way to the Gil-croft stalls, which were farthest from the show ring. A shrill whistle from the direction of the stalls made the horse prick up his ears and start to canter towards them. Grabbing the reins, Joanna felt her heart lift crazily. Only one person would whistle to Changeling like that, and now she could see the person standing near the stalls. Steve had come after all.

She rode straight up to him. He caught Changeling's bridle, patted the horse's neck and murmured something to him. Her day was perfect.

'We won, we won! Look!' she cried.

Happiness broke through her habitual reserve as she held out the cup to him. He took it from her.

'I know,' he said. 'I saw you.'

He had been there all the time watching, and Tom had been wrong!

'Oh, I'm so glad. Aren't you glad Changeling won?'

'Yes.' The monosyllable was quietly spoken and he didn't smile but watched her with wary eyes. She was puzzled by his lack of emotion when her own spirits were rocketing sky-high and when it was all she could do to prevent herself from flinging her arms round his neck and kissing him to show how happy she felt.

'You don't seem very glad,' she blurted, the sparkle fading from her face.

His faint smile was enigmatic.

'What do I have to do to prove to you that I'm glad, very glad?' he asked.

He didn't wait for an answer. Instead he dropped the beautiful trophy in the straw at her feet, put his hands on her waist, bent his head and kissed her.

It was the first time Joanna had ever been kissed by a man who wasn't a relative, and the fact that it was this man who was kissing her made her react in a most peculiar manner, so that when he raised his head a few seconds later her cheeks were flaming, her eyes were misty and her mouth was tremulous. He stared hard at her and then frowned.

'Don't tell me you've never been kissed before?' he jibed softly, and Joanna shook her head dumbly, feeling hopelessly inadequate and inexperienced.

'Then here's your chance to make up for lost time,' he said lightly, teasingly, and kissed her again with a deliberation which broke through her defensive innocence and awoke the woman within her. She raised her hands to his shoulders and giving in to impulse held him closely and responded to his kiss.

Slowly, like sleepers waking from a pleasant dream, they both became aware of sounds around them; the blowing of horses in the stalls, the excited chatter of girls hidden from them, the drowsy genteel clapping from the show ring, and they drew apart.

Steve spoke first, lightly, almost flippantly, as if determined to keep the whole incident lighthearted, as if he suspected Joanna was disturbed.

'You won't be taking what has happened too seriously, I hope.'

Dazedly she noticed the firm set of his mouth, the slight flicker of anxiety in his cool grey eyes, and realised that while she had allowed her emotions to slip out of control he was still completely master of himself. Her happiness collapsed once more and she felt dreary and desolate, and out of her desolation grew a need to protect herself against him. With a great effort she forced herself to speak lightly too. 'No. Why should I? I know you can't be serious about kissing me, because you're going to marry Consuelo for the money, aren't you?'

She hadn't meant to say the last bit, but it slipped out unwittingly. Anger leaped like lightning in his eyes. But the storm was short-lived. No thunder followed and his attitude was still cool, although this time definitely unpleasant as he observed,

'I'd forgotten that the local grapevine owes its origins to Marjorie and her mother. By now you must know all about me and my present intentions.' He shrugged carelessly and added. 'That's fine, because it means I don't have to do any explaining.'

He bent to pick up the silver cup and Joanna, feeling choked and miserable, turned to Changeling and slipping the bridle off placed a halter over the horse's head, then led him into its stall and tethered him in preparation for unsaddling.

'Ste-ven!' Consuelo's voice with its fascinating break floated over the grass as she came towards them. 'I didn't know you were here. No one did. Why didn't you come into the show ring when I was presenting the cup? Think what a family affair it would have been if you had!'

She was lovely and graceful in her flowered dress and wide-brimmed hat and her face glowed with pleasure as she looked at Steve. Behind her came Tom.

'That was what I wanted to avoid,' said Steve dryly, 'so I came late.'

Consuelo, who wasn't to be put off easily, linked her arm through his.

'You will have to learn to be more sociable, Steve. You should have come to join us. We were all sitting together, Foster'—her voice lingered emphatically on the name—'the rest of his family and me. We had an excellent view of everything and I was so thrilled when the organisers asked me to present the Millar Trophy. I felt as if I'd really been welcomed home. Little Karen has done very well.'

'Joanna did well too,' put in Tom pointedly.

Joanna was struggling with the girth of the saddle and was having great difficulty with the buckle because her fingers were all thumbs. But the struggle gave her a good excuse to keep her back turned to the others.

'Yes, I know she did,' said Consuelo airily. 'She could do nothing else but win the trophy on a horse belonging to Lanry Stables. If I'd known you were here in the stalls, Steve, I'd have brought Sam Craik to see

you and the horse. He wants to buy it. He thinks it has great potential as a steeplechaser.

'So do I,' replied Steve, no longer disinterested. 'Is he still here?'

'Yes. Why not sell Changeling to him?' purred Consuelo persuasively. Joanna stopped fiddling with the buckle to suck her thumb which she had scratched on the buckle and which had started to bleed.

'I'd like to know what price Sam is offering,' Steve was saying. 'Let's go and find him and take him back to my office so that we can discuss the sale over a drink in a civilised way,'

Consuelo chuckled knowingly, triumphantly.

'I thought you'd be interested. Please excuse us, Tom, Joanna—I'm sure you two would prefer to be alone. When Steve thinks there's a possibility of selling one of his horses there's no holding him,' she said.

Joanna heard them move away and she leaned her head against Changeling. Now she could be miserable on her own without having to hide the fact. Changeling whom she had learned to love during the past two weeks, was for sale and might be sold that afternoon. That had been Steve Millar's only reason for showing the horse, and she had been a fool not to realise it. She knew from her own experience that almost every horse appearing in a show was for sale if anyone cared to offer for it. Hadn't Marjorie said that Steve's reason for asking her to ride his horse would be wholly practical? Why then had she allowed herself to run blindly? In doing so she had betrayed herself.

'Hey, there! I thought you'd be doing a Highland fling by way of celebration.'

Tom spoke from the other side of the horse, startling her because she had forgotten about him. She looked up to find him peering over the horse's back. The expression in his eyes was one of concern. Swallowing hard and hoping there were no tell-tale signs of dried tears under her eyes, she said as calmly as she could,

'I'm not a Highlander, so that wouldn't be appropriate.'

She gave one last tug at the girth strap and it came free of the buckle. She pulled the saddle off Changeling's back and handed it to Tom who had come round to stand beside her. He took it and frowned irritably.

'O.K., so you're a real tough English girl with a stiff upper lip,' he scoffed. 'But I know differently now, I know you have emotions tucked away deep down and that you're not always as **Cool** as a cucumber. Did Consuelo and I interrupt something?'

She gave herself away by turning sharply to look at him. What had he seen?

'Ah, we did,' he said triumphantly. 'Was it a quarrel, or an embrace, perhaps?'

'Why do you want to know?' she countered foolishly. If he could guess so accurately was it possible that Consuelo could also draw conclusions from finding Steve alone with her at the stalls?

'Because I'm as jealous as hell of that guy, that's why,' Tom returned waspishly. 'Where do you want this saddle dumping?'

'In the Land-Rover. We may as well start packing up now. The show is nearly over.'

•

He walked away, and Joanna blinked bemusedly. Tom jealous of Steve! It was fantastic, as foolish as herself being jealous of Jackie.

'I guess it's the thought of Changeling being sold that's really upsetting you,' Tom said, returning to the stall.

'Yes, it is,' she answered eagerly. That happened to be true and would divert his busy inquisitive mind from any other notions he might have about the cause of her misery.

Just then the rest of the Gilcroft crowd returned to the stalls, noisily pleased because Wendy had won another rosette for the stable by getting a fourth in the last class. In the midst of all the talking and laughing Tom, who by now was as high-spirited as anyone, issued an invitation to a party that evening at Lanry House;

'I haven't told her yet, but my sister's giving a party to celebrate Karen's success on Cindy. You're all invited.'

'Me too?' asked Wendy shyly. She could hardly believe that she had been invited to anything by this tall golden-haired American whom she admired so much.

'Sure, you as well,' he answered with a grin. 'Haven't you got something to celebrate too? We'll have a cook-out on the lawn, American style, so bring your appetites, all of you.'

He bent close to Joanna and murmured in her ear, 'And if you're still looking miserable when I see you at the party I'm going to tell a certain guy what I think of him!'

## CHAPTER FOUR

TOM'S threat was still ringing in Joanna's ears when she and the Cowans arrived at Lanry House for the cook-out, and once on the lawn she looked round apprehensively, searching for Steve. But although it seemed as if Tom had invited everyone who had been at the horse show to the party there was no sign of Steve or of Consuelo.

She had to admit that the threat had worked in her case because she made a great effort to cheer up. Dressing in more feminine clothes and using a little make-up at Marjorie's insistence had helped, and now that she was there and had been greeted with warmth by Tom and Jackie she felt relaxed and ready to enjoy herself.

It was certainly a perfect evening for a party on the lawn. The air was still warm and the sun was shining benignly on the flat aquamarine sea beyond the grey wall which separated the garden from the beach. On the terrace in front of the french windows which opened from a big room on the ground floor Jackie and Tom were gaily supervising the cooking of steaks and pieces of ham on two barbecues, and there were several tables set with bowls of salad, fresh bread rolls and pickles. The idea was to help yourself and then to take your plate and sit on the lawn or on the wall of the terrace, or just stand. There was a choice of soft drinks or beer, the serving of which was being undertaken by Karen and her jovial grandfather.

It did not take long for the guests to get into the swing of things under the guidance of their gay hosts and hostesses, and soon everyone was eating and talking. Joanna was approached by several people she had not met before who either lived locally or had holiday cottages in Seakirk and who were interested in the riding stables because they had children who wanted to learn riding. She noticed that Marjorie and Bill came in for their share of sudden popularity too, and felt pleased for them.

The day's successes had given Gilcroft the publicity it needed and from now on, provided of course that the Cowans could offer decent horses for their clients, there was no reason why the riding school should not succeed. Joanna knew from past experience that people liked to think that the riding teacher instructing their children had been successful in the show ring, and today both she and Wendy had proved they knew what they were doing when it came to riding.

A sharp thought occurred almost like a prick of conscience. None of the day's successes would have been possible without Steve Millar. It was he who had recommended the stables to Jackie for Karen. It was he who had taken herself to Alan Drummond's farm to buy Bonnie Lass. It was he who had asked her to ride Changeling for him. Without any of those actions on his part, Gilcroft showing at Lanry Summer Horse Show would have been very poor indeed. But why had he helped so much? True, he wanted to sell Changeling, but there was no profit for him in Karen's success or in Bonnie Lass's. Had it all been to prove to her that he wasn't unkind and unpleasant all the time, as he had told her?

'Och, ye went like the wind this afternoon, so ye did, lass.' She turned to find Johnnie at her elbow, a beer mug in his hand. 'I wasna' able to congratulate ye at the time. I was talking to one of the boss's friends, Sam Craik. He's managing director of Craik's breweries. This is some of his ale I'm drinkin' now.' He held up his -glass of amber liquid. Then lowering his voice he added, 'This is a strange way to be holdin' a party, to my way of thinkin'. Now in Sir Henry's day when we had a big win we used to have champagne cocktails and the best smoked Scotch salmon, ye ken.'

'For everyone? Even the stable hands?' asked Joanna. 'You have to admit that no one has been left out of this party. It's truly democratic.'

'Aye, just so, just so. That's how it should be. Sir Henry didn't leave anyone out either. Of course there was always those who preferred beer to champagne, but not many.'

'Lady Millar said at the show that Mr Craik wants to buy Changeling,' said Joanna.

'Aye, he kens a good horse when he sees one. He's always had an ambition to own a Grand National winner, one that's Scottish bred and Scottish trained, and he's thinkin' Changeling might be the horse.'

'Do you think so too?' Joanna couldn't help the quaver in her voice at the thought of the gelding being sold for racing purposes.

'Maybe, maybe. I'm not committin' meself. That horse has definite likes and dislikes, and it's just possible he might not like Sam or his trainer.'

Joanna didn't laugh at Johnnie's theory. She knew that Changeling was a sensitive horse and that he would not realise his potentialities as a steeplechaser unless he had the right training and the right jockey.

'Och, here's the beauty queen herself, now,' Johnnie said mockingly, and Joanna turned to see Consuelo standing at one of the french windows.

Beautifully dressed in a slim sheath of a dress, her black hair swept up and back and tied at the neck, she stood in an elegant pose, one hand resting on the frame of the window as she surveyed the crowd of guests. The faintest of frowns pulled her slanting dark eyebrows together and her full red mouth had a slightly sulky droop as if she had been thwarted in some plan. Frown and droop vanished quickly, however, when Foster Hilroy left his job of serving drinks and made his way over to her, welcoming her with an expansive gesture of his arm which somehow managed to find its way across her shoulders as

he led her to the barbecue, found her a plate and helped her to select food.

'I canna' think why she's makin' up to yon American,' muttered Johnnie, 'unless it's to keep the boss on his toes.'

'I'm afraid I couldn't drag Steve and Sam away from the whisky,' Consuelo was explaining to Jackie in a carrying voice. 'I apologise for them I think they'd talk horses and drink whisky all night.'

'They'll come later perhaps,' said Jackie hopefully.

Consuelo, who had been saying something in an undertone to Foster which must have been amusing because he put back his handsome head and laughed heartily, shrugged one shoulder. 'I don't know,' Jackie. You should know by now that Steve pleases himself and no one else.'

She walked away with Foster, and Joanna, finding that Johnnie had gone from her side, went over to join Tom and Jackie who were talking to the Cowans. As she approached Tom greeted her with the same gesture his father had used to welcome Consuelo, putting his arm round her shoulders. Joanna willed herself not to stiffen as she reacted to the proprietorial gesture.

'How do you like this way of entertaining?' he asked her. 'Having fun?'

'Having too much to eat,' she sighed, and raised a laugh from the others.

'So am I,' put in Marjorie, who was sitting on a long lounging chair in order to rest her legs. 'I must have put on pounds already, which at this late date isn't good for me.'

'When is your baby due?' asked Jackie.

'End of August, thank goodness.'

'And how soon will you be riding after that?'

'The sooner the better. You've no idea how envious I was today of Joanna and Wendy.'

'You'll ride again only when the doctor says you're fit,' said Bill firmly.

'Have you forgotten we've a business to keep going?' she challenged him.

'No. But Joanna is here looking after everything very well and I'm sure she'll stay on for a while after the baby arrives, won't you, Jo?'

'If you really need me, yes, I'll stay,' replied Joanna.

'Don't make any promises now,' whispered Tom urgently in her ear. 'Let's go for a walk so that we can talk alone.'

Fearing that the conversation might pick up where it had left off that afternoon when Tom had declared his jealousy of Steve, Joanna went with him rather reluctantly, preferring to have stayed in a group where the conversation would be general.

They walked across the lawn to the part of the drive which went down to the old coach house. Tom opened the door in the wall and they went through on to the firm yellow sand.

The tide was out and wreaths of golden seaweed marked the high-water line, glistening in the sunlight which slanted over the blue shoulder of a distant mountain. Small wavelets hissed as they advanced and retreated on the edge of the sand and several terns dipped and squealed above the water in their endless search for fish.

The shore was deserted, and yet for Joanna it was temporarily haunted by two people on horseback, herself and a slim straight-backed man with a taut tanned face and stormy grey eyes. Last time she had been in this place she had looked at the house and had wondered what it was like to live in it. Last time, she had met Steve and had decided he was one of those people who possessed everything. Now she knew he owned the house and that it was inhabited at present by an unhappy woman separated from her husband, a sophisticated diplomat and the young man at her side.

'Have you ever been sailing?'

Tom's voice disrupted her reverie and the ghostly riders and their horses disappeared.

'No, this is the first time I've ever lived near the sea.'

'I'll take you some day, and who knows, maybe when your appetite is whetted you'll prefer it to riding. Although I've done a bit here with members of the local yacht club, I guess I'm really missing it this summer.'

'Where do you sail usually?'

'Off the coast of New England. I'll be going there in September. Like to come with me?'

They had been meandering along the shore aimlessly, two people out for an evening stroll. But as he asked the question Tom took hold of Joanna's hand and pulled her round to face him. Slightly startled by the invitation, she stared up at him, trying to make out whether he was serious or not. As if sensing her perplexity he said,

'Oh yeah, I'm serious all right. This guy's in love, Joanna, with you.'

'But remember what you said about getting to know a person before ... before...' She could not go on. After all, he hadn't mentioned marriage, so perhaps she was being presumptuous.

'I remember, and I figure I know all about you ... all I need to know right now, anyway. Guess I've shown my hand too soon, though, going by the expression on your face. But I had to, Jo, to make sure you know I'm around and interested. You don't mind, do you?'

Over his shoulder she could see the moon rising beyond Seakirk's green hill. The sun had slipped behind the other hill—she could tell without turning to look because the water was no longer blue but a soft lavender colour.

'Maybe you'll acquire a wealthy husband before the end of the summer.' Steve's sneering remark made on the morning they had driven to Drumlee scorched through her mind. Here was the temptation he had suggested would be offered to her—Tom asking her to go with him to the States in September.

'September is too far away, Tom,' she said gently.

'Six weeks. Long enough for us to get to know each other better,' he replied earnestly.

How could she tell him that she wasn't in love with him, that she couldn't hold out much hope of ever loving him, without hurting his feelings too much?

'I can't promise,' she said, and watched disappointment shadow his face. He looked down at the hand he was holding, then up again, and a whimsical smile twisted his mouth.

'Guess it's the first time a horse has come between me and something I want,' he said. 'O.K., we'll leave it like that. But it doesn't mean I'm giving up. Riding lesson as usual on Monday morning?'

'As usual,' she agreed, relieved to have cleared that hurdle and to have retained his friendship, and they turned to walk back along the shore in the gathering twilight as if nothing out of the ordinary had passed between them.

By the time they reached the lawn it was dim and shadowy and empty. Light spilled out of the long windows on to the terrace revealing two people standing together apparently talking seriously.

'Jackie will be pleased,' commented Tom dryly. 'His lordship has condescended to come after all.' He raised his voice as he and Joanna went up the steps of the terrace and called, 'Hi there, Steve. Did you get some food?'

'Of course he did. I saved some for him,' replied Jackie. 'Where've you been? Pop is getting annoyed because he's having to do all the entertaining in there. We'd better go in and help him out.'

Standing close to Tom, Joanna was very aware of Steve, who was leaning against the stone balustrade.

'I guess he's worried in case someone else makes off with Consuelo while he's having to serve drinks,' remarked Tom cheekily. 'O.K., we'll go and rescue him.'

Taking Joanna's hand in his, he pulled her with him towards one of the open windows.

'I'd like to have a word with you, Jo, please.' Steve spoke very quietly, but he managed to make the request sound like an order, and as she turned back to look at him Tom turned too and said nastily,

'This is a party, not a business meeting. Save your word until another time.'

Once again Joanna was aware of tension between the two men. There was a nasty brief silence and then Steve said coldly,

'What I've got to say won't take long and I can assure you that Joanna will join you as soon as I've finished.'

'Is it about Changeling?' asked Joanna quickly before Tom could explode.

'Yes.'

'You go in, Tom, and I'll be with you soon,' she urged.

'Now perhaps you'll understand what I meant about a horse coming between me and what I want,' he muttered belligerently.

'You're not very polite, Tom,' cautioned Jackie. 'Remember both Jo and Steve are our guests. Come on, now, before Pops gets sore.'

'Q.X., I'll come,' he grumbled, and went with her into the house.

Joanna walked to the balustrade and looked out over the wall to the sea and the faint loom of land beyond it. The moon was silver now, laying a dazzling path of light on the dark water. A faint breeze rippled the water and the path of light quivered. She watched and waited for the man beside her to speak, but he said nothing, so she turned to look at him. He was still leaning back against the balustrade and he was watching her.

'Are you selling Changeling?' she asked.

'No.'

'Wasn't the price offered high enough?'

'What do you know about any prices which might have been offered?' he countered frostily.

'Johnnie told me Mr Craik had offered for him.'

'Sam would give me anything I asked, but I haven't asked,' he replied, and again there was silence between them. The noise of voices in the room crescendoed, then diminished slightly as someone closed the nearest window and pulled the heavy curtains across it.

'Jackie is more considerate than her brother,' observed Steve, and Joanna realised that the American woman had closed the window and curtains deliberately to give herself and Steve more privacy. He must have told Jackie he wanted to talk to her.

'I'd like to enter Changeling in the Hunter Trials at the end of August and I'd like you to ride him,' said Steve tersely. 'Are you agreeable?'

Hunter Trials. That meant a cross-country course of about three miles, something like the one she had ridden at the end of her horsemaster's training. There would be about twenty-two jumps. None of them would be any more difficult than the jumps at the show today, but the pattern in which they would be set out would make it trickier. To enter a horse in such a contest was a way of proving its ability to jump under fairly difficult conditions, and if it was successful quite naturally its price would go up.

Could she help Changeling pass such a test? And what was more important, did she want to, just to help Steve Millar get a better price for the horse? She found she was in a dilemma as her love of riding struggled with her conscience. She wanted to take part in the trials, but the thought that Changeling would be sold immediately afterwards made her pause.

'Not interested?' asked Steve.

'Oh, yes, I am. I'd like to ride Changeling again, but ...'

'But after this afternoon you don't want to do anything for me again.'

'This afternoon?' She was bewildered.

'Yes. I didn't behave very well.'

As the memory of what had happened in Changeling's stall that afternoon came rushing back, making her cheeks warm, she realised that he was almost apologising for kissing her. Although she did not hold the kissing against him she was touched to think that he felt he should apologise, and wanting him to know that she regretted having taunted him about wanting to marry Consuelo for the money, she said, 'I wasn't very pleasant either.'

'No, you weren't,' he agreed with aggravating equanimity. 'Someone has been teaching you to hit below the belt.'

He hadn't stayed apologetic for long, and once again she struck out in self-defence, trying to pretend she wasn't hurt.

'Maybe I've learned from you,' she riposted.

She heard him take a sharp savage breath. The tinkle of laughter from the big room mingled with the distant soft shush of waves on the shore beyond The wall. Warm light shafted from the two uncurtained windows across the terrace, only to be absorbed by the moonlit purple of the night. The scent of roses blended with the aroma of pine trees and the salty tang of the sea.

Joanna was aware of all these things in the silence which followed her remark, and she was reminded of the time when Tom had refused to agree to Steve's suggestion that he return to Consuelo and his father the day she and Steve went to Drumlee. Now, as then, Steve wanted

to retaliate violently, but his self-control prevented him from doing so.

'I'd like an answer to my request,' he said at last, quite calmly. 'You can refuse to ride without making any excuses. I can understand and accept a straight no.'

'I want to ride Changeling, but I hate the thought of him being sold afterwards for racing purposes. I'll ride him on one condition,' she said hurriedly, forced into being forthright by his own attitude.

'And that is?' he prompted warily.

'That you don't sell him or enter him in a National Hunt race yourself.' It was a ridiculous condition and she knew it, but she had to try. If his heart was in the right place he might agree.

'That's an almost impossible condition,' he replied irritably. 'You must know by now that Changeling is potentially a great steeplechaser, and whether you like it or not I have to sell my horses at a profit or race them.'

'But not Changeling,' she appealed.

He shifted restlessly and when he leaned back against the balustrade again he was closer to her.

'Do you know, Joanna, for a gentle person you use the most drastic methods to get your own way,' he was chiding softly, when two people stepped out on to the terrace and began to walk towards the steps.

'You two choose the oddest places to talk,' remarked Consuelo, and there was a wealth of mocking insinuation in her voice as she approached them with Foster Hilroy.

'Highly romantic, if you ask me, with moonlight and the scent of roses,' chuckled Foster. 'Why don't we leave them to bill and coo here while we explore the garden together? That rustic summerhouse has a certain attraction, I think.'

'If that is what you'd like,' murmured Consuelo smoothly.

'That is what I'd like.'

They moved on and disappeared down the steps. Joanna was startled to hear Steve swear heartily and violently under his breath. Thinking that he was upset not only because Consuelo was so blatantly making up to the American but also because of Foster's amused reference to romance, she tried to help.

'You don't have to stay with me. If you feel like that you'd better go after them and explain that you and I are not billing and cooing,' she urged, and he turned on her.

'Be quiet,' he ordered savagely. 'I-can do without your advice on a subject about which you know nothing.' He drew another sharp shaky breath as if he was struggling to regain his self-control and continued more quietly, 'To get back to your condition, I agree to it, in this way. I won't sell Changeling while you're at Gilcroft and are willing to ride him.'

Rather shaken by his savage reaction to her suggestion that he should follow Consuelo as well as by his abrupt agreement to her condition, she stammered,

'But how do I know you'll keep the condition?'

'I rate pretty low in your estimation, don't I?' he grated, really furious by now. 'I give you my word, that's all I can do. If it isn't enough send Changeling back here tomorrow. And now you'd better go and join

your American friend before he comes looking for you. I'm going back to talk to Sam. Good-night!'

He swung away from her, and walking swiftly along the terrace he also disappeared down the steps into the darkness of the garden.

One way and another it had been the most eventful day in her life, thought Joanna as she switched off her bedside light and turned on her side in preparation for sleep. A day of ups and downs, of success and sadness. A day when she had experienced great happiness, a new soaring high-as-a-kite feeling when Steve had kissed her, to be followed by a new cold desolation. A day of ecstasy and pain. Hadn't she read somewhere that you couldn't experience one without the other? Something about melancholy and delight always living together?

*'/ly, in the very temple of Delight Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.'*

That was it. It was from Keat's *Ode on Melancholy*. When she had read it at school she had scarcely understood it, but now she knew that it was true. And now, like Keats, all she wanted to do was 'to drown the wakeful anguish of the soul in sleep'.

But most annoyingly sleep which should have come quickly because she was tired did not come, and she lay wide-eyed and tearless staring at the waning moon which peered lopsidedly through the window panes across which she had forgotten to pull the curtain. It was the same moon which had touched the sea with silver when she had stood on the terrace with Steve and which Foster Hilroy had considered a necessary attribute to romance.

Some romance, thought Joanna with a whimsical grimace, unconsciously using one of Tom's succinct phrases. Two kisses, not

to be taken seriously, given and taken in a horse's stall, plus a few hard words on the terrace. No, there was nothing romantic in her association with Steve Millar. Whenever they met they seemed to hurt each other. He struck out deliberately because he didn't want anyone to get too near him. But she, who had never wanted to hurt anyone in her life, struck out in self-defence because she was afraid he might hurt her too much.

Yet he had agreed not to sell Changeling. While she was at Gilcroft and while she was willing to ride the horse he would not sell him. And she did want to ride him, because he presented a challenge which might never come her way again.

No, the romantic interlude had not been with Steve, it had been with Tom who had said he was in love with her. But she wasn't in love with him. She wasn't in love with anyone and she didn't want to be in love. It was far too complicated a situation.

'Better stick to horses,' she muttered to herself. 'They have more sense than to lie awake in the dark!'

And on that comforting thought she fell asleep.

The next morning she was up as usual at six o'clock, a little jaded after the previous strenuous day and the sleepless hours she had experienced. But her mind was clear and settled as she rode Changeling across the dew-soaked fields and watched the mist rising off the sea as the sun grew warmer.

She would ride Changeling in the Hunter Trials and she would take a chance on Steve keeping his word and not selling the gelding afterwards. She would not send the gelding back to Lanry House because she could not bear to part with him while she still had the opportunity to ride him. When he didn't arrive back, Steve would know she had decided to trust him and presumably would make

arrangements with the Cowans to pay for the horse's board at Gilcroft.

The decision made, she felt peaceful again and found the next two weeks pleasantly busy as she coped with two more groups of children who came to stay as well as dealing with several new clients who booked riding lessons as a result of the school's successes at the show. Karen came every day and so did Tom. He made no reference to the interlude on the shore and it was easy to drift again into the happy-go-lucky relationship which had existed between them before the show.

And of course she rode Changeling every day, sometimes across country, sometimes round the paddock, working with the horse regularly so that she would be able to anticipate anything he might do. One morning Johnnie came to watch her, to tell her he would help her prepare for the trials nearer the event and to make definite and businesslike arrangements with the Cowans for the horse's welfare and keep during the next few weeks. Although she felt a familiar pang of disappointment because the gelding's owner had not come in person to see him and to make the arrangements she realised Lth-at Johnnie's presence at Gilcroft meant that Steve had assumed that she was agreeable to participating in the trials, so she did not allow herself to dwell too long upon his apparent indifference. And anyway, considering the peculiar way in which she behaved whenever he happened to be around it was really better for her if he didn't come.

The pattern of those two weeks looked as if it was going to repeat itself for the rest of July and for the month of August, and Joanna was glad because in regular routine there was security. By the end of August the Hunter Trials would be over, Marjorie's baby would be born, Tom would be going back to the States and she would be having to decide whether to stay at Gilcroft or not. Whenever the question of whether she should stay or not came up she tended to shy away from

it. There would be plenty of time to decide when September came, and she would slide back into the comforting pattern again, pretending to herself that she was there to stay for ever and ever.

But the pattern was disrupted in an unexpected way. One morning Tom brought Consuelo with him— a different Consuelo. She wore skin-tight jodhpurs and a smooth black jacket. There was a white stock at her throat and a black velvet riding cap on her luxuriant hair.

'Consuelo wants to ride,' announced Tom cheerfully. 'Can you mount her now?'

Joanna's, wits were so scattered by Consuelo's appearance and by Tom's demand that she forgot to ask the usual questions about amount of riding experience and where it had been obtained.

'Only on Minette,' she spluttered. 'Unless you give up Bonnie Lass and do without your ride today.'

'Couldn't I ride Steve's horse—what's its name, Changeling?' queried Consuelo, immediately placing Joanna in a dilemma. She had never thought of allowing anyone who came to the stables to ride the gelding. He had been put in her care for her to train. He belonged to Steve and before anyone else could ride him Steve's permission would have to be obtained.

'I'd have to ask Mr Millar first,' she said hesitantly.

Consuelo raised her eyebrows haughtily, pursed her lips and tapped one very shiny black boot with a very new crop and drawled,

'So? Why don't you phone him now?'

Joanna glanced at Tom hoping for assistance, but he could only shake his head and raise and drop his shoulders in a comically exaggerated shrug.

'He might not be in,' she fenced, aware that she was stalling for time because she didn't want to share Changeling with Consuelo. Sharing him with Wendy, or Marjorie, or even with Karen she might have considered, but not with Consuelo.

'He's there, in his office. I spoke to him before coming here.'

'It's a pity that you didn't ask him then if you could ride his horse,' said Joanna gently, and received a flashing, venomous glance from the big pansy eyes. 'Very well, I'll go and phone him.'

In the kitchen she told Marjorie quickly what had happened.

'I don't want to ask him, but I don't know how I can avoid it,' she said.

'I don't either, although I'd be tempted to tell a lie and say that he isn't in. Bet you ten to one he'll say yes.'

'You think he will?'

'Of course. He wants to marry her, doesn't he? He'll give in to her whims to keep her happy.'

Joanna did not like the picture this remark conjured up of Steve giving in to Consuelo's whims.

'Oh, what shall I do?' she cried. 'I don't want her to ride Changeling.'

'Then just tell her you can't mount her today and ask her to come another day. She can't do any harm.'

'Can't she, though? She'll be furious. She's come all dressed to ride and if I annoy her she'll set everyone against Gilcroft Riding School and we'll lose all the goodwill we, gained at the show. Oh, how I wish she hadn't come!'

'It seems rather strange that she has, doesn't it?' murmured Marjorie, watching her friend closely. The usually calm Joanna seemed very emotional judging by her ^flushed cheeks and by the speech she had just made. 'I think you'd better phone Steve,' she added gently.

Telephoning a person was not the same as meeting him, Joanna told herself, but her hands were distinctly clammy as she picked up the receiver and her heart had started to bump jerkily. And since she was phoning him on behalf of the woman he intended to marry he could scarcely be annoyed with her for contacting him.

When he answered the call and she announced herself he interrupted her rudely to rap,

'Is there something wrong with Changeling?'

'Oh, no, he's fine. Lady Millar is here and she wants to know, or rather she asked me to ask you, if she might be allowed to ride Changeling.'

'Consuelo... at Gilcroft? What the hell is she doing there?' He didn't sound very pleasant this morning. Definitely a case of getting out of bed on the wrong side.

'She wants to ride. She asked if she could ride Changeling and I told her I'd have to ask you.'

'Quite right, too.' Then he laughed suddenly, rather maliciously. 'She can ride him, if she can get on him, which I very much doubt.'

'Why?'

'I don't think he'll let her.'

'Oh.' There didn't seem to be anything else for her to say. 'Well, thank you. I hope I haven't interrupted your work ... but Lady Millar insisted and I didn't want to annoy her by refusing.'

'I understand. You're very sensible not to annoy her. Let Changeling do that.' Then very quietly, almost gendy he asked, 'How are you, gentle Jo?'

She was so surprised that he should ask after her welfare that she found it difficult to answer.

'I'm very well, thank you,' she replied stiffly. 'How are you?'

'I'm feeling particularly mean and tough,' he replied curtly, all gentleness gone. 'You sound like one of those recorded replies which doctors use to answer the phone when they're away, completely devoid of feeling, and I get the impression that you don't want me to know how you are and that you're not really interested in how I am. Are you?'

Joanna closed her eyes, bit her lower lip and muttered,

'I must go. Lady Millar and Tom are waiting.'

'That sounds more like you refusing to engage in battle, giving me a soft answer,' he scoffed. 'So Tom's there too. Has he proposed to you yet?'

This time anger had its way with her and she made no attempt to control it. He was unkind and she hated him.

'No. He hasn't, well... er ... not exactly.'

'Make up your mind,' he mocked.

'Oh, it's none of your business!' she retorted furiously. It was all she could think of to say, and she wasn't surprised when she heard him chuckle.

'You sound confused. Never mind, I'll let you go now. Take care.'

The line went dead. Shaken out of her comfortable shell by the interchange in spite of her intentions not to be roused by Steve's needling remarks, she made her way back to the stable yard. Tom and Consuelo were talking as they stood together near the low-slung red car. One tall and fair, the other tall and dark, they made a handsome pair. And yet there was something alien about both of them. Although she liked Tom she would never feel close to him, would never be able to communicate fully with him. He would never understand her nor she him. As for Consuelo, she couldn't like her because she was afraid of her, afraid of what she might do.

'Take care,' Steve had said softly. Had he been warning her? Or had he been using the words in the way some people used them, as an expression of farewell similar to 'Look after yourself'?. Whatever he had meant he had seemed very close to her, much closer than the two people who stood talking together in the stable yard.

Consuelo was smugly pleased when Joanna told her that Steve had agreed to let her ride Changeling and she followed Joanna to the stable to watch the gelding being led out. She made no offer to saddle the horse, so Joanna tacked up while Tom prepared Bonnie Lass for himself and Minette for Joanna.

When the gelding was ready Joanna asked Consuelo if she had ever ridden before. The woman replied that she had, so Joanna stood back to let her mount, keeping on the alert in case help was needed. Consuelo took the reins, but before she could do anything else the gelding began to sidle away from her, jerking his head and trying to pull the reins from her grasp.

'Come here!' said Consuelo, seizing the reins more firmly, and the horse, his ears pricking forward, danced away from her again.

Consuelo looked round, smiled charmingly at Joanna and said,

'Perhaps if you would hold the horse for me, Miss Frost, I'd be able to mount.'

Joanna sprang forward, took the reins and talked chidingly to Changeling. The horse muzzled her and lifted his upper lip in what she liked to think was a smile.

Then to her surprise Consuelo, instead of turning her back to the horse's head in order to mount, faced forward, putting her left foot in the stirrup. Immediately Changeling began to move away so that Consuelo, hopping after him, lost her balance and fell to the ground.

'Now, boy, that was naughty,' Joanna rebuked the horse, and he calmed down at once and stood meekly, gazing over his shoulder curiously at Tom, who was helping Consuelo to her feet.

'I hope you're not hurt,' said Joanna anxiously. 'I think it would be better if I held Changeling against the stable wall so that he can't move away and then Tom can give you a leg up. Are you willing to try?'

'Yes,' answered Consuelo, as she brushed loose dirt from her immaculate breeches and jacket. She sounded as if she was speaking through clenched teeth, and Joanna, who was pulled between a desire to laugh, and anxiety in case Consuelo had hurt herself, glanced at Tom. He rolled his eyes and grinned and she felt better. At least he would be there as a witness to any accident that might occur and would be able to say it wasn't her fault.

Talking soothingly to the horse, she backed him against the wall and held him there. Tom held Consuelo's bent left knee and hoisted her into the saddle. Pleased to be mounted at last, Consuelo thanked him with a smile and took the reins. Joanna moved away and was going to warn Consuelo about the gelding's favourite trick when he dropped

his shoulder, arched his backhand Consuelo, who had been bending over adjusting a stirrup, was thrown to the ground.

At once Joanna was at her side and offering to help her.

'Are you hurt? I'm sorry. I should have ... ' she began.

'You did it on purpose!' hissed Consuelo, managing to look graceful even though she was sprawled on the ground. 'You don't want me to ride that horse!'

She was so near the truth that Joanna was silent.

'Joanna did nothing,' said Tom mildly.

'Exactly. She did nothing. She didn't warn me that the horse would behave like that.'

'You must believe that I didn't do it on purpose,' Joanna defended herself. 'Changeling hasn't done that recently and I'd forgotten about it. The best thing for you to do now is to mount him again to show him you're boss.'

'What? Mount that bad-tempered beast again? Certainly not! I'll ride the grey mare you were going to ride. But I'm warning you, Miss Frost, any more tricks like that one and I'll make Gilcroft the most unpopular riding stables round here.'

Her face white with the effort of controlling her temper, Joanna led Changeling back to the stable and brought Minette forward. Then she asked the question she should have asked earlier.

'Have you ridden much, Lady Millar?'

'In Argentina only, gaucho style, of course. I know nothing about the English style of riding.'

'Then may I suggest a few rules? In the English style you put your bade to the horse's head and then put your foot in the stirrup and twist yourself over the saddle.'

Consuelo's eyes flashed, but she did as she was told and Minette allowed her to mount.

'Since you have no experience of riding here perhaps we should start at the beginning,' said Joanna quietly and firmly. 'I would like you to walk Minnie round the paddock. Then when I ask you, make her trot. Gradually I'll ask you to put her through all her paces.'

Again Consuelo's eyes flashed as she realised she was being treated as a beginner, but she said nothing and obeyed Joanna's crisp orders. Tom, as easy-going as ever, rode round the paddock with her obeying the instructions too. He was beginning to post quite nicely, thought Joanna, as she sat on the paddock rails and watched the horses trotting round, but Consuelo was like a sack of potatoes and she found herself wondering what Steve would think of his future wife now.

When the lesson was over Consuelo slid to the ground and asked if she could go into the house to wash her hands and tidy her hair. Joanna directed her to the kitchen where she would find Marjorie, and then began to unsaddle Minette. When she took the saddle to the tack room she found Tom there waiting to pay for his lesson.

'Why did you bring Lady Millar?' she asked.

'She asked me to bring her. I guess I felt rather sorry for her.'

'Oh. Why?' There didn't seem any reason for anyone to pity Consuelo, thought Joanna. The woman had everything.

'She's been hanging around Lanry House for the last week, as bored as hell because Pops has gone south again and because Lord Muck has been very standoffish, completely unapproachable and unavailable,

in fact.' Tom's voice became sarcastic as he referred to Steve. 'Yesterday she asked me if I thought Steve would approve if she took up riding. I suggested it was worth a try. So this morning she arrived dolled up in that outfit, which must have cost some, and asked if she could come with me. And here we are. O.K.?'

'O.K.,' agreed Joanna with a sigh.

'You don't sound very enthusiastic.'

'I'm not. I've a funny feeling that she has another motive for coming here to learn riding. It's unpleasant and I can't get rid of it. Perhaps I'm being hypersensitive.'

'I get you.' Tom frowned anxiously. 'Maybe Lord Muck shouldn't have given his permission to let her ride Changeling. That little fracas just now nearly ruined your reputation as a riding teacher. Ever though that he might have an ulterior motive too?'

Joanna said nothing. She wasn't going to argue about Steve with Tom. Yet she kept recalling Steve's malicious chuckle when he had suggested that it would be better to let Changeling annoy Consuelo as if he knew the woman could be spiteful. Had he been trying to warn her when he had said, 'Take care, Jo'? Well, even if it hadn't been a warning she was going to take care where Consuelo was concerned. One false move on her part and she guessed that Consuelo would have no hesitation in ruining Gilcroft's reputation as well as her own.

'You won't be seeing me for the next two weeks,' Tom was saying as they went out into the sunlit stable yard to wait for Consuelo. 'I've been taken on as a crew member for a yacht which is taking part in a long-distance race to the Hebrides. After the race we'll be cruising for a few days among the islands. It's a chance I'm not passing up. Think you'll miss me?'

'I'm sure I shall. There'll be no one to help with the mucking out and no one to take me out for dinner.'

He grinned good-humouredly.

'I'm glad I've had my uses during these past weeks. Consuelo can have my lesson time, that's if she wants it. Do you?' he asked, turning to Consuelo who had just joined them. Her hair was back in place, her make-up was perfect again and her smile was back.

'Yes, I want to come again. Tomorrow? The mare will suit me very well, and maybe later when I'm more accomplished in the English style of riding I'll try to ride Changeling. Good-bye, Miss Frost. Thank you for being so patient. I really appreciate it.'

And so after breaking up the pattern of the routine Consuelo became a part of the new pattern. She came every morning immaculately turned out, receiving curious glances from the youngsters who were also taking lessons. At the end of the week she was riding much better and had ceased to look like a sack of potatoes. Joanna could not help admiring the woman's determination to overcome the agonising stiffness from which she had suffered during the first days of riding. Nothing was going to stand between her and her goal, which was to ride and jump in the English style in order to impress Steve.

One day when Tom had been away nearly two weeks, Consuelo lingered for a while in the tack room after paying for her lesson.

'Am I improving?' she asked.

'Oh, yes. There's been a great improvement,' said Joanna honestly, keeping to herself the opinion that she held that Consuelo would never be a good rider because she had little or no sympathy for the animal which she was riding.

'Good. It is most important that I should be able to ride well. Steve is such an excellent rider himself and a perfectionist into the bargain. How well I remember him making fun of me when he and his father visited Argentina. That was when I first met them. They were staying with the parents of a girl-friend of mine. I fell in love with both of them.' She laughed with an attractive touch of self-mockery. 'Sounds crazy, doesn't it? But it was true. I had a hard time deciding which one I should marry.'

'Did they both propose?' asked Joanna, who although slightly embarrassed by the other woman's sudden desire to confide was curious to know more.

'Oh, no. You see, Steve didn't stay long. He had to come back because there was some problem connected with the estate which needed his attention. Henry stayed on and when he proposed I had no difficulty in agreeing. He was a charming man, so handsome and polite and very kind.'

'So actually you didn't have to make a decision because there was no choice when only one of them proposed,' murmured Joanna.

'I beg your pardon,' drawled Consuelo, 'I don't understand.'

'Oh, nothing,' muttered Joanna evasively. Consuelo wouldn't understand. In her self-centred mind there had been a choice, the choice of which man she would pursue, not which one would marry her.

'You know that Steve and I are going to get married soon?' queried Consuelo.

Joanna said that she had heard that piece of news.

'We've had to wait. It wouldn't have looked right if we'd rushed into marriage soon after Henry's death. But the strain of waiting is telling

on us both. I went away for a while, back to Argentina, but I missed Steve so much I had to come back. I think he's feeling the strain of waiting more than I am. Men are much more impatient about that sort of thing that women are, don't you think?'

Joanna muttered that she supposed that they were, and Consuelo smiled dreamily and added, 'So nice to have a man impatient to marry one.'

Joanna remembered Tom saying that Steve didn't exactly strike him as a man who was head over heels in love, and she wondered whether Consuelo was suffering from self-delusion. There was no chance to follow the thought because Consuelo was asking another question.

'Are you going to ride Changeling again in a show?'

'Yes, in the Hunter Trials.'

'When is that?'

'Near the end of August, the twenty-second to be precise.'

'I shall come to watch you. Tell me, does Steve come here often to see Changeling?'

The question was asked carelessly, but Joanna was suddenly aware of Consuelo watching her closely. There was a strange cold expression in her dark eyes which made her shiver. This woman frightened her. She was cold and calculating and possessed a steellike determination to get what she wanted. She had married Henry Millar for his money and position and to do so had probably disregarded her own preference for his son. And now she was determined to marry Steve, not that she would have any difficulty in doing so because he had apparently the same cold determination to marry her.

'No, he doesn't come. Johnnie Leggat supervises the training of the horses for him.'

Relief flickered momentarily in the great dark eyes and Joanna felt suddenly grateful to Steve for keeping away from Gilcroft and herself. Now she understood why he had kept aloof from the riding school. In staying dear of her he had made it impossible for Consuelo to have any reason to be spiteful to her.

'I expect he doesn't really have the time,' she said conversationally.

'No, he doesn't,' agreed Consuelo urbanely. 'He's always busy with the estate and the horses. It's often difficult for us to have time together. But we'll make up for it on our honeymoon.'

The week following the strange conversation with Consuelo Tom came back. He appeared on Thursday morning for his lesson and after it was over arranged to take Joanna out to dinner. It was the first time since he had gone away that Joanna had been out in the evening, and she realised as they walked into the pleasantly luxurious atmosphere of the hotel how strained the last two and a half weeks had been. On top of the effort of running the riding school there had been the added strain of keeping a careful watch on Consuelo, making sure that every lesson she had was successful and without mishap so that she would have nothing to complain about.

And under everything else there was the inward struggle she was having concerning her own emotions. Although she had set a course for herself after the party at Lanry House which was to keep her entirely free of entanglement she was finding that her memory played disturbing tricks on her just when she had thought she had blotted Steve Millar from her mind.

For instance in the morning when exercising Changeling she had suddenly started daydreaming about that morning in June when she

had met Steve on the shore. Now, almost two months later, that blue sun-shot morning when the yellow light had glittered on the sea possessed a special quality and every detail of it was clear in her mind.

Sometimes when she was grooming one of the horses in the stable she would have an odd feeling that Steve was there leaning against one of the stalls watching her as he had watched her in the stable at Drumlee.

Another time when she was about to dismount after taking Changeling round the jumps she would wish that he would be there waiting by the stable door to congratulate her with a kiss.

No amount of effort on her part kept her memory in order, and the flashbacks worried her, creating additional strain. So she was glad that Tom had come back and that he had taken her out for the evening, and she responded to his laughter and to his stories about the sailing race in which he had taken part.

'I wouldn't have missed it for anything,' he said. 'I guess there isn't much time left now. In three weeks I'll be going home. Feeling any different from the way you did the night of the party?'

'Afraid not,' replied Joanna, wishing he hadn't spoiled the evening by bringing up the subject of how she felt.

'There's still time for you to change your mind,' he said jauntily.

Joanna shook her head.

'I guess life isn't a bit like the romantic films,' complained Tom. 'If this was a film you'd get into some awful scrape, I'd appear just in time to rescue and click!' he snapped his fingers, 'you'd suddenly realise you'd been in love with me all along.'

Joanna couldn't help laughing.

'But life is never neat and tidy like that. I don't think you're really in love with me. You'll forget all about me when you return to the States. I'll just be the girl who showed you how to sit on a horse.'

His wide mouth turned downwards at the corners in an ironical smile.

'So I'm not in love with you the way you're not in love with Steve Millar,' he scoffed, and Joanna stiffened in her chair.

'That's not true, I'm not in love with him,' she retorted.

'Just with his horse, eh? Come off it, Jo. You must have some feeling about the guy. He's the only person I know who can unnerve you, set you on edge.'

'That's because I dislike him,' she said firmly.

'Hey, Jo, watch it,' he warned softly. 'I wished you disliked me that way! Guess I could begin to start hoping. As it is you're far too nice and easy with me.'

'Oh, you're impossible! I wish we'd never got on to this subject. Why can't you enjoy the summer without getting intense about relationships? You don't have to be in love. Nor do I. And I'm not, nor do I want to be,' Joanna said rather irritably.

'I like getting intense, especially about people like you. You don't want to be in love because you don't want to be hurt. So why not fall in love with Tom Hilroy, guaranteed not to hurt, who'll give you your freedom any time you'd like to take it? Honestly, Jo, if you come with me to the States I'll give you as many horses as you like. You'd have a life of ease, not a care in the world ..."

'Too good to be true, and terribly boring,' laughed Joanna.

'You could start your own riding school. Think, a school organised the way you would like it to be, with horses you'd chosen and plenty of capital behind you, Doesn't that tempt you?'

'Yes, it does, but I don't think it's for me, Tom.'

'Why?'

'It doesn't feel right.'

He looked perplexed. Slowly he shook his head.

'I guess I don't understand, Jo. What d'you mean by saying it doesn't feel right? I thought horses were your reason for living.'

As she had guessed he didn't understand her. He had thought he could tempt her to marry him by offering her something which she liked. He didn't understand that if she had loved him she would have been willing to give up riding, give up horses to be with him.

'Think, Tom,' she urged. 'Would you feel happy if I married you just because you'd offered to give me as many horses as I'd like? Can't you see it would be wrong for me to marry you for that reason?'

His grin was shamefaced.

'O.K., Jo, I give up, for the time being. But the offer is open for always, even after I've gone. If you feel you want to come out to the States just send me a cable telling me the arrival time of the flight and I'll be there to meet you off the plane.'

The chances of her ever wanting to fly out to the States were very remote, thought Joanna, as they drove back to Gilcroft. She liked Tom and there had been times when she had been very glad of his company. But once he had gone he would fade into the background of

her memory, and she knew there would be no flash-backs to disturb her.

When she entered the kitchen at Gilcroft she was immediately aware of the silence of the house. On the table there was a sheet of paper, a hastily written note from **Bill**. It explained that he had had to take Marjorie to the nursing home because they both thought that the baby was on its way. He would stay at the home until the baby was born and would phone her if there was any change of plan.

By midnight he hadn't phoned nor had he returned, so Joanna went to bed to wrestle with uneasy thoughts, which owed their existence to her conversation with Tom as well as to the difference to her plans the early arrival of Marjorie's baby might make.

Tom's scoffing accusation that she was in love with Steve Millar had alarmed her. It just wasn't true. How could she be in love with a man who upset her every time they met and who made a profit out of racing horses, a sport against which she had set her mind when her father had been killed? How could she be in love with a man who was going to marry his father's widow because she had inherited the money which he had hoped to receive as a legacy? The whole idea was ridiculous, and "Tom must have made it up on the spur of the moment to ease his own self-esteem, finding in it a good reason for her not being in love with him.

Having cleared her mind on the issue by denying it emphatically she turned on her side to go to sleep and across the darkness of her eyelids there flashed a series of bright images. Steve laughing with her at Drumlee. Steve waiting for her at the stalls at the Lanry Show, watching her with wary grey eyes, then kissing her.

She tossed on to her back, opening her eyes in order to disperse the flashbacks. Why did they occur? Why, when she was alone, did she sigh and wish that he would come just once to see Changeling? Why

did she long to hear his voice either taunting her or telling her gently to 'Take care'? She did not know why, but she knew that her work with horses was no longer sufficiently absorbing.

Perhaps she needed a change? And perhaps the arrival of Marjorie's baby pointed a way to change. Naturally she would stay at Gilcroft until her friend was well enough to cope with the riding school as she had promised, but once Marjorie was back in the saddle she was not sure whether she would want to work for her. It would be better if Wendy Hillen took her place. Wendy would jump at the opportunity of being a riding teacher. Come to think of it, Wendy should be taking more responsibility now.

Joanna turned again restlessly. It was time she had a day off. Monday would be a good day. There were only a few lessons booked. Consuelo had cancelled hers because she had a previous arrangement to meet some friends. The next group of resident riders wasn't coming until the following week. With Bill's permission she would leave Wendy in charge and would go to Ayr to do the shopping which she had never managed to do since she had arrived.

She couldn't have explained why the sudden decision to take the day off from Gilcroft made her feel better, but it did. Perhaps it was the thought of escaping which made her relax. She fell asleep at once and didn't waken until the phone rang at five-thirty next morning.

Bill sounded weary but excited. He was the father of a boy, small but alive and well. He assured Joanna that Marjorie was well too and said he would be home in half an hour to eat a big breakfast.

The desolation of the small hours forgotten, happy because her friends were happy Joanna dressed and went downstairs looking forward to the new day.

## CHAPTER FIVE

MONDAY was a gay blustery day, warm enough for Joanna to wear a blue linen dress but cool enough for her to take a white cardigan when she set out on her shopping spree in Ayr. Bill had been quite agreeable to her taking the day off as long as she could be back by five o'-cMck, when he wanted to leave to go and visit Marjorie and his son.

Riding on top of the double-decker bus which rumbled and lurched along the coast road, she had a splendid,, view of the Firth. The wind was from the north-west and it had swept away the thin haze which always blurred visibility when the wind blew from the south. There was her favourite island which she hadn't had time to visit yet. Its fields were freshly washed green, its cottages were glinting white specks and its jagged peaks were various shades of violet and mauve, sharply outlined against the cloud-scattered blue of the sky.

Just below, beside the road, the long grasses bordering the shore bent under the wind. The water was shallow and amazingly clear in spite of the fact that the cylindrical tanks of an oil storage depot glinted on the curve of land beyond the sands. Gold-spangled waves roared upwards and broke in cascades of white froth on the numerous small rocks which were scattered along this part of the shore.

As she looked at the water and the sky Joanna felt, not for the first time since she had come to live at Gilcroft, the attraction of the seascape, of the ever- changing moods of weather. Whenever the day was like this, a day which she knew now was typical of the west coast summer, she experienced a mood of expectancy, a forward-looking mood. The brightness, the vivid colours, the expanse of perpetually moving glittering sea under the wide arch of the limitless sky made her restless, like one of the gulls which hovered on a current of air, haunted by a hankering after something she scarcely understood but which she felt sharply.

Today the mood was strong and it lasted all the way to Ayr where after she had done her shopping in the main shopping street she wandered up a narrow side street lined with small shops, each one of them offering some speciality.

One shop held her attention for a long time, because it showed riding clothes in its windows. She was admiring a beautifully cut hacking jacket when she noticed that someone was coming out of the shop. Glancing sideways, she saw that it was Steve Millar. Immediately she looked away hoping that he wouldn't see her. The stupid shaky feeling which she always experienced at the thought of having to speak to him overcame her and she pressed against the window as if by doing so she could disappear from his view. But gradually as she stared fixedly at the plate glass she realised she could see him vaguely reflected in the window. He was standing a little to one side of her and looking in the window too.

'I'm trying to decide whether it's the window display which is absorbing all your attention or whether you are feeling faint and require support,' he said mockingly. 'If you're feeling faint, let me be your support and take you to have some lunch.'

Willing herself to act normally, she turned slowly, widened her eyes in pretended surprise and looked straight into a pair of amused grey eyes.

'Hello,' she said, and could say no more because coming face to face with him after not seeing him for a while seemed to have taken away all power of speech. He seemed to be stricken suddenly with dumbness too, because he didn't reply but stared at her as if he hadn't seen her before. It was a strange silent moment, its silence accentuated by the noises of the street, the purr of car engines, the click of high heels the sound of voices raised in argument.

'I haven't seen you in a dress before,' he murmured at last. 'That's why I couldn't be sure it was you.'

He had seen her in a dress before, at the party, but she supposed that in the darkness on the terrace he hadn't noticed.

'I wonder if you know that wearing blue makes your eyes seem bluer, forget-me-not blue,' he continued slowly. Then with a shake of his head and a self-mocking grin he said, 'But of course you won't. You're not like that. You're Joanna, and you wouldn't set out deliberately to deceive a mere male into thinking you're unforgettable. Any relation of the colour of your dress to the colour of your eyes is wholly unintentional, I expect.'

He was talking rubbish; blatant delightful rubbish. She had never thought that the hard-bitten Steve Millar could speak nonsense, not this sort of tender nonsense that could easily go to a girl's head. And all she could do was stand tongue-tied. As he noticed her lack of response his smile faded, the warmth went from his eyes and she sensed his withdrawal. In a panic, not wanting him to withdraw, she said hastily,

'This is my day off. I've left Wendy holding the fort at Gilcroft. It will be good experience for her. I came to buy something for Marjorie's baby. Oh, perhaps you don't know—she's had a boy.'

A faint smile which showed that he was interested, but only just, curved his mouth.

'I believe the grapevine informed someone on the estate and somehow the news reached me. Are they both well?'

'Yes, and Bill is so proud. It's quite silly. You'd think no one had ever had a baby before.' She was babbling, saying anything, a stupid prattle to cover up her shyness, to stop him from walking away.

'Bill and Marjorie haven't,' he said gently. 'Such behaviour on the part of new parents is quite reasonable, you know.'

Away from the responsibilities associated with Lanry House he seemed so different, gayer, more approachable.

'My invitation to have lunch with me was genuine,' he said. 'Will you accept?'

She looked down the street and then up the street. The sun was shining bright and the wind tugged at her hair and skirt. Maybe today was the day she would find what it was she was hankering after.

'If it will help you to make up your mind any faster,' he said dryly, 'I'll take you to Alloway afterwards to see the cottage where Burns was born, if you haven't seen it already.'

'No, I haven't seen it, yet. I ... I...' Why was it so difficult to tell him she would be delighted to have lunch with him and to visit the old cottage? Because she wasn't used to expressing delight. She could only use simple heartfelt phrases such as 'I'd love to come'. And her reserve prevented her from saying that to this man.

'Joanna,' he rapped suddenly, making her jump, 'yes or no? That's all I need to know.'

'Yes,' she gulped hastily, 'please.'

Although she didn't know, her pleasure was revealed in her eyes which sparkled suddenly and by the emphatic 'please'. Steve smiled and to her surprise took one of her hands in his and together they started to walk down the street-

'Thank you,' he said. 'Now I can take the rest of the day off too and we can play truant together.'

Truant. The word set the seal on the rest of the day. With a wonderful feeling of freedom, of having escaped, Joanna enjoyed a four-course lunch in a big hotel near the sea where Steve seemed to be well-known. Several men with horse-racing written all over their faces greeted him when they walked into the dining room, made remarks in the language of the turf and stared hard at Joanna before going on to take their places at dining tables.

'I'd forgotten that Ayr has a race-course,' she remarked.

'So you recognised my acquaintances for what they are, do you?' he answered with a grin. 'Yes, there are several meetings here during the year. The biggest and most important takes place towards the end of September when the Ayr Gold Cup and the Ayrshire Handicap are run. Maybe you'd like to come and watch. If you do, let me know, and you can come as my guest. I'll have several horses running this year.'

Surprised by the invitation, Joanna bit her lip and looked down at her plate and said nothing.

'And I was forgetting that you dislike horse-racing,' said Steve quietly. 'Are you going to let your father's accident colour your outlook for the rest of your life, Jo?'

She looked up quickly. He had finished eating and was leaning back in his chair watching her. There had been a note of rebuke in his voice and she realised for the first time that he resented her attitude to the sport with which he was connected.

Having gained her attention he leaned forward and continued in the same quiet manner,

'Let me give you something else to think about. You've allowed your initial reaction to your father's death to develop into prejudice. As a result you consider everyone who is associated with horse-racing as a hardhearted, double-dealing ogre. But you're wrong. All of us have

hearts and feelings, although it's possible that some of us don't care to show them to everyone else.'

He had used the plural, but she knew he was talking about himself. He had accused her of prejudice, and she had an uneasy feeling that he was right. How juvenile and petty her behaviour must seem to him! Her cheeks grew hot with confusion as she toyed with the food on her plate, not daring to face his direct gaze.

'I believe Changeling is behaving well,' he was saying in a more bland conversational tone. 'Is Consuelo?'

On this subject at least she could give him good news.

'Yes, her riding has improved greatly. But you were right, Changeling wouldn't let her go near him.'

'So she told me. She can't understand why I own such a recalcitrant beast. The trouble with Consuelo is not that she can't ride. She can. She can do anything she sets her mind to. It's just that unlike your favourite poet, Burns, she has no feeling for animals. I suppose that's why you admire his poetry. You share his sympathy for the animal kingdom.'

Joanna nodded her agreement, wondering how he had guessed so much about her.

'I thought so,' he said. 'There's a poem by him describing an old farmer's new year greeting to his old mare Maggie, and when I read it I thought of your spirited defence of that old bag of bones you were riding the day we first met.'

Now he was making fun of her. But his mockery was gentle and was based on his knowledge of her likes and dislikes, and like her he remembered their first meeting.

'I thought you didn't know any poems by Burns,' she said.

'I didn't until you showed an interest in him. After we'd talked about him the day we went to Drumlee I looked in the library at Lanry House and found a copy of an edition of his works. When I was leafing through it I found the poem about the mare. Listen to this. Doesn't it remind you of Minnie?'

*'Tho' thou's howe-backit and knaggie,  
I've seen the day  
Thou could hae gone like onie staggie,  
Out ower the seas.'*

Joanna's eyes widened as he quoted the words in a broad Scottish accent.

'But what does it mean?' she asked. 'I can't understand a word.'

'Shame on you!' he teased. 'It's good Scottish dialect which is a dialect of the English language, although it's been raised to the dignity of a language by Burns and his like. All those few lines are saying is that although the old horse is now hollow-backed and knobby the farmer remembers the day when it could go like any colt over the meadows. The rest of the poem is in the same vein, remembering the horse's good days and saying that because they've shared so much together he'll never forget it or let it starve. I think you feel the same way about animals. That's why you got so heated when I criticised Minnie.'

The memory of the morning in June was between them again. The knowledge that he remembered it as well as she did made Joanna feel light-headed.

'You were rather unkind about Minnie. She can't help her looks, but she's a good worker and very patient with children.'

'I'm sure she deserves your championship,' he conceded, 'but at the time I was irritated to see such an excellent rider mounted on such an unworthy horse. I wanted to take you back to my stables there and then to show Changeling to you. But you misunderstood.'

'How was I to know?' answered Joanna, feeling troubled. 'I'd only just met you. I didn't know your name or anything about you.'

'And you were old-fashioned enough not to trust strangers and I hadn't made a very good impression.' His mouth twisted cynically. 'The past few years of my life haven't been the most pleasant and haven't been spent with particularly pleasant people. I'd forgotten how to speak to people like you, Jo. Every time we've met since I've hurt you, I know I have. I don't want to be the one who hurts you. That's one of the reasons why I've stayed away from Gilcroft. I don't want you hurt through anything I may have done. Do you understand?'

She thought she did. It was all connected with his relationship with Consuelo, she was sure.

'I think I do,' she said hesitantly. 'But what about today?'

'Today we're playing truant, remember? I'm just an ignorant Scot who knows very little about the literature of his country and is taking an English lass to the birthplace of the Scottish bard, near which I've lived all my life and which I've never visited. If you've finished eating we'll go and be educated.'

Pushing new misgivings about spending the rest of the afternoon with him deep down where they couldn't bother her, Joanna smiled at him happily and agreed to go and be educated.

The sun was still shining and the wind was still blustering as they reached the village of Alloway and passed by the pleasant detached villas set in their beautiful gardens, screened by thickly leaved trees.

Joanna had an impression of greenness and peace, and in that setting of unostentatious wealth it was strange to find the humble cottage with its low white walls sparkling in the sunshine, its thatched roof trim and immaculate; the birthplace of the great Scot who had suffered poverty all his life.

They parked the car and joined the group of people outside the cottage who were waiting to go in. July and August were the peak visiting months and so even though it was Monday there were a great many people going through the turnstiles. Yet in spite of the number of visitors the cool dim interior of the cottage was extraordinarily quiet. People spoke in hushed voices as if they were at the shrine of a saint or were in a church.

Joanna thought that the living area of the cottage was small for the number of people who had lived in it during Burns' childhood, but it did not seem overcrowded now, and there was a simple homeliness about everything which overcame the austerity of the furniture and the stone-flagged floor. She was fascinated by the bed in the corner of the room which could be concealed from the living quarters by a curtain and also by the thickness of the walls as revealed by the window apertures.

After inspecting the living quarters they moved into the byre which adjoined the kitchen, and Steve teased her by saying that she would have enjoyed living in that type of cottage in the eighteenth century because she would not have been separated from the animals even at night. Then they went to the Museum at the back of the house where the original manuscripts of Burns' songs and letters were all on show. Joanna lingered over them as long as she dared. She did not want to bore Steve, but on glancing at him she could see he was not bored and he was talking easily to another man who spoke English with a strong foreign accent. In fact many of the people who were visiting the cottage that day seemed to have come from foreign - countries and she noticed when she signed the visitors' book that the pages were

filled with addresses in Austria, Scatfdinavia, Australia and America and even in Russia.

They left the Museum and walked to the old graveyard of Alloway's ruined kirk and on to the Burns Memorial which was situated among the flower beds of a well-tended garden on the banks of the River Doon.

'Here you are on the very banks of that river about which you sang at school,' mocked Steve. 'Doesn't that give you a thrill? There are even roses if you want to pick one and bring the poem to life.'

'To do that I'd need a false lover to steal the rose from me,' replied Joanna lightly.

'Well, I suppose I could play that part, although it doesn't appeal to me,' he answered with a slight grimace of distaste. 'I'd prefer to give you a rose. Here.'

With a quick deft action he snapped a red rose from a bush and handed it to her. Giving a rather guilty glance round the garden and hoping that no one in authority had seen him, Joanna took the rose. A thorn pricked her finger and made it bleed a little.

'There's even a poem for this situation, about my love being like a red, red rose,' he said softly.

'But it's hardly appropriate,' said Joanna sharply, making a business of placing the rose in the buttonhole of her cardigan so that she wouldn't have to look at him.

'As you say, it isn't appropriate. I much prefer the simple forget-me-nots.'

The wind rustled the leaves of the trees, the river babbled cheerfully. The banks and braes of bonny Doon were blooming and the birds

were singing. Never again would she be able to read that poem without remembering this moment.

'I think it's time I went back to Gilcroft, please,' she said, trying to sound matter-of-fact, and the expression on his face hardened as he stepped back into line.

'I expect it is,' he agreed. His glance was caught by the little speck of blood on her finger as she finished twisting the stem of the rose in her buttonhole. He pointed to it. 'I've hurt you again. I'm sorry.'

It did not take them long to get back to Ayr. The town was busy with holiday traffic and they were held up at the lights at the bridge over the river, but once through that bottleneck they moved at a steady speed through Prestwick and the other towns and were soon on the coast road to Seakirk.

They did not talk. Since he had apologised briefly in the garden on the banks of the Doon, Steve had retired behind his iron curtain. Joanna would have laughed at her own description of his withdrawn mood if she hadn't felt so depressed. The day of truancy was over and she was having to pay for it. Would Steve have to pay for it too? She glanced sideways at him. He was frowning too as if he was thinking about something unpleasant. She wished she could ask him what his problem was, but she had no rights. And if she asked she had no doubt that he would repulse her.

She stared out of the window at the sea. The wind had died down and the sunlight was brilliant, shining out of the west and laying a carpet of gold on the water.

'The dazzle on the sea,' murmured Steve, taking a quick glance sideways at the view, ' "while you are alive beyond question, Like the dazzle on the sea, my darling." '

She glanced at him in surprise. He had turned his attention to the road again, but he acknowledged her surprise with a grin.

'No, the words aren't mine. They're from a poem by Louis MacNeice called "Leaving Barra", but there are times when I find them appropriate.'

He swung the car across the road to take the back road over the hill behind Seakirk to Gilcroft. Joanna looked back at the dazzle on the sea. There was nothing dazzling about her, she thought morosely. It was Consuelo who dazzled, who was alive beyond question. Did Steve quoted the lines to Consuelo when he was making love to her? Did he make love to Consuelo? Somehow she couldn't imagine anyone making love to that dazzling but infinitely cold and calculating woman. And anyway, she didn't want to imagine Steve making love to anyone but herself.

The wayward thought jarred her nerves and she stared hard at the very uninteresting council houses which they were now passing. Children were playing in the side streets', darting about and calling to each other. Lines of washing festooned the gardens, hanging listlessly now that the wind had gone.

The car swooped down the hill, passed the elm-screened castle ruin, passed the triangle of grass at the fork in the road and stopped at the end of the road to Gilcroft.

Gathering her parcels in one hand, Joanna fumbled for the door handle with the other.

'Thank you for the lunch and for taking me to Alloway,' she muttered.

Steve was searching for something in the glove compartment in front of her. 'Thank you for your company,' he replied, and tossed the book into her lap. 'You can keep that as a memento of the day we played truant together.'

She picked up the book and glanced at the title: *Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*. Then she looked at him. He was watching her with an expression of tender amusement in his eyes.

'Are you sure?' she asked. The book was richly bound and quite heavy.

'If it pleases you, I'm sure. Good-bye, Jo.'

It was dismissal, polite and gentle but quite definite. The truancy was over. She scrambled out of the car, banged the door shut and did not wait to see him depart. Clutching her gift to her breast, she walked up the farm road, her melancholy mood suddenly lit with joy.

As soon as she walked into the stableyard she sensed that there was something wrong. For one thing, Consuelo's black car was there, and for another Wendy was standing in the doorways of the tack room actually wringing her hands and looking anxious.

'Och, Jo, I'm glad to see you! I'm worried. Lady Millar came about an hour ago. She said she wanted to ride Changeling. She said Mr Millar had given her permission to ride the horse and that you knew.'

'Was she able to mount him?' Joanna felt very alarmed.

'He was a wee bit difficult, but she talked to him in the way you do and I helped her up and she set off. She said she'd ride through the woods and back. I thought she'd be here by now. You don't think he'd throw her, do you?'

'He might do anything. He doesn't like her.'

'Och, I'm sorry, Jo. I shouldn't have let her go.'

'How could you have stopped her?' asked Jo gently. 'You know you couldn't. She's strong and determined. Stop worrying about it. If she

has a fall it's her own fault. Saddle Bonnie Lass for me, there's a dear, while I change my clothes, then I'll go and look for her.'

She might have known something like this would happen while her back was turned, thought Joanna as she struggled out of her dress, pulled on her breeches and a sweater. And it was typical of Consuelo to take advantage of her absence. But how had Consuelo known she was absent? The woman hadn't made any arrangements to have a lesson today.

Joanna pulled on her boots, grabbed her hat and crop and clattered down the stairs, noticing how quiet the house was without Marjorie. Bill must have driven in to see his wife already, so it was no use hoping for his help if Consuelo had had an accident.

She had just mounted Bonnie Lass and was adjusting the stirrup leathers when Wendy called out,

'Here she is, Jo! She's coming, and she's leading Changeling.'

The two of them waited for Consuelo to reach the stableyard. As she came near it was possible to see that the horse was limping, and Joanna's heart began to sink slowly. If Changeling was damaged and couldn't jump in the hunter trials however was she going to tell Steve? As she watched the gelding she had no thought for Consuelo. The horse was sweating badly and looked if he had been beaten. When she went up to him he flinched away from her.

'Steady boy, steady,' she murmured, and patted his neck gently. At the sound of her voice his ears pricked and he turned round and nuzzled her, showing his gladness to be with her again.

'Here is your wonderful horse, Miss Frost. I'm sure you're welcome to him,' said Consuelo, her usually creamy voice harsh. Only then did Joanna glance at her. Her black hat had gone, her hair had escaped from . the confines of the big tortoiseshell slide which held it at the

neck and there was a bruise on her right cheekbone. Her immaculate black jacket was streaked with mud and grass.

'What have you done to Changeling?' asked Joanna, trying to keep calm.

'What have I done to him?' Consuelo almost shrieked. 'You don't care about me! You don't care if I break my neck. All you care about is the horse. He threw me, that's what happened! And I've hurt him, that's what I've done to him. I hope now he's no good to you ... or to Steve!'

'But what happened, Lady Millar? Why did he throw you? Och, I've been worried about you,' blurted Wendy.

'That was nice of you, dear.' Consuelo flashed her sudden smile. 'I'm glad someone was concerned about me. I'd just readied the edge of the wood when he bolted.'

'Something must have frightened him,' said Joanna. 'Changeling never bolts.'

'Well, he bolted this afternoon. He jumped a fence before I was ready. I pulled back on the reins and he caught the back of his legs on the fence, then when we were over he threw me.'

Joanna bent down and examined the backs of Changeling's forelegs. Both of them were grazed, but she couldn't tell how serious the injury was. She stood up straight and gazed steadily at Consuelo. The dark eyes stared back at her and there was hate in their depths.

'Take Changeling and unsaddle him, please, Wendy, then wash the grazes carefully with soap and water. We must be careful that no infection gets into them,' she said quietly.

The gelding flinched when Wendy approached, but at another gentle word from Joanna and some more soothing pats he went away obediently.

'You are wondering why I came this afternoon and asked if I could ride him, aren't you, Miss Frost?' said Consuelo. 'Well, I shall be pleased to tell you and then you'll know exactly how I feel and to what lengths I'm prepared to go to keep what I consider to be mine.'

In spite of her dishevelled appearance and recent accident the woman was cold, deadly cold.

'I'll be glad to hear your explanation, Lady Millar,' Joanna replied. Whatever she did she mustn't let her dislike of the woman prejudice her attitude.

'As I told you, I'm going to marry Steve in the autumn. It's all arranged and has been for some time, by me. Ever since I met that man I've wanted him. He was difficult to catch and he evaded me, so I married his father and came here to live in the same house. Henry Millar was a kind man, but not exciting. Steve was, and still is, exciting. Before he died I told Henry that I wanted his son and how it would be possible for me to get him. Henry obliged and changed his will, leaving me all his private fortune, which he had intended originally to leave to Steve. In his will there was a stipulation that the fortune would revert to Steve if he married me. It was clever of me, don't you think?'

Joanna was horrified. She hadn't believed anyone could be capable of such cold long-range planning.

'Now, because of my very strong feelings about Steve, I'm extremely possessive by nature,' went on Consuelo. 'I've disliked very much his association with you through this horse which you ride for him. That is the reason I came for riding lessons. If any woman is going to ride a

horse for Steve in future that woman will be me. So I've worked hard at my riding, and what better teachers-could I have than you, the girl whose riding ability Steve has admired so much?'

It was out in the clear at last, the motive behind Consuelo's desire to ride. Jealousy had motivated her, jealousy of the the girl who had been asked to ride a horse belonging to her future husband. If the situation had not reminded her too forcibly of what had happened in her first job, Joanna would have found it amusing.

'There's no need for you to worry about my association with Steve. I've told you, he never comes here,' she said.

'Yes, and I was beginning to think that there was nothing for me to worry about, until today,' replied Consuelo. 'I didn't book a lesson with you because I'd promised to meet some friends in Ayr for lunch.'

Joanna felt her face stiffen. Consuelo noticed the change in expression and nodded knowingly.

'I saw you and Steve as you were leaving the hotel. I was in the lounge with my friends. After we had eaten I excused myself and returned home. I changed my clothes and came here. You hadn't come back, so I rode that horse. I wanted to damage him and I have. I hope you won't attempt to come between me and anything I want again, Miss Frost. You are bound to suffer next time, never mind a horse. Good-bye.'

She walked over to her car, opened the door and got in. Joanna watched her, unable to move or speak, she was so shocked by the woman's confession. How could Steve marry such a monster? Did he know how she had connived to marry him? She had heard that some women when frustrated in their desires would go to any lengths to satisfy them, but she hadn't really believed that anyone would go to the lengths to which Consuelo had gone.

The black car swished out of the stableyard. Stirring herself, Joanna hurried into the stable and to Changeling's stall. In response to Wendy's kindly attention, the gelding was beginning to look better.

'She must have beaten him hard,' said Wendy in a horrified voice. 'That's what made him bolt. She did it deliberately. Why would she be so cruel?'

Joanna inspected the weals which were rising under the hair on Changeling's flanks.

'She was angry and she had to lash out at the nearest living thing,' said Joanna vaguely. She couldn't explain to Wendy the real reason for Consuelo's strangebehaviour.

'She must be crazy!' muttered Wendy.

'Have you looked at his legs again?'

'Yes. The right one is bad. It'll need a dressing and I don't think you'll be able to ride him.'

'Then I'd better go and tell Mr Millar.'

'I suppose so. But have your tea first. You look quite wishy-washy, as if you've had a shock.'

Drinking several cups of tea and nibbling at scrambled eggs on toast which she had forced herself to make after Wendy had left and gone home, Joanna wondered how much she should tell Steve. She would take all the blame for the accident, of course. She should never have taken the day off. If she hadn't she wouldn't have met him in Ayr, they wouldn't have been seen together by Consuelo and Changeling would never have been hurt.

Her meal over, she washed up, told Archie where she was going and asked him to tell Bill when he returned, then set off down the road on Marjorie's bicycle.

It was a perfect evening, not unlike the evening of the party at Lanry House. The courtyard in front of the big house was deserted and there was no sign of Jackie or Tom. Joanna rode down towards the coachhouse, parked her bike against the wall and knocked at the red door of the office. She knew Steve must be somewhere around because his car was parked outside the garage door.

The door opened. Steve, dressed in jeans and the old turtle-necked sweater of which he seemed so fond, his hair rumpled as if he had been running his hands through it, stood and stared at her in surprise.

'I've something to tell you,' murmured Joanna.

His gaze roved curiously over her breeches and riding boots and he frowned slightly. For a panic-stricken second she wondered whether Consuelo was with him, then he stood aside and said briefly,

'Come in.'

She went past him into the office. At the back of the room a door was open and through it she had a glimpse of another room filled with the light of the evening sun and the sound of orchestral music.

'Come through,' said Steve, moving past her into the other room, and she followed him. He closed the door and she looked round. It was furnished comfortably as a living room. There was a wide window framing a view of green islands and the dark blue mountains of the north-west. Beside the window facing the view was an armchair and beside it was a small table on which there was a cut glass tumbler containing some liquid which she guessed was whisky, and an ash tray from which a spiral of cigarette smoke rose lazily. Newspapers were scattered on the floor near the armchair.

Steve switched off the radio and stubbed out the cigarette in the ash tray, then asked abruptly,

'What's wrong?'

'Something dreadful has happened at Gilcroft while I was away today,' she began clearly enough. Then the memory of Consuelo's spite engulfed her and she burst out, 'I should never have gone. I should never have had lunch with you or gone to Alloway. Oh, dear!'

Tears came unbidden. She stood there knuckling her eyes like a child, trying to control her sobs.

One of her hands was pulled away from her face and a handkerchief was thrust into it. It was a nice handkerchief, big and soft. An arm was placed round her shoulders and she was guided to the armchair. She was pushed into it and discovered with pleasure that it was still warm because Steve had sat in it recently and the warmth enfolded her with more comfort. She wiped her eyes, blew her nose and was relieved to find her sobs were subsiding. She tried to smile at Steve, who was sitting on a footstool in front of her watching her attentively.

'I'm sorry. I don't usually cry in company,' she said.

'Don't apologise. I'm glad you feel you can cry in my company. It means that you trust me at last. We've come a long way since June.'

She would work out that puzzle later. Now she must tell him about Changeling.

'Consuelo saw us in Ayr today,' she said. Again his eyebrows came together as he frowned.

'Where?'

'At the hotel when we were leaving. She was so angry she went back to Gilcroft and persuaded Wendy to let her ride Changeling. She beat him to make him bolt. He jumped a fence and she pulled him back and damaged the back of his forelegs. There's a bad graze on one of them and he isn't fit to be ridden. Oh, dear!' Tears spurted again and she had to mop them up.

'Did she tell you why she made him bolt?' he asked curtly.

'Yes. She wanted to hurt him as a warning to me not to try and come between her and what she wants.'

'And what does she want?'

'You,' she whispered. She dabbed once more at her eyes, then peeped round the corner of the handkerchief. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his hands were spread on either side of his bent head as he considered what she had just told him.

'I'm sorry, Steve,' she said again. 'It was all my fault. I shouldn't have...'

'Be quiet,' he ordered, as he had once before, 'and stop apologising. If anyone should be apologising it should be me for putting you in such a position in the first place. I told you I didn't want to be responsible for hurting you. I hoped to avoid anything like this by staying away from Gilcroft. I know how spiteful Consuelo can be.' He paused and then went on in a quieter voice, 'But today was different. I thought that for a few hours we were both free to do as we pleased. It was as you pleased, wasn't it, Jo?'

He looked up urgently and leaning forward took one of her hands in both of his.

'Yes, it was,' she whispered, staring in surprise at the smallness of her hand compared with his.

'Then, stop blaming yourself for what happened. You say Changeling can't be ridden. In that case I'd better take you back to Gilcroft and have a look at his legs. Johnnie isn't here, so I can't send him. How did you get here?'

She told him and he grinned.

'Easy enough coming here freewheeling all the way, but it's a damned long haul back up the hill. Leave the bike here. I promise to send it back, probably with your knight errant.'

'Knight errant?'

'Tom Hilroy.' He released her hand and stood up. 'Has he proposed yet?'

'You've asked me that before.'

'I know, and you couldn't give me a straight answer. Has he?'

'Yes, he has,' she retorted tartly, suddenly annoyed by his persistence.

'And your answer?' He was picking up the newspaper and attempting to tidy it as if he wasn't really interested in her reply.

"Wouldn't you like to know?' she taunted wilfully, then blurted out furiously, 'Oh, why do you keep teasing me about Tom? I've told you before it's none of your business!' Then, feeling upset because he seemed to think her friendship with Tom to be such a joke, she burst into tears and wailed, 'Oh, I'm in such a muddle!'

She had stood up ready to leave, but she had to pause and mop up the tears again. To her irritation Steve laughed and she felt his arm round her shoulders again.

'That's right, Jo,' he murmured, and he was very close, 'let it all come out, the frustration, the pent-up emotion. You'll feel better afterwards.'

Liking the feel of his arm holding her close, slightly puzzled by his attitude, she found that she did feel better after her outburst. In the short time she had been in the room she had cried like a child, had lost her temper and had cried again, giving way to emotions she usually kept bottled up. She had shared them with Steve quite easily.

She realised his arm had tightened and glanced up.

His eyes were dark and stormy.

'Shall we make it a full day, emotionally speaking?' he asked softly, and pulling her closer, kissed her.

A little later she moved her head and broke the kiss. With a sigh of pleasure she leaned her head against Steve's chest. She could feel the slightly uneven beating of his heart and under her right hand the bicep muscle of his arm was taut as he continued to hold her closely. She would have liked to have stayed in his arms, to have lingered for the rest of the evening in the pleasantly untidy room watching the sun go down behind the mountains, to have forgotten the rest of the world, but Changeling's legs needed attention.

'We'd better go,' she whispered.

'I suppose so,' he agreed reluctantly, and moved away.

As she followed him to the door she thought he seemed as cool and as collected as ever. Perhaps he made a habit of kissing women who went all emotional on him. Perhaps it was all part of the treatment. Yet when she had first met him she had not believed him capable of comforting anyone.

The little green car started with a roar and sped up the drive. As it swept through the courtyard in front of the house Joanna noticed that Tom's car was there as well as the estate car and that lights were on in the house although it was not yet dark.

The drive to Gilcroft did not take long and was done in silence. When they arrived Bill came out into the stableyard and accompanied them to Changeling's stall. As usual the gelding showed excitement on hearing Steve's voice and nuzzled him. When the examination of the forelegs and weals was over they went out into the yard.

'Well, what's the verdict?' asked Bill.

'Rest, of course, and careful treatment. The wounds must be kept clean at all cost. I'll put temporary bandages on for tonight and I'll ask the vet to call tomorrow.'

'Would you like Changeling moved back to your stables?' was Bill's next question.

'No, that isn't necessary. I'd like him to stay with Joanna. With a bit of luck the wounds should heal in time for the Trials. But if they're not,' he gave a slight shrug, 'who cares about the Trials? I'd rather have a horse with good legs.'

His eyes met Joanna's and he smiled. She smiled back. He had put the horse first before any other consideration, and as she went to the tack room to get the ointment and the bandages he wanted she could not help feeling a little spurt of triumph. Consuelo's attempt to make trouble between Steve and herself had failed after all. He was leaving the horse in her care. He trusted her. As he had said earlier, they had come a long way since June.

Crouching beside him in the stall, she watched him apply the ointment and bandages. They were alone in the stable apart from the horses. A feeling of well-being, a slightly hazy condition of mind

induced by his kiss, was still with her, making her immune to the smell of horse, straw and leather, making her immune to everything except Steve's physical presence and every movement he made.

As she watched the sure but gentle movements of his hands she sensed his love and concern for the horse and admitted to herself at last that she had been entirely wrong and prejudiced in her original estimation of him. Marjorie had been nearer the truth when she had said he had a heart if anyone could take the trouble to find it. And Joanna had found it today in a sunlit garden in Alloway, in his room at Lanry House and how here in Changeling's stall.

The feeling of well-being persisted when they left the gelding and walked out into the greenish rose-shot twilight towards Steve's car. When he Opened the door of the car he turned to look at her, a dark searching glance from narrowed eyes. Joanna waited for him to give further instructions for the care of the horse or to make a half tender, half derisive remark on which she would survive until their next meeting.

'I must go and see Consuelo,' he announced abruptly. 'Good-night.' Without waiting for a reply he got into the car, slammed the door shut and starting the engine, drove off.

No longer hazily happy, the pleasant cocoon-like state in which she had been wrapped ever since leaving Lanry ripped open rudely by his abrupt statement, she watched the red tail lights disappear round the bend in the farm road, and saw the wide sweep of white light from the headlamps as the car swung out on to the Lanry road. Her spirits at a low ebb, she turned and walked to the house, and as she went up the stairs to her bedroom she scolded herself softly for forgetting so completely that Consuelo held the whip hand, the Millar fortune.

The weather changed. The clear visibility and brilliant sunshine vanished overnight. The dazzle on the sea had gone and with it the drama and excitement had gone too. With the return of the usual damp hazy weather normality returned also and if it had not been for Changeling's wounds and a vague sense of disappointment which nagged at her continually Joanna might have thought that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Riders came for their lessons as usual and the only absentees were Consuelo and Tom. Consuelo she didn't expect, but she wondered sometimes what had happened to Tom.

One evening she was able to go and visit Marjorie and to admire her son, who slept in a crib in the corner of the pleasant room in the nursing home. She gazed with awe at the tiny red-faced baby, who already possessed Marjorie's dark hair.

'Isn't he beautiful?' crowed Marjorie, who was sitting up in bed looking very healthy in a pink bed-jacket which set off her dark colouring.

'I'll reserve judgement until he opens his eyes,' teased Joanna.

'Och, he only does that when he's hungry and then he yells and goes even redder in the face. He's much better looking when he's asleep.'

Joanna gave the baby one more glance and then went to sit on a chair at the bedside.

"What was it like?" she asked, and Marjorie knew at once she was referring to the birth.

'Agony and ecstasy, pain and happiness,' she replied. 'Och, the relief when it was all over, the wonderful sensation that at last my body was my own again, followed by the terrible anxiety as I wondered how I was going to look after him, would I be able to feed him properly, bring him up straight.' She hugged her arms about herself. 'Och, it's wonderful, Jo. I can recommend it!'

Joanna glanced at her hands and muttered vaguely, 'I'm glad you feel like that.'

Delight and melancholy again. Marjorie knew them both and was able to accept both as being all of life. Maybe her acceptance grew out of the knowledge that she was loved by Bill. It gave her security.

'What's the matter, Jo?' asked Marjorie. 'Bill told me about Changeling. Are you worried about him? Will he get better in time for the Trials, do you think?'

'The vet seems to think so,' she replied briefly. So had Steve that night he had looked at the horse's legs, but she hadn't seen him or heard from him since then. Not that she expected to, really.

'Was Steve angry?' probed Marjorie.

'No. He was very nice about it.' Joanna couldn't prevent her voice from wobbling when she remembered just how nice he had been.

'According to Bill Steve's being nice to you and taking you out to lunch put Consuelo in a rage. Things have changed since you and he first met, haven't they?' persisted Marjorie.

'Yes. But there was no reason for her to be jealous or to take it out on the horse. There's nothing between Steve and me. Nothing. How could there be? He's going to marry her, she told me herself. Anyway, he and I are worlds apart.'

'Not really,' suggested Marjorie.

'Yes, really. He does a lot of things I don't like,' said Jo firmly, hoping to put an end to the discussion. 'Now let me show you what I've bought for wee Jamie, as you call him.'

The gift she had brought for the baby had the effect of diverting Marjorie's attention and for the rest of the visit she managed to keep the conversation confined to the subject of babies, with occasional digressions on the subject of horses.

Tom turned up on Friday. He brought Karen for her lesson. He brought also a tall slim girl with long swinging honey-coloured hair, who was wearing ordinary blue jeans and a plain white shirt but who managed to look as if she had been turned out for a fashion show. Her skin was tanned to a uniform golden hue and she wore make-up round her eyes only and they were a clear green-lit hazel.

'This is Carol,' Tom said casually, 'an old friend from home. By the strangest coincidence she and her family happen to be touring Europe and are taking in Scotland on their way back to the States. They came on Monday and are staying until the end of the month.'

Joanna smiled at the beautiful clean-limbed Carol, who smiled back with restraint, her quick glance going over Joanna's ruffled hair, shiny nose and pink cheeks.

'I'd like to ride with Torn,' she said. 'He doesn't want me along with him, but I hope you can fix it for me.'

Joanna thought she might be able to fix it, if they didn't mind waiting while she led out the horses. She went to the stable wondering why Tom didn't want Carol to ride with him. To her surprise he followed her into the stable.

'How's Changeling?' he asked. 'Johnnie told me what happened.'

'His legs are mending gradually.' She wondered just how much Johnnie knew and how much he had told Tom.

'Consuelo's behaviour certainly brought results, didn't it?' said Tom.

'What do you mean? What results?' she asked urgently, turning on him.

His eyes were very bright blue as he enjoyed tantalising her.

'I thought you'd know. Consuelo has left Lanry. Her house is for sale. Steve has gone away too. Presumably they're together. Maybe they're getting married in a hurry before she can do any more damage to horses or to people.'

Her senses felt numbed. Perhaps dying would be like this.

'No, I didn't know,' she mumbled through stiff lips. 'Do you think your friend could manage Crackerjack? Minnie is lame again this morning.'

'You don't have to find a horse for her,' he said irritably.

'Oh, but I must. She asked me to fix it.' His discomfiture made her forget her own pain a little. 'Why don't you want her to ride with you?'

He made an exasperated grimace.

'She's followed me about for years. We met in Maine years ago, when we were kids, and she's sort of grown up with me. And now she's turned up here and I've been asked by her parents to go with them on a quick tour of the Highlands starting tomorrow. Am I mad? I was hoping to spend the last days of my stay here entirely with you, wearing you down. You haven't changed your mind yet, have you?'

'No, I haven't changed my mind. And I think your Carol is very nice.'

'Oh.' He looked rather disconcerted, and she laughed.

'Go on your tour of the Highlands, Tom. It will be much, more enjoyable than hanging around Gilcroft, and much more profitable. One day you'll be glad that Carol came to Scotland.'

'There's no hope, then?'

'No.'

'I'm sorry.'

'There's nothing to be sorry about. We've had a lot of fun together.'

'It's not that I'm sorry about. It's—oh hell, I'm sorry because it hasn't worked out right for you with Steve. "Tom, please!"

He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, looking thoroughly uncomfortable and embarrassed.

'O.K., I remember now. You don't like him, period,' he muttered, and grabbing Crackerjack's reins led the horse out of the stable.

The numbness which followed Tom's announcement that Steve had gone to London and was possibly getting married there was not new, Joanna had experienced a similar feeling when her father had been killed and when her mother had married again and she'd lost her to a person she could not like. She had been determined to avoid such experience again and had failed.

In the hours and days which followed Tom's visit Joanna searched for the cause of the numbness and kept coming up with the same answer. She loved Steve Millar and he was going to marry Consuelo, was possibly married to her already and there was nothing she could do about it. Over and over again she rejected the answer. She was merely attracted to him temporarily because he had let her ride Changeling.

Once away from Gilcroft and Lanry, away from the dazzle on the sea, she would soon forget him.

Meanwhile there was still Changeling to nurse back to good health before the trials. Marjorie came home and would soon be back in the saddle. For a small person Jamie Cowan managed to upset the household considerably for the first few days he was home, waking at the wrong times and refusing to be pacified unless he was fed. But with the help of the practical and motherly district nurse his diet was soon corrected, and with a routine established Marjorie was able to participate more in the running of the stables and began to supervise some of the lessons.

Now that her friend showed signs of taking over again Joanna began to think about the future, trying to disregard the feeling that it would be grey and bleak. A letter from her Aunt Phyl brought with it another letter which had been sent to her address in Reading. It was from the stables in Berkshire at which she had helped during week-ends. The proprietor was losing one of his best riding instructors who was getting married and moving to another part of the country. He offered the position to Joanna and said he would like to talk to her about it as soon as she returned to Reading.

She told Marjorie and Bill about the offer she had received and they were rather dejected when they realised she was seriously considering going back to Reading.

'Can't you stay, Jo?' wheedled Marjorie. 'We've done so much better than we ever expected this year and we could pay you now, not as much as that other place, but enough.'

'I said I'd stay until you were up and around again, and you're obviously in the pink. I'm glad I've been able to help, although the success isn't entirely due to me, you know. You must give Steve some

credit. He did recommend the school to Jackie and he helped us to get Bonnie Lass and so on.'

'I doubt if he'd have helped us if you hadn't been here,' replied Marjorie shrewdly, and watched Joanna's cheeks grow pink. 'I thought you liked being here.'

'Yes, I do like being here, but that isn't sufficient reason for me to stay. Besides, Wendy needs the job here. She's quite capable, you know, and is more likely to do what you tell her than I am.'

Marjorie laughed.

'So it's taking orders from me that's worrying you, is it?' she mocked. 'I can see you're in one of your stubborn moods. Anyway, let's shelve the discussion until the trials are over, shall we? You're still going to ride Changeling, aren't you?'

'Yes, if he's fit. I promised.'

'And a promise is a promise,' scoffed Marjorie unkindly. 'Will Steve be there to watch, do you suppose?'

'Johnnie says he will.'

'With Consuelo by his side?'

'I expect so,' shrugged Jo.

The vet announced that Changeling could be ridden in the trials just one week before they were due to take place. Pleased that the horse was recovered, Joanna asked Johnnie whom she had telephoned in order to inform him of the good news if Steve wanted to see the horse before she rode it.

'Och, I dinna think so. He'll be away to York tomorrow and so shall I, and we won't be back until the night before the trials. It's a great week of racin', ye ken. We've a filly entered in the Yorkshire Oaks and a two-year-old in the Gimcrack stakes. Ye'll have to go ahead on your own, lass. Think ye can manage?'

'Oh, yes, I think so. Is Mr Millar at home now?'

'Not yet. He's been in Ireland the \*oast few days visitin' a friend in Dublin and havin' a look at a new stallion. He'll be back later today and then off bright and early in the mornin'. But don't worry, lass. It's a busy life the man leads, but he'll be there on Saturday to watch Changeling.'

And with that she had to be content and recognise that as Changeling's rider she was just a small part of Steve Millar's life, to be fitted in between racing schedules, and she began to understand a little of how Consuelo must feel. Was Consuelo with him in Ireland? Would she be going to York? Strange that Johnnie hadn't mentioned her, and with the absence of Jackie and Karen as well as Tom she had no news of the Happenings at Lanry House. Even Marjorie's mother, that great gossip about anything connected with the Millar family, had no information.

For the rest of the week Joanna devoted every minute she had to spare to Changeling's training. Naturally she had to be careful not to overwork the horse and to pay careful attention to his legs. She was glad of Bill and Marjorie's help in arranging for the horse to be transported to the trials and in making other arrangements regarding her entry in the Novice Class.

But in spite of all the careful arrangements she and Changeling were almost disqualified from the trials because they were late in arriving at the course. First of all Changeling played up when they were trying to get him into the horse van and they missed Johnnie's firm handling

of the horse. Then on the way to the course the horse van developed engine trouble. It was lucky that Marjorie was following in the Gilcroft Land-Rover because she was able to go to Lanry House and arrange for another van to come and take the place of the first one. Then they had to go through all the performance of getting Changeling out of one van into another in the middle of the road. Consequently by the time they reached the course the gelding wasn't in the best of moods and even Joanna was feeling a strange tingle of apprehension as she wondered what would go wrong next. She wasn't encouraged when Johnnie suddenly appeared looking rather tired to tell her testily that though he'd managed to get back the previous night the boss had been delayed in York and he didn't see how he could arrive in time to see her ride.

While Bill went off to explain to the judges why they were late and to make sure Changeling could still take part, Marjorie saddled the horse and Joanna went to walk the course, which was a few miles outside Lanry in the rolling Ayrshire countryside. It was raining steadily by now and as she looked at the course from the top of a slight hill on which the refreshment tents had been pitched Joanna felt her apprehension grow.

The pattern of jumps was complicated and she knew she would have to have complete control over Changeling. There was a tricky in and out jump called the Pen which would have to be taken at a moderate speed and there were several spread jumps including a ditch and rails at the foot of a steep drop. After that there was a pit jump which consisted of a birch rail, a grassy hollow in which there was another jump and a steep slope to another birch rail at the top.

When she had finished walking the course she pushed through the crowd of spectators, most of whom were wearing riding macs or good weatherproof tweeds, towards the horse van where Marjorie was waiting with Changeling.

'What's it like?' asked Marjorie.

'Fearsome. I'll never make it.'

'Of course you will. It's not like you to have doubts. Here, let me tie your number card on.'

She tied the tapes of the white card with the black numerals round Joanna's waist just as Johnnie came up leading a black gelding which was ridden by a small hunchbacked man who tipped his bowler hat to Joanna and Marjorie when Johnnie introduced him as Colin Gillespie.

'I believe you and I are paired, Miss Frost,' said Mr Gillespie. 'It's a pleasure, I'm sure. Have you walked the course?'

Joanna said that she had.

'Good. The Novice Class will begin in fifteen minutes and you and I are the sixth couple to participate. Now I suggest you let me set the pace. I've been riding these trials for many years and I like to think I know my way round. It's interesting to know your horse belongs to Steve Millar. Several years ago I was paired' with him in this same event. It looks an intelligent beast. This one I'm riding is a bit of an unknown quantity, so be prepared for surprises.'

He was a well-informed, jolly man and Joanna found his continuous flow of words as he recounted experiences in the hunting field soothing as they waited for their turn. By the time their number was called over the sound system she was in control of herself .aftd of Changeling,, and had ceased to scan the crowd of spectators. All that mattered was riding and getting the gelding round the course without any accident.

When she recalled the Hunter Trials in the days that followed Joanna's memories were mainly sensuous. The sting of damp air on

her hot face; the noise of galloping hooves; the smell of churned up earth; the feeling of being suspended in the air for a brief moment above a fence before coming down on the other side of it.

Always just ahead of her were the sleek black hindquarters of Pirate, Mr Gillespie's mount. He went for the Pen too fast and had to be checked. He swerved away from the stile and wire and had to approach it again. She had no problem with Changeling. The gelding cleared everything easily and kept up his usual steady pace between the jumps. But she had a moment of anxiety when Pirate after clearing the ditch fell on the other side, flinging his rider to the ground. Close behind, Joanna had no chance to check her mount. Changeling cleared the ditch and to her relief responded to her whisper and a pull on the reins and managed to avoid the obstacle of booted legs and horses hooves as Mr Gillespie and Pirate rolled over and got to their feet.

Then came the pit, as she slid down into the hollow, clinging to Changeling's back, whispering encouragement, she felt sure that the gelding would never be able to jump the rail at the bottom. But he made it and they were scrambling up the other steep side to clear another jump at the top.

From then on everything else seemed comparatively easy and it was possible to enjoy riding and jumping in company with another good horse and rider. The rain stopped, the sky cleared gradually and a pale sun glittered through the flurry of raindrops shaken from the trees as Changeling and Pirate finished the course and made their way back to the field which had been roped off for competitors, their vans and their horses.

As they entered the field Joanna and Mr Gillespie congratulated each other on their horses' performances, hoped that they'd meet again some time and then separated to go to different parts of the field. Looking round for the Lanry House horse van, Joanna saw Johnnie

coming towards her. He was accompanied by a big man who was wearing a flat tweed cap and a belted white riding mac. He had a full-jowled longish face and sharp black eyes which roved over Changeling assessingly as he came to stand at the horse's head.

'This is the greatest wee jumper I've seen for a long time, and you show him to advantage, lass,' he observed in a thick asthmatic voice. 'I'm Sam Craik and I want to buy this horse.'

'And I'm Joanna Frost, and he's not for sale,' she retorted spiritedly.

'I'm not the only one here who's interested. I want the horse now before anyone else has a chance to offer and force up the price. I know Steve Millar only too well. He's a hard one to bargain with. Where is he anyway?'

'I don't know. Now if you'll excuse me, Mr Craik, I'd like to take Changeling over to the horse-box and un\* saddle him. I think he deserves a rest, don't you?' replied Joanna.

His black eyes twinkled up at her and his hand tightened on the bridle.

'Yes, I do, my dear. But you don't get rid of me in that way. I'm sticking with you and this horse .until Steve turns up so that I can hear his refusal to sell from his own lips.'

## CHAPTER SIX

WITH all the swaggering air of one accustomed to leading in winning horses, Sam Craik led Changeling across the field to the red Lanry Estate horse van. As they approached the van Joanna could see that Marjorie and Bill were talking to someone, a man whose straight shoulders were covered with elegant tweed and whose hair was reddish brown. She felt the familiar crazy leap of her heart and felt the blood rush to her cheeks. Then she was quelling the joy as she looked round cautiously to see if Consuelo had come with Steve.

As she saw her coming Marjorie waved a hand in her direction and Steve turned.

'Being a little previous, aren't you, Sam?' he called out mockingly. 'That's my job you're doing.'

'Just getting in a bit of practice for when he's mine,' chuckled the big man.

Changeling stopped by Steve, nuzzled him as usual and received the usual caresses.

'It's taken you long enough to get back from York,' probed Sam, his black eyes inquisitive. 'What happened? Did you get involved in one of Ralph Crawley's parties?'

Steve's smile was enigmatic as he continued to fondle the horse. So far he hadn't spared a glance or a word for Joanna.

'That, and a little haggling over the price of the filly I'd entered in the Yorkshire Oaks,' replied Steve. 'Crawley wanted her for a song because she only managed fifth place. I didn't sell. I left about nine o'clock and had to put up for the night at Alton as by then I'd had enough of driving. I drove the rest of the way this morning, and

arrived home about an hour ago. It wasn't a bad party. I wish I could have stayed longer.'

He was standing close to the horse's left side, his shoulder almost touching her left leg, and as she looked down at his well-brushed hair, at the healthy tan of his lean face, at the crisp set of his shirt collar and the smooth fit of his jacket across his shoulders Joanna wondered how he managed to look so cool and unruffled after his party and his cross-country drive.

'You did well to get away from Crawley's at that time,' Sam was saying. 'I always avoid his parties when I go to York. Too much liquor and too many women.'

Steve laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

'I didn't know you were such a Puritan, Sam,' he taunted. 'I agree about the liquor, but not about some of the women.'

Joanna looked at him sharply. The hardness, was back and with it the sneering remark, the callous disregard for another's feelings. He was the hard-bitten unpleasant horse-owner she had met on the shore one morning in June.

'I'd like to get down and unsaddle, please, Steve,' she said quietly. She couldn't dismount with him standing so close. Her request brought his attention to her at last. He looked up, a cold impersonal grey glance.

'Hello, Jo. Marjorie tells me you rode **Well** today.'

That was all. No congratulations, no warm greeting, no smile. She had ridden better than she'd ever done and he hadn't been there to see her show his horse to advantage. Yet all he could offer was a casual off-hand comment. The difference in his attitude hurt sharply and she had to cover up by replying in kind.

'Of course I rode well. What did you expect? We manage very well without you, Changeling and I. I wondered you bothered to leave your party and come back. You weren't needed here.'

He stepped back quickly as if he had been struck and as she slipped from the saddle she saw anger flicker in his eyes. But he made no attempt to retaliate or to explain. He turned to Sam and said,

'So you still want to buy? How much?'

Joanna couldn't believe her ears. Surely he wasn't going back on his word? He'd promised he wouldn't sell while she was at Gilcroft. As she unbuckled the saddle girth she held her breath waiting for Sam Craik's answer.

'I'll give you five hundred for him, now,' he said, taking out his cheque book with a flourish.

'You're not going to refuse, Steve! That's a good offer for a horse which hasn't been tested much,' exclaimed Marjorie excitedly.

Bother Marjorie! Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut? 'thought Joanna savagely, as the saddle fell into her lap and she inspected the marks it had left on Changeling's coat. Now what could she do, what could she say to stop Steve from accepting the offer?

'I must admit it's difficult to refuse,' he said coolly. 'I haven't sold a horse since Ascot. But I'm not sure, Sam.'

'You can't have had a better offer already,' Sam said quickly. 'There hasn't been time.'

'No, I haven't,' admitted Steve slowly. 'As a matter of fact I'm thinking of keeping the horse for this winter. I'd like to hunt him.'

Sam's reaction was explosive.

'You're a fool to refuse!' he roared huskily. Then more quietly, 'You're pulling my leg. You must be. Hunt him yourself when you've an offer like mine? I can't understand you. You need your head seeing to.'

'I'm beginning to think so too,' said Steve dryly. 'It's lunch time. Supposing we go and discuss this in the refreshment tent? They might be selling some of your beer there, Sam.'

They walked away together without another word to either Marjorie or Joanna.

'They might have invited us to have lunch with them,' remarked Marjorie caustically, 'but then I don't think I'd have enjoyed it. Steve is in a foul mood. I wonder why he doesn't want to sell. If he's been having bad luck lately you'd have thought he'd jump at an offer like that. Unless he's hoping to get Sam to offer more.'

'I expect he's not selling for the reason he gave. He wants to hunt Changeling himself,' snapped Joanna. Steve had kept the condition, but only just. And even now he might be trying to raise the price Sam had offered, as Marjorie had suggested.

'You are cross,' Marjorie was saying. 'I suppose you're tired. It was rather a hectic morning... and you received very little thanks for your efforts. As soon as Changeling's in the van we'll go back to Gilcroft. I assume Steve wants the horse taken there. He didn't give any orders about it.'

'Where's Johnnie?'

'I don't know. Gone for lunch, I expect. He sloped off while Steve and Sam were talking.'

They had just managed to get Changeling into the horse van when Tom came up to them. He looked very cheerful and relaxed after his

trip to the Highlands, thought Joanna, and she wondered whether he had enjoyed it more than he had anticipated.

'Why are you leaving so soon?' he asked. 'I was hoping you'd come and have lunch with us in the refreshment tent. Jackie's here, and Karen.'

'Well, there's no reason why Jo shouldn't go with you. She deserves some light entertainment after all her hard work on Lord Muck's behalf,' said Marjorie. 'But I happen to be a mother these days and I'm dying to get back to my baby.'

'That's very understandable,' agreed Tom. 'Will you stay, Jo? This is the last time I'll see you. I'm flying to London early in the morning with Jackie and Karen. Glen is due to arrive at Heathrow tomorrow. He and Jackie have decided to make a go of marriage again. We're going to meet him and then I'll fly home from there. I believe Jackie wants to make some arrangements with you about the pony.'

Pleased to hear that Jackie and her husband had decided not to separate, Joanna agreed to stay to lunch and went with him to the big green tent. When she entered its steamy atmosphere she noticed at once Steve and Sam sitting at a table with Colin Gillespie and Johnnie. Johnnie was talking and the others were listening attentively. With their weather-beaten faces, narrowed shrewd eyes, their tweed suits, riding macs, their hearty laughter as Johnnie finished his story, they looked and sounded to Joanna what they were, men who were knowledgeable about horses, and she experienced a sudden longing to be a participant in their conversation and their laughter. Feeling betrayed by the longing, she turned her back on them and went to sit with Jackie.

'Everything has happened so quickly that I'm as giddy a baby on a swing,' said Jackie happily. 'As soon as Glen has seen some of the sights of London he wants us to go back with him to the States, so we

won't be returning to Lanry House. Neither will Pops. I had to tell Steve this morning. He was a little annoyed because he'd let the place to us until Christmas. I assured him that Pops will keep the contract and pay rent until then, but I don't think he likes the house to be empty. And then on top of everything else what are we going to do with Cindy?'

'You can't sell her, Mom. I'll be mad if you do. I'll run away and you'll have to go to the States without me,' announced Karen defiantly.

'But you can't take her to the States. You may as well sell her here and buy another pony when you get home.'

'Dad will never let me. You know he hates horses. That's why I've got to hang on to the one I've got. They're always moving horses about these days, so why can't we send Cindy by air freight?'

'It would be kinder to leave her here,' said Joanna quietly, and Karen turned to look at her.

'Do you really think so? Won't she miss me?'

'Not for long. If I were a pony I'd hate to be cooped up on a plane or a ship and taken to the other side of the Atlantic.'

'As usual Jo can only see the problem from the horse's angle,' said Tom, gently mocking. 'But I guess she's right, Karen. It wouldn't be fair to Cindy to force her into a plane and fly her across when there are perfectly good ponies to be bought over there.'

'I know that. But how can I persuade Dad to let me have one? You know how mean he was about it before. Oh, Jo, I wish you could come to London and talk to him.'

A movement over to her right caught Joanna's attention and she glanced out of the corner of her eyes. Steve and Sam were leaving.

She was sure Steve had seen her sitting with Jackie and Tom, but she doubted if he would want to speak to her after the way she had criticised him, and she felt a stab of regret. Even though he hadn't seemed particularly overjoyed by the horse's success and about seeing her again she needn't have lashed out at him. She should have remembered that he didn't like revealing his real feelings in company. Maybe if Sam Craik and Marjorie hadn't been there he would have behaved differently.

Aware that Tom was watching her, she withdrew her gaze from the two men who were just leaving the tent and said to Jackie,

'How long will you be in London?'

'About three weeks, I guess.'

'I'll be going to Reading soon. I've been offered a position as a riding instructor at a school in Berkshire, and the proprietor wants to talk to me about it at the end of the month. I could visit you in London, or you could come down to the country. Berkshire is lovely and there's plenty of good riding.'

Everyone seemed to speak at once.

'Gee, that'd be great,' said Karen, her eyes shining. 'You could tell Dad how good I am and persuade him to buy me a pony when I get back home.'

'We'd love to see you, Jo,' said Jackie warmly.

'Who'll ride Changeling when you've left Gilcroft?' asked Tom pointedly.

'Perhaps Consuelo will. He'd make a good wedding present,' she replied as lightly as she could, then realised both Jackie and Tom were staring at her in surprise.

'Do you know where Consuelo is right now?' asked Tom.

'No. I thought she must be back in Lanry.'

'She's in Washington, D.C., and guess why?'

Joanna stared at Jackie and whispered incredulously,

'Your father?'

Jackie nodded and her big bright smile appeared.

'Yeah. He's running hard and fast, and it looks like he'll escape because he's a wily old devil. In a way I feel responsible for his predicament, because I encouraged him and Consuelo to be friendly. When Steve told me of the\*-dilemma in which his father's will had placed him I felt very sorry for him. I could see he was worried and unhappy. The fact that his father had left all the money to Consuelo had made running the Lanry estate very difficult and it had turned whatever liking he may have once had for Consuelo into sheer hate. Yet he felt compelled to marry her. So when Pops showed an interest in her—he's always been a flirt—and I saw her being attracted by him, I encouraged them.'

'But Tom told me that Consuelo had gone to London and that he thought Steve had gone after her I' exclaimed Joanna.

'That's right. She took off after that fiasco when she hurt Changeling,' replied Jackie. 'She came to me the day afterwards. My, was she in a state? Steve had called to see heT the night before after he'd seen the horse. He'd been very angry with her for damaging the horse and for upsetting you. He told her to quit Lanry, that he never wanted to see her again and that he was tired of her hanging around waiting for him to marry her. I suggested that she should go away, but I never thought she'd go running after Foster.'

And all this time she'd been thinking that Consuelo had been with Steve, in London, in Ireland, and until she had heard differently from Steve himself today, in York. Joanna glanced at Tom and he grinned ruefully.

'I know what you're thinking,' he said. 'I gave you wrong information. But I was deceived too. I'd forgotten he wasn't exactly head over heels in love. When he went away I assumed he'd gone to make it up with her. I'd forgotten business always comes first with him. I'd forgotten the racing schedule rules his life.'

'Do you think Consuelo will come back?' Joanna asked Jackie. The American had understood Steve so much better than she had, possibly because she was older and had experienced unhappiness in her own marriage.

'I don't know. If she has any pride, she won't, not if what she told me Steve said to her is true. He didn't spare her, from all accounts. It would be better if they didn't marry. They'd be terribly unhappy if they did, or at least Steve would be. He'd always feel as if he'd been tricked.'

Joanna nodded in agreement.

'Consuelo told me once that she'd persuaded Sir Henry to change his will so that Steve would have to marry her if he wanted the money. I don't think she cared whether he loved her or not. She just wanted to make sure he didn't marry anyone else.'

'What a crazy mix-up,' commented Tom with a sigh. 'Do you know, you almost have me feeling sorry for the guy. Seems he's been walking a tight-rope for years.'

Karen, who had been listening with ill-concealed impatience to all this nonsensical adult talk, interrupted curtly,

'This has nothing to do with Cindy. What are we going to do with her? I can't just sell her to anyone, not after all she's meant to me.'

Joanna smiled at her, glad of the interruption. Jackie's insight into Steve's problems and her attempts to help him had churned up emotions she preferred to ignore.

'I think the Cowans might buy her from you if you tell them you want to sell. Come back to Gilcroft now and have a ride on Cindy, and talk to Bill and Marjorie. They should be there by now.'

'I've got a better idea, honey,' said Jackie. 'I'll come with you and together we'll present Cindy to Gilcroft stables in memory of the wonderful rides and lessons you've had there this summer.'

The demonstrative Karen flung her arms round her mother's neck and hugged her affectionately.

'I like that idea. Come on, let's go to Gilcroft. Hurry !'

When they arrived at the riding school they found Johnnie there. He had come over, he said, to make sure Changeling had not suffered any more damage. Leaving the others to talk to Bill and Marjorie, Joanna went with him to the pasture where the gelding was grazing. Johnnie whistled and the horse loped across the field and stood quietly while the backs of his legs were examined.

'Aye, he's as right as rain. No damage,' grunted Johnnie. He slapped the horse on its rump and it cantered away. Then as they left the pasture and closed the gate he turned to Joanna, gave her one of his sharp horse-assessing glances and said grumpily,

'Ye know about Craik's offer? Ye were there? Well, he increased it to seven-fifty—a grant offer, and the way things are at present, one we shouldn't refuse. But what happens? After no luck at York and heavy losses all summer the boss turns down seven hundred and fifty quid

for an untried gelding. If he was goin' to race it himself I could understand, but he says he's goin' to hunt it. I've never known the like before. D'ye ken what's got into him?'

Under his sharp questioning gaze Joanna's faltered. She looked away across the sun-bright pasture to the gelding. Tail swinging gently from side to side, he was cropping the grass.

'Maybe he likes Changeling too much to sell him,' she suggested.

'Huh. Never known sentiment to influence him either. There must be something addlin' his brain,' grumbled Johnnie. He leaned his arms on the top rail of the fence and resting his chin on them he stared at the gelding too. 'Aye, and another thing, it's not like him to be so restless either, goin' to parties and burnin' the candle both ends. I reckon somethin's gone sour on him. He sent the beauty queen packin' and I'm thinkin' he's thinkin' he made a mistake there. She's gone off? and that's the last we'll see of old man Millar's money, ye can bet a cert on that. Aye, we're in a bad way.'

Troubled by the implication that Steve was regretting having quarrelled with Consuelo, Joanna asked hesitantly,

'Is Mr Millar having financial problems, then?'

'The money hasna' been rollin' in lately because we havena' had any big wins nor have we sold a horse. Ye canna run a place like yon estate on peanuts. We depend on the winnings to finance the estate, ye ken, now that her ladyship has all the money. Och, if it goes on like this I can see he'll have to sell more land. I hear the Government are lookin' for a big house with some land in this area for a physical recreation centre and that they've already been in touch with the boss. If that happened it would put paid to Gilcroft Riding School because the centre would offer ridin' as well as other sports facilities.'

'And what will happen if he doesn't sell land?'

'Well now, we'd all have to tighten our belts to make ends meet and the estate would get run down. We're short of labour now, includin' a stable boy, and I noticed he hasna' bothered to advertise for a new one. That'll mean more work for me and I'm not gettin' any younger.'

He stopped grumbling and for a while they both leaned on the fence. As she struggled to put Johnnie's pessimistic statements in the right perspective, Joanna noticed that the colours of the now familiar landscape had changed during the past week. The hills were more purple. The fields instead of being a patchwork of different greens were now a patchwork of green, yellow and brown. Summer was passing and the season of fruitfulness was on its way.

'Aye,' sighed Johnnie lugubriously, 'I ken by the number of berries on the holly trees that we're in for a hard winter in more ways than one. We may have some luck at Ayr, of course. But I still canna' understand why he won't sell that horse. Ye ken, don't ye, lass?'

He shot the question at her suddenly with a Sideways glance. She stiffened.

'Yes, I do,' she replied honestly.

'Then if ye've any sense ye'll do somethin' about it,' he said sternly like a father reaching the end of his patience. 'Ye're a good lass, none better, but ye're still young and in need of guidance like the gelding out yonder.'

He pouched her briefly and almost affectionately on the shoulder and walked away. Joanna stayed where she was leaning on the fence, trying to make sense out of what he had told her. He had guessed Steve had turned down Sam Craik's offer because he had promised not to sell Changeling while she was at Gilcroft and was able to ride the horse. And now Johnnie was worried because Steve had sent Consuelo away and there wasn't much chance of the Millar money

returning to the Lanry estate. He also knew that Steve needed every penny he could make from racing and selling horses and he knew that so far the season had been an unsuccessful one for the Lanry stables. And he had implied that she could help by releasing Steve from the condition she had imposed. In other words, she must leave Gilcroft so that Changeling could be sold.

It would be hard to leave. She loved the place, she loved the horse, but she knew now that she also loved the man. To help him she would give up the place and the horse. She would return Changeling tomorrow, tell Steve she was leaving and that he was free to sell him.

Her painful musings were interrupted by a loud shout from Karen.

'Hi, Jo, come and saddle up! We'll go for a last ride together.'

Joanna walked over to the stableyard. Last ride for Karen on Cindy. Tomorrow, last ride for herself on Changeling. Last time she would see Steve. It didn't do to think about it.

'Marjorie and Bill have said they'll have Cindy,' said Karen. 'They were terribly proud at first and wanted to buy her. But Mom talked to them and they gave in. Do you think we ought to have a plate made to put over Cindy's stall? It would say "Cindy, presented to Gilcroft in memory of Karen Carson who rode here".'

'That doesn't sound right to me,' replied Joanna gravely, although she was secretly amused at the girl's inflated idea of her own importance. 'In memory of' makes it sound as if you've died.'

'Oh, would it be better if I left it out?'

'Much better.'

A few minutes later Tom joined them and for the next hour the three of them rode together through the fields and woods which they had ridden during the summer.

After they had put away the tack when the ride was over, Tom detained Joanna in the tack room.

'I'll say my good-bye in here, unseen by inquisitive eyes,' he said. 'I won't see you again, Jo?' He made it sound like a question.

'No.'

'Not ever?'

'You never give up trying, do you?' she replied with a laugh.

'I don't like to be a loser, that's why,' he returned with a grin.

'Did you have a good trip to the Highlands?' she asked, curious to know how he had got along with his friend Carol.

'Yeah, it was great. Funny thing has happened, though. Carol has grown up.'

'Didn't she follow you around like she used to do?' teased Joanna.

'No, she didn't.' His brow wrinkled in a puzzled frown. 'At times she was a bit cool and stand-offish. Made the trip interesting, though.'

'Will you be seeing her when you get back to the States?'

'Before then. I'm flying back with her and her parents tomorrow. I'll be glad of company on the flight.'

'And glad that Carol came to Scotland?' prompted Joanna gently.

He grinned.

'O.K., Jo, I get the message. Yeah, I'm glad she came, and I'll be seeing her a lot when I get back to the States. Satisfied?'

Joanna nodded and he added quietly, 'But I'm glad I've known you too. We've had fun, Jo.'

Later that evening, Joanna told Marjorie and Bill of her decision to leave Gilcroft.

'But why all the rush? Why tomorrow?' exclaimed Marjorie.

'Because Steve promised he wouldn't sell Changeling until I left Gilcroft and by staying any longer I'm making it difficult for him to accept Sam Craik's offer. You said yourself that he'd be foolish to refuse such a good offer.' 'I know I did, but I didn't know then that you had him in a cleft stick. What on earth made you insist on such a promise?'

'At that time I couldn't bear the thought of him selling Changeling for racing purposes.'

An expression of exasperation crossed Marjorie's face.

'Honestly, Jo, weren't you being a little childish?'

'Childish, prejudiced, anything you like to call it. I wanted to find out if he would put sentiment before profit.'

'Your sentiments, in fact. You were asking an awful lot on such short acquaintance,' scolded Marjorie, 'and he did as you asked.'

'I suppose I was. I didn't think too clearly about it. I acted on impulse.'

'And this afternoon Steve kept trust. He refused to sell,' put in Bill quietly, watching Joanna with suddenly interested eyes. 'He must

think very highly of you, Jo. And now you don't mind if the horse is sold?'

'Not if he needs to sell it. This afternoon Johnnie told me that Steve needs every penny he can make from his horses to keep the Lanry estate going.'

'But isn't he going to marry Consuelo, after all?' asked Marjorie.

'I don't think so. She's gone to the States.'

'Well, well. Just think of Lord Muck feeling the financial pinch and being poor,' commented Marjorie.

'All things are relative,' remarked Bill. 'While he owns that estate I wouldn't call him poor. But to get back to you, Jo. We were hoping you'd stay here. We like having you here.'

'I like being here, but I have to go. Please try to understand.'

For a few minutes Marjorie and Bill were both silent as they studied Joanna's face. Then Marjorie said,

'Och, I understand all right. For once you're putting someone, a real live human being before a horse and I think that's a good sign. But what about Bonnie Lass? Will you want to take her with you? We'd like to buy her from you. We can afford an extra horse now,

thanks to you, and you must know we need her.'

And so by the time Joanna climbed the stairs to her little room in the attic everything had been arranged. Bonnie Lass had changed hands, Joanna's departure had been fixed for noon the next day and all she had to do was to pack her belongings.

It took her a long time to pack because she kept thinking about Steve. She was worried about him after listening to Johnnie's grumbles. Was Steve really regretting having sent Consuelo away? In a way she was responsible for him being angry with the other woman. If she hadn't given in to her own desires and hadn't ridden Changeling, or gone to lunch with Steve that day in Ayr, Consuelo would have had no reason to feel jealous. She would not have wanted to damage the horse in some way and consequently Steve would never have been angry with her nor sent her away.

She wondered what he was doing now. Was he spending the evening with Jackie or was he still with Sam Craik talking horses and drinking whisky? Or was he alone in that room in the old coach house thinking about Consuelo and wishing she hadn't gone away? Joanna found she disliked the picture of him being alone and yearning for Consuelo, so she concentrated on thinking why she had fallen in love with him. She knew so little about him really, and yet she knew so much. She knew he could be hard and uncaring when it suited him, but she also knew he could be tender and considerate. She would like to have stayed and discovered more about him. She would liked to have spent the rest of her life with him learning something new about him every day.

The last object she put in her suitcase was the book he had given her. She turned it in her hands, wondering why he had offered it to her. A memento of the day they had played truant, he had said. It had been a lovely day, even though Consuelo had hurt Changeling. ,,

She opened the book. On the fly leaf there was an inscription:

'To Henry with love from Martha' and under that there was a quotation from Burns: *'The heart's ay the part that makes us right or wrung.'*

Once, on that lovely day when the dazzle had been on the sea and the roses had bloomed beside the bonny Doon, she had thought she had

found Steve's heart, a foolish romantic fancy which had persisted in spite of his absence until today. It persisted now, even though he had come too late to see her ride today and had greeted her so casually. He had a heart and he wasn't past hurting, as Johnnie had once said, but he was very good at hiding his heart and his hurt. And so she could only think that his coolness today had been deliberate because he had become impatient with the condition that he mustn't sell Changeling while she was at Gilcroft. He wanted her to leave because he wanted to sell Changeling and when she was gone he would ask Consuelo to come back.

Well, she would give in gracefully and go away, enabling Steve to ignore his heart and do what his head dictated.

Next morning was crisp and cool. By the time Joanna was on the way to Lanry House the sun had freed itself from grey clinging clouds and was shining out of a pale blue sky. Across the forbidden fields of the Lanry estate she could see the shimmer of yellow light on the sea and the slate blue mountains of Arran playing hide and seek among the thin wreaths of cloud.

As she rode along the grass verge she rehearsed in her mind the speech she would make to Steve when she handed Changeling over to him. She would be like him, cool and off-hand, hiding her real feelings. On no account must he know that she was leaving to help him. She would make it quite clear that she had had a good offer from a superior riding school, an opportunity too good to miss, and that she was leaving almost immediately and so was returning Changeling to him. She would thank him courteously for allowing her to ride his horse. She would say good-bye and leave. Naturally her mental conversation was completely onesided and in her imagination Steve had nothing to say.

The driveway to Lanry House was a tunnel of sun- shot green light as the sun's rays filtered through the summer thick foliage of the over-arching trees. Birds sang among the trees and in the distance there was the throb of a farm tractor starting up for its day's work. A pleasant morning full of the pleasant sounds of the countryside, ideal for the pleasant occupation of riding, and she wished that such mornings could always be hers.

And so they would be, she asserted firmly. There were other driveways along which she would ride, other trees through which the sun would shine other horses she would ride. Life wouldn't come to an end just because she had to leave this place.

Changeling's ears blurred suddenly as tears filled Joanna's eyes. There would never be another horse quite like Changeling in her life. Furiously she shook the tears away. She must stop being sentimental. What was so special about Changeling? He could jump well, that was all. But so could many other horses. Yes, but those other horses didn't belong to Steve Millar.

In an attempt to stop such betraying thoughts she urged the gelding to a trot and posted elegantly along the remainder of the drive to the courtyard in front of the house.

The courtyard was empty, swept clean of cars. The front door of the house was firmly closed. Blinds had been pulled down so that the windows looked blank. The home was empty of people. Tom, Jackie and Karen had gone. The American occupation was over and Lanry House was silently waiting for another tenant. The silence had a quality of sadness and Joanna left the courtyard quickly and went down the rest of the drive to the coach house.

The red door was closed too, but upstairs the windows were unmasked and open and curtains moved in the morning breeze. She dismounted, looped the reins over her arm, raised the brass knocker

on the door and knocked twice. She waited. No one opened the door, so she turned the knob and pushed. The door opened. The office room behind it was empty.

'If ye're lookin' for the boss, he's away, ridin' on the shore.' Johnnie's gruff voice speaking behind her made her jump guiltily. Closing the door, she turned.

'I've brought Changeling back,' she said.

'Aye, I see that,' he said dryly. His small sharp eyes looked the horse over and then looked her over. 'Taken the hint, have ye?' he asked.

She nodded.

'Good lass! I'm thinking ye'd better do your own explainin' though. The boss doesn't like anyone to run out on him without tellin' him why. Ye know y'r way?'

He pointed to the door in the grey wall beside the coach house. It was the door through which she'd gone with Tom on to the shore that moonlit night over a month ago.

She offered the reins to Johnnie.

'No,' he said, 'take the horse with ye. He loves to ride on the sand and I dinna' know how far the boss has gone. Ye may have to ride far.'

When the door in the wall had closed behind her and Changeling, she remounted immediately and then looked up and down the shore. Northwards the sand stretched invitingly beside the long arm of the sea. Green islands and distant hazy mountains beckoned to her, but as she did not see what she sought she looked away to the south and was momentarily blinded by the dazzle of sunlight on the sea. Shading her eyes with her hand, she looked along the shore. Near the reef of red

sandstone rocks she could just make out the dark shape of a horse and its rider moving slowly beside the shimmering water.

She urged Changeling to a canter and rode towards the rocks. The dazzle of light on the water shifted as wind riffled through it. It disintegrated into separate splashes of golden reflections and then reformed into one intense blaze.

Although she was sure Steve must have heard the noise of Changeling's approach he didn't turn to look at her until she was beside him. He was riding a young chestnut stallion and he reined in when he saw her. She turned Changeling so that the gelding's head was parallel to the other horse's hindquarters and that way she could look directly at Steve.

He stared at her from under slightly frowning eyebrows.

'Have you been trespassing again?' was his rather irritable greeting.

'No, I came by road. Johnnie told me you were here. I came to talk to you.' -

His frown grew blacker and his eyes were storm grey. Getting out the wrong side of the bed in the morning seemed to be a habit with him, she thought, with a wistful attempt to see the humorous side.

'Why?' he rapped. 'Johnnie knows I like to ride alone in the morning. What do you want?'

Hostile and arrogant, just as he'd been that morning in June. Wanting the whole shore to himself. Selfish and unpleasant. While he was in this mood saying good-bye to him would be easy.

'I don't want anything, thank you,' she replied, her serenity the direct product of his bad temper. 'I've brought Changeling back.'

Surprise dispersed his frown momentarily, but it came back.

'Why?' he demanded.

'Because I'm going away.'

'When?' 'Today.'

The frown disappeared altogether and his eyes became blank as the familiar withdrawn expression smoothed away any real clues to his feelings. He glanced away at the glittering water.

'Of course, I should have guessed,' he murmured. Then more crisply he added, 'Leave the horse with Johnnie, will you, please. I expect he'll drive you back to Gilcroft, if you ask him.'

He lifted the reins and the chestnut horse began to move forward. It had hardly gone a few feet when he urged it into a canter. Riding off into the bright shafts of sunlight, Steve did not turn once to look back at her.

Turning Changeling round, Joanna sat and stared after the other horse and its unpredictable rider. This was it. This was the end. Somehow the parting from Steve had not gone as she had planned. She had not been able to make her speech. But then she had not been able to predict his reaction. She hadn't imagined he would ride off without saying good-bye. Instead of being pleased that she was leaving and that he would be free at last to sell Changeling he had behaved as if he couldn't have cared less. What an anti-climax!

She was about to turn Changeling again and go back to Johnnie when there flashed across her mind suddenly, vividly, the memory of Steve riding away from her the morning they had first met. She shaded her eyes with her hand again. The young horse had stopped cantering and was walking slowly along the edge of the water, its head down as it

sniffed curiously at the wavelets. Its rider sat carelessly, his shoulders slumped, apparently not caring about what the horse was doing.

She couldn't go without saying good-bye. She couldn't leave with this cold leaden feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had to know if she had hurt his feelings and why, and if she had she had to try and make amends.

She urged Changeling to a full gallop. Excited by the feel of the sand, the horse went like the wind, travelling a good hundred yards past the dawdling chestnut before Joanna could stop it by hauling with all her strength on the reins.

When the horse stopped she turned it and looking back saw to her horror that Steve was having trouble with the chestnut, which was rearing and whinnying with fear, splashing about in the shallow water. By the time Joanna reached him he had managed to calm the distressed horse. Once clear of the water he dismounted and led the panting, rolling-eyed animal away from the sea to the grass verge in front of the grey wall.

Slipping from the saddle, Joanna pulled Changeling after her and followed Steve. He was soothing the chestnut with soft words and gentle hands.

'What happened?' she asked anxiously.

'He tried to bolt, that's all,' he replied cuttingly. 'Don't you know better than to ride past an unsuspecting highly-strung horse at that speed? You and Changeling startled him. What were you trying to do— break my neck?'

Her back stiffened and her head came up.

'If the horse is so highly-strung you shouldn't have been riding so carelessly,' she retorted. 'How was I to know he's nervous?'

'By observation.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make him bolt,' she apologised, suddenly meek. He was right, she should have noticed more about the horse, but she had been too busy observing him, too troubled by the dark shadows round his eyes and the grim set to his mouth to bother about the horse. Looking closely at it now, she could see that it was a thoroughbred stallion whose elegant arched neck, short back and generous quarters were indicative of its breeding.

'Well, if it wasn't your intention to unseat me and give me a soaking, or to break my neck, why did you come after me? I thought you'd stated your business and finished back there,' he said sourly.

'I... you see ... I mean ...' she stammered stupidly. Emotion was taking over. In none of her flashbacks had he been as unpleasant as this. She couldn't speak straight, so she had to stop. She couldn't look at him because her eyes were filling with tears and he might see them.

'No, I don't see. What do you mean?' he queried, and although there was a certain dryness in the tone of his voice, the unpleasant harshness had gone.

Above the water line the sand was soft. She pushed at it with one foot and watched the grains slide off the toe of her black riding boot as she tried to recover her composure sufficiently to speak. She noticed that Steve was also wearing riding boots this morning, but instead of breeches he wore a faded pair of jeans stuffed into the tops of the boots. And above the jeans, incongruously contrasted with them, he wore a well-tailored shirt of fine checked **Wool** which was open at the neck. Her gaze lingered briefly on his taut features before returning to contemplate her boot again and she muttered gruffly,

'I came after you to say good-bye.'

She heard him draw his breath in sharply and then let it out again shakily, and she braced herself for another impatient retort.

'Do we have to?' he grated.

'It's usual and polite and pleasant to say good-bye,' she persisted forlornly.

'You may have noticed I don't feel polite or pleasant this morning, he replied coolly.

She was able to look up at last. He was soothing the chestnut again and taking no interest in her or Changeling whatsoever. A tiny spark of anger flared inside her.

'You should be,' she said crossly. 'Now that I'm leaving you'll be able to sell Changeling to Sam Craik.'

He stopped stroking the chestnut and gave her a sharp glance over the horse's nose.

'I've no intention of selling Changeling to Sam.'

'But you need the money.'

'Do I?' he asked haughtily. 'You seem to know more about my affairs than I know myself. Please tell me more. Why do I need the money?'

Joanna flushed. He had every reason to be unpleasant to her now. Noticing her hesitation and discomfiture, he moved towards her, the horse's reins looped over his arm.

'Tell me, Joanna, why I need the money,' he urged softly, dangerously.

Unhappy because she had unwittingly revealed that she had listened to people prattling about his affairs, she began uncertainly,

'Johnnie said ...'

'Johnnie has always talked too much, and if I was really tough I'd have sacked him years ago for gossiping,' he said.

'He said that you've been unlucky at die races this year,' she continued as if he hadn't interrupted her. 'He said you'll have to economise this year, so I thought I'd better bring Changeling back and tell you that you don't have to keep that silly condition about not selling him while I'm here, because I'm going away.'

Her throat closed up and she had to look down quickly because the thought of going away was becoming more and more painful the longer they stood here together in the sunshine beside the glittering sea. She made a final effort, blinked her tears back, looked at him and thrust out her right hand.

'Now will you say good-bye?'

He gave her a dark underbrowed glance, took her hand in his. But the chestnut was growing restless, pulling at the reins, and Steve had to release her hand quickly to turn and calm the horse. Feeling rather shaky and more desolate than ever, Joanna prepared to mount Changeling.

'Good-bye, Jo,' said Steve. 'I hope you'll be happy in the States.'

The States! Her foot already in the stirrup ready to heave herself into the saddle, she wondered whether she was hearing correctly. She pulled her foot out of the stirrup and whirled round to face him.

'I'm not going to the States,' she said.

For the first time since she had known him he looked disconcerted.

'Then where are you going?'

'Back to Berkshire.'

'Why? Don't you like it here?'

Didn't she like it here? She liked being in Ayrshire far more than he would ever know, for a reason he couldn't guess at. But why was she leaving? So that he could sell Changeling? He had just told her that he had no intention of selling the gelding. Oh, well, then she was leaving so that he could enter it in a National Hunt race.

'I ... I've been offered a job in a very good riding school down south,' she said. 'It's a very good opportunity. Too good to be missed.'

Had she overdone the heartiness, the enthusiasm? He looked puzzled.

'Aren't you going to marry Tom Hilroy?' he asked warily.

'No.' She was beginning to feel irritable again. Why was he always harping on the possibility of her marrying Tom? 'I thought I'd made it plain from the beginning that I wasn't interested in marrying him.'

'Someone told me you'd changed your mind.'

'Who?'

'Consuelo.'

'But when? Why?'

'The last time I saw her, the day she hurt Changeling's legs. You'll remember I went to see her when I left you. I went to tell her I didn't want to see her again and that I wasn't going to marry her. She told me

then that you and Tom were very fond of each other, made for each other were her exact words,' he said with a cynical twist to his mouth. 'She said that Tom was gradually wearing you down and that he hoped you'd agree to marry him before he went back to the States. She said she'd seen you and him together while she'd been learning to ride and she had no doubt that you were very much in love with each other.'

He spoke in a flat monotone and when he had finished he shrugged as if the subject had lost interest for him.

'But why should she tell you a lie like that?' gasped Joanna, who felt as if she was lost in a fog even though the sun was warm and the air was clear.

'Was it a lie?' he countered. 'I was prepared to believe her. Tom was always at Gilcroft, and I asked you twice if he'd proposed and the second time you said that he had.'

'But I didn't say I'd accepted his proposal,' she retorted.

'True enough,' he agreed. 'But you behaved in a confused manner when I asked you, so I gathered that you were having a few problems adjusting to the idea and that it would just be a matter of time before you capitulated. Then yesterday when I saw you in the refreshment tent, all very friendly with him after giving me the sharp edge of your tongue, I concluded that he'd asked you a third time and you'd accepted. Your arrival here this morning to tell me you were leaving today fitted in. He'd gone, and I assumed you were going to follow him to London and then, fly with him to the States.'

He turned away to adjust the saddle girth on the restless chestnut. Joanna watched him thinking that she had never really considered how her friendship with Tom might appear to Steve. She had never considered either how Steve might interpret her behaviour when she

was with him. Emotional. Sharp edge of her tongue. Only with him did her emotions get out of control. Only to him had she been sharp. Why? Because when she was with him she was hypersensitive to everything he did and said.

Now it was very clear that Consuelo had been responsible for a great deal of misunderstanding. From the first she had shown an undue interest in Joanna's relationship with Tom. She had exaggerated that relationship and had fabricated a story which she had passed on to Steve.

'I still can't understand why Consuelo made up such a story about Tom and me,' she said.

'Possibly because she was jealous, because she knew ...' He broke off. Pride tautened his face. He didn't want to talk about Consuelo, that was obvious. 'Who knows what goes on in the mind of a woman?' he added bitterly.

After that there didn't seem to be anything more to say. Joanna turned away dispiritedly. Putting her foot in the stirrup, she swung up into the saddle and gathered the reins in her hand. She had got what she wanted. He had said good-bye.

She squeezed with her knees and Changeling moved off obediently in the direction of Lanry House. She didn't look back. Ahead of her the green islands and distant blue mountains beckoned beyond the shimmering sea. To her left the mountainous island sunned itself placidly. She had never visited it and now she supposed she never would. Regret seared her feelings. She supposed she would get used to living with it.

The sound of a horse's hooves muffled by soft sand, the noisy snort of its breathing, the creak of a leather saddle made her stiffen and square

her shoulders. The chestnut drew alongside, but she didn't turn to look at its rider.

'Is it really necessary for you to return to- Berkshire?' asked Steve casually. 'I'm looking for another stable hand and if I'd known you were available I'd have given you first refusal. But I suppose I'm too late with my offer and...' His voice trailed away to silence, tantalisingly.

Joanna caught her breath and glanced sideways at him. Then she answered quickly,

'I haven't taken the job yet. I wrote to the proprietor and said I'd go and see him when I returned to Reading. What would being a stable hand involve?'

'The usual tasks—mucking out, exercising the horses. Of course you'd have to forget any prejudice you have against horse-racing. I own horses primarily for racing purposes and I'm not going to change in spite of the recent run of bad luck. I'm a gambler and racing is in my blood, just as it's in yours if you'd only be honest and admit it.' He flicked a glance in her direction. 'Perhaps I should warn you there would be certain risks attached to the job.'

'What sort of risks?' She was suddenly intrigued. Out of her desolation joy was growing. Melancholy followed by delight.

'The boss might want to kiss you when he's making his rounds of the stables, and there's also a distinct possibility that he might ask you to live with him and share his table and his bed.'

Joanna's heart began to thud uncomfortably. A flush stained her cheeks pink. He was so casual about it all as if it was the sort of suggestion he made regularly. Wondering how to answer, she kept her gaze directed to the space between Changeling's ears, longing to

take a gamble, to agree to the risks, but hesitating because she might get hurt.

'Yes, or no, Jo. Take it or leave it,' he said quiedy, and she glanced at him. He was smiling. She could see the attractive dent in his cheek. Her heart leapt crazily, hopefully.

'Yes,' she said clearly.

'Quite sure?'

'Quite sure.'

'Because you want to stay near Changeling and ride him again?'

His question was urgent and probing. Throwing caution aside, she took a gamble.

'No, because I want to be near you,' she replied honestly.

She was unprepared for his reaction, as usual. He reined in quickly and dismounted, grabbed Changeling's bridle and forced the gelding to stop.

'Get down,' he ordered Joanna.

She stared down with puzzled eyes. "Why?" she quavered.

His eyes blazed up at her. 'Do as I say and you'll find out why.'

Obediently she slid to the ground. The reins of both horses\*looped over one arm, he reached out, seized her shoulder and pulled her towards him.

'I've been wishing for some time that you'd put me before my horse,' he muttered, and kissed her.

It wasn't a congratulatory kiss like the one she had received in the horse stall at Lanry Show. It wasn't a comforting kiss like the one she had received in his room at the coach-house. It was quite out of keeping with the peaceful sunny morning. It was a demanding, dead-of-night kiss. But the chestnut was restless and so was Changeling, and Steve had to release her to deal with them.

'I'm in love with you, Joanna,' he said over his shoulder as he calmed the chestnut and she coped with Changeling, 'and this is really no place to tell you, so I suggest we ride back to the coach-house and I'll tell you while we have breakfast together.'

He swung up on to the chestnut's back. Joanna blinked And stared up at him. As if in answer to the incredulous expression on her face Steve grinned suddenly, gaily.

'Don't look so astounded,' he mocked. 'Ever since that morning when I saw you riding Minnie and I wanted to give you a horse worth of your ability I've been acting strangely. There have been times when I've been disgusted with myself. No one has ever had the effect on me that you have. I've found myself doing totally unselfish acts just to please you because you have forget-me-not-blue eyes and a gentle way of rebuking me when I'm unpleasant.'

'I couldn't understand why you were so unpleasant to me,' remarked Joanna as she mounted Changeling again.

'Mostly self-defence. I resented you because you were a threat to my chosen way of life,' he retorted. 'You're not bad at defences yourself. All the time I've had an impression that you put up with me only because I owned Changeling and you wanted to ride him. However, after your reaction when I kissed you just now, I know differently this morning.'

The two horses moved forward side by side. It was like the morning in June when they had ridden together, only this time their backs were to the sun and they were no longer strangers.

'I was afraid to love you because I thought you were going to marry Consuelo,' explained Joanna shyly.

'For the money,' he added grimly. 'I was. I had it all planned and was nerving myself to take the drastic step when you came to Gilcroft. Every meeting I had with you seemed to underline the odd feeling I had experienced the first time we met that you represented so much that I'd always wished for in a woman. I discovered that as well as being able to ride and appreciate horses, you were also gentle and sensitive and possessed courage and endurance. Like the dazzle on the sea in the poem, you're alive beyond question, gentle Jo. After the day we played truant together I wondered how I could marry Consuelo, having known you. I was struggling with the problem when you came to tell me what she'd done to Changeling out of spite, so I had no difficulty then in deciding I couldn't marry her, not for all the money in the world. I went and told her, and she retaliated by laughing at me and saying that I was lovesick for a girl who was interested only in my horse and who preferred Tom to me because he was younger and gayer. I believed her. I had no reason to do otherwise. I decided that it was poetic justice, a form of punishment handed out for having planned to marry her for money and not for love. I thought I would get over it in time, but that didn't stop me from feeling thoroughly miserable.'

And she, thinking that he'd gone back to Consuelo after their lovely day of truancy, after their closeness in the coach-house and in the stable that evening, had been thoroughly miserable too.

'But I thought—Johnnie once said—that you fancied Consuelo for yourself before your father married her,' she stuttered. 'I thought you loved her.'

His mouth tightened and he scowled.

'Damn Johnnie!' he muttered. 'He knows more than is good for him. I loved Consuelo, or thought I loved her, a little in Argentina. She was beautiful, the atmosphere on the hacienda was romantic and I was ready for some light relief. When I came back to Scotland I soon forgot her, but I hadn't realised how tenacious she was. The time after the marriage was extremely difficult. She began to show far too much interest in me and in the end my father objected. But he blamed me for encouraging her, so I went away hoping to ease the situation. Consuelo followed me.'

He stopped talking because they had reached the reef of red sandstone rocks and had to guide the horses carefully through them. Once on the sand again Steve continued his narrative, the expression on his face bleak with the effort of putting his unpleasant memories into words for her benefit.

'Eventually I managed to persuade her that I would have nothing to do with her while she was married to my father. She came back here and I think she made him happy for the last years of his life. But in doing so she managed to destroy any trust he'd had in me and I wasn't surprised when he left her all the money. Incidentally, she was stretching the truth a little when she told you that the codicil in my father's will stated that the money would return to the Lanry estate when she married me. It didn't specify whom she should marry, only if she should marry again. Having known her quite a long time I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to marry her, so when I started losing money I decided to take a chance on marrying her myself to save the estate. I didn't reckon on falling in love with someone else.'

'She might marry Foster Hilroy,' suggested Joanna brightly.

'She might, but I think he's too clever for her, unlike my father.' He shrugged, then turned to smile at her. 'It's all over now and I'd prefer

to forget the unpleasantness Consuelo caused while she was here. In spite of the yarn Johnnie has been spinning to you, I'm not exactly poverty-stricken. When shall we get married, Jo?"

'You haven't asked me to marry you yet,' she teased. 'You've only mentioned something about living with you.'

'That was to test you,' he murmured. 'You didn't really think I'd anything other than marriage in mind, did you? Because if you had you can forget it. I was going to wait until you grew used to the idea of having me in love with you and I was going to use a little gentle persuasion to get you to fall in love with me. But that doesn't seem to be necessary now, and on second thoughts we'd better make it soon to stop the gossip. Once the grapevine knows you're working at Lanry Stables the tongues will start wagging. When, Jo?'

The rest of the ride was spent discussing dates. Soon they reached the door in the grey wall. Steve bent from the saddle to open it and then waited for Joanna and Changeling to go through first. But Joanna turned to look back along the shore at the sparkling yellow sand, at the mountains of the island dark beyond the dazzle on the sea. For a moment she gazed, feasting her eyes on the scene. When she turned her head again and glanced at Steve she discovered he was watching her with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

'It's all yours, Jo, every morning for as long as you want to ride with me.'

'That will be for ever,' she replied challengingly. 'I happen to be very conventional about marriage.'

'Be careful,' he warned with a mocking smile. 'Remember you'll have to put up with my early morning scowl and unsociability, unless you know of a way to ensure that I get out of bed the right side every morning.'

Joanna laughed at his use of the phrase which she had used herself to describe his ill-humour.

'I think I know a way,' she smiled.

'Then let's go and have breakfast,' he said softly, urging her and Changeling through the door. 'Even you have to admit that there are times when being on horseback is inconvenient, and this is one of them. Hurry, Joanna, I've waited for you for a long time.'