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Harlequin Presents...

**FLORA
KIDD**

the loving gamble



THE LOVING GAMBLE

Flora Kidd

She disapproved of what he stood for

A millionaire stockbroker was not the kind of man Rachel wanted. Her dream of succeeding as an artist came first.

Ross Eraser, dynamic and charming, changed Rachel's mind and the course of her life in four short weeks. And when people asked why a penniless artist might be marrying such a rich, successful man, Ross dismissed their remarks as petty jealousy.

But he couldn't silence the soft, accented voice that asked for him on the telephone--or the doubts that filled Rachel's mind as to why he had married her

CHAPTER ONE

THE feeling that she was being watched by someone she couldn't see made Rachel's skin prickle all over. Slowly she turned her head and glanced over her shoulder.

He was still there, in the shade of two graceful silver birches. He was standing, as she was, slightly apart from the group of laughing, talking people who were clustering about her cousin Jenny Vanway who had just been married to Dr Charles White. It wasn't easy to see what he looked like because he was dappled with the shadows of birch leaves, but she had the impression he was tall, his physique symmetrical, broad shoulders tapering down to lean hips. He was elegantly dressed in a silver-grey double-breasted suit.

She looked away from him and down the sloping lawn to the River Hudson, wide and shining in the mellow sunshine of late September. On the other side of the river, from the tops of reddish cedar-crowned cliffs the land rose up gradually in green curves to the summits of the Catskill Mountains. The slopes of the hills were ablaze with the colours of autumn, scarlet of maples, gold of elms and birches, threaded with the greens of cedars and pines.

Still aware of being stared at by the stranger and resenting what she considered to be his rudeness, she began to wander away in the direction of the path that wound down the steep bank to the narrow, stony beach that edged the river. Even though she and her brother Giles had been made very welcome when they had arrived in this part of the State of New York, three days ago, having flown over from Scotland to be at the wedding, she still felt like a stranger in a strange land.

Everything was so much larger here than it was at home in Scotland. The river was wider than any other river she had ever seen, the trees grew taller and there were more of them, and the land seemed to go

on and on for ever. Houses also were much bigger than any she had known, and the Vanways' sprawling split-level was more comfortable and luxurious than any house she had ever stayed in before. The people, too, were different: noisier, livelier, more outgoing and, she had to admit, friendlier than any people she had ever met before. Even her Aunt Moira was thoroughly Americanised now in her ways, and in her speech, too, so she also was a stranger.

Reaching the beach, Rachel strolled along, enjoying the warmth of the sunshine and watching a big tug pulling several loaded barges down-river. Some sailing boats from the nearby marina were trying to race in the almost windless air, their white sails glinting against the dark cliffs. For a moment she paused, trying to fix the scene in her mind, wishing she had her camera with her.

The crunch of stones under someone's shoes made her look back over her shoulder, and immediately she felt resentment flare up in her again. The tall man had followed her. His well brushed, fashionably trimmed hair shone with the reddish glow of polished mahogany in the sunlight. That was all she allowed herself to see before she walked on swiftly, her head held high, as she hoped to convey to him her dislike of being stalked by a complete stranger.

Beside her the historic river flowed, tranquil and unhurried. The tug and barges chugged by, the yachts lolled about aimlessly, sails empty and shaking. The beach ended, unfortunately, where an old wharf once used by transport barges jutted out into the water. The only way she could escape from the man, who was stalking her, was to climb either up the pilings of the wharf or up the steep bank to the top and to trespass into the garden of the house next door to the Vanways' house.

It was while she was eyeing the pilings, wondering where she could best get a foothold, that the stranger came up behind her and spoke. There was an undercurrent of amusement stirring beneath the pleasantly modulated tones of his voice.

'I wouldn't risk it if I were you,' he said. 'Not in those shoes or that pretty dress. You'll ruin them. Also the timbers aren't to be trusted. You could fall.'

She turned slowly to face him. He had taken off the jacket of his suit and was carrying it slung over one shoulder. The knot of his sleek silk blue and grey tie was loosened and the collar of his stark white shirt was undone. From between thick dark lashes his eyes, violet-coloured in the sunshine, surveyed her narrowly. While she stared at him in haughty silence, resenting her innate response to his physical attractions, he smiled at her, his lean, lightly tanned cheeks creasing, his well shaped teeth gleaming white.

'I could wait for ever to be introduced to you, so I've decided to introduce myself,' he continued smoothly, and she noticed there was hardly a trace of accent in the way he spoke English. He sounded neither British nor American.

'I'm Ross Fraser and I know you're Rachel Dow, Jenny's cousin, and you're from Edinburgh, Scotland. You and I have something in common. I was born in Edinburgh, though I've lived in the States since I was twelve and I'm a friend of Charlie White, Jenny's new husband. You were walking so fast I got the impression you were running away from me. Why?'

'I don't like being followed by someone I don't know,' she retorted, looking away from him at the river, her chin up, her eyelids drooping.

'Well, now you know who I am shall we walk back together?' he replied equably. 'Or are you really set on doing some mountaineering? Perhaps I should warn you that even if you did make it to the top of the bank the Perkins, who own the house and land up there, have two fierce Doberman dogs, trained to attack any intruders. I'm much less vicious.'

She glanced sideways at him from beneath her lashes. His pleasant mockery of himself did much to allay her resentment. Judging by the way he spoke and the expensive cut of his suit and shirt he was not only well educated but also wealthy. Suddenly intrigued by him, she decided to abandon her plan to evade him. Turning to face him, she smiled.

'Jenny did tell me she and Charles hoped you would be at the wedding,' she said. 'But she wasn't sure if you'd get to the church in time.'

'I just made it to hear them say their vows,' he replied, smiling back at her, and it seemed to her as if his smile was a ray of sunlight shining into her and warming the cold knot of caution and reserve inside her. 'I've not been to a wedding before,' he added as they began to walk side by side back the way they had come.

'Not even to your own?' she asked and he laughed.

'No, not even my own. How about you?'

'Oh, I've been to other weddings, at home, in Scotland, but none of them were as grand as Jenny's. In fact, until we arrived the other day my brother and I had no idea that Aunt Moira's husband was so well to do, nor that they lived in such a beautiful place.'

'I suppose, like many Brits, you had the impression that New York State is all industrial, with chimneys belching forth smoke everywhere and textile mills polluting rivers, like the Midlands and north of England, to say nothing of the Lowlands of Scotland,' he scoffed.

'Well, I had read that this river was badly polluted,' she retorted spiritedly. 'And it still doesn't look very clean.'

'It was even worse some years ago. But thanks to people like Pete Seeger, the folk-singer, it's been cleaned up, and although it's not completely free of pollutants yet, the fish in it aren't dying any more,' he replied. 'But you haven't answered my question. When I said how about you, I meant have you been to your own wedding? Are you married?'

'No.'

'Have you been?'

'No. I've never met anyone I've wanted to marry and I feel I never will.'

'Never will marry or never will meet anyone you'd like to marry?' he queried.

'Never will marry. I'm much too interested in trying to make a career for myself as an artist,' she answered lightly.

He stopped walking to turn to her. She paused too, returning his gaze frankly.

'No time for a man in your life, then?' he asked.

'Not seriously. I don't mind having men friends, but so far I haven't felt any great desire to give up my freedom to marry one of them.'

'What a waste,' he murmured enigmatically, his glance drifting over her face and then her figure.

'What do you mean?'

'I mean that you'd be so nice for a guy to come home to every night of his life, but if you never marry that won't happen and all your female

beauty and expertise will be wasted, never shared with a suitable mate, and never passed on to your children.'

'If I'd known the conversation was going to run along these lines I'd never have agreed to walk back with you,' she replied as coolly as she could. For a moment she had imagined what it might be like to have him come home to her every night of his life, and she had wished it could be.

Disturbed because he had, in a very few minutes, made a violent impact on her, she turned away and began to march quickly back along the beach, angry, not with him exactly, but more with herself for allowing him to get under her skin in such a short time. In her haste to get away from him she didn't look where she was going. Her left foot, in its neat low-heeled black pump that gave little or no support to her ankle, slipped on a stone, her ankle twisted, pain-shot through it and she sat down abruptly, moaning a little and bowing her head in agony.

'Well, well, I guess the old adage is right after all. Pride does come before a fall,' he mocked her. 'Let me help you up.'

'No.' She got up quickly but as soon as her left foot touched the ground she yelped, pulling it up sharply.

'What's up?' he asked.

'I think I've sprained my ankle,' she muttered weakly, and, without looking at him, she began to limp along, flinching at every step. Although not far away, the path that twisted down the bank from the Vanways' garden looked very distant at that moment.

'You'll never make it,' he said with aggravating male arrogance.

'Then what do you expect me to do?' she challenged, stopping to turn on him. He gave her another raking glance that did nothing to appease

her. It seemed to her he was actually measuring and weighing her in his mind. With a swift movement he shrugged on his jacket.

'I'll carry you,' he said forcefully.

'No.'

She stepped back defensively, forgetting she was close to the edge of the beach, and found herself standing in the river. Moving quickly and decisively, giving her no chance to avoid him, he stepped forwards and scooped her up into his arms.

Like bars of iron they supported her. Her head was close to his shoulder and when she looked at his face she could see the darker skin where he had shaved, the quirk of amusement at the corner of his sensually carved broad lips, the bold straight line of his nose, and the determined jut of his cleft chin above the strong column of his throat, the heart-appealing length of his eyelashes, only a few shades darker than his reddish-brown hair.

'I'd give anything for this not to have happened,' she muttered, uneasily aware that she longed to give in, to lay her head against his broad shoulder and relax, to let him take the load and be responsible for her.

His eyes flashed briefly down to her face and then looked straight ahead again as he walked along the beach.

'Pride again?' he taunted. 'You want to watch it...Pride never did anyone any good.'

'I hate being dependent on a stranger,' she persisted.

'I sense a feminist,' he scoffed. 'Don't you really mean you hate being dependent on a man? Actually I'm not a stranger. Not any more,' he added as he started to climb up the pathway, apparently effortlessly. 'I

feel as if I've known you all my life, even though we never met until today. I'm the guy who is going to marry you.'

'Oh, that does it! Put me down at once. Put me down.' She began to wriggle in his arms and he stopped walking.

'Be still or we'll both go backwards down the bank,' he rapped. He frowned down at her, his face hard and implacable, and she had her first taste of his steely determination to have his own way.

'Then put me down. I'll walk the rest of the way by myself,' she ordered.

'I'll put you down when we're on level ground and not before, you stubborn wench,' he growled, and forged on up the path.

'I could call you names too,' she said sniffing haughtily.

'So go ahead. There's nothing I enjoy more than a good slanging-match or argument, especially with a woman. Clears the air.'

She didn't say anything, guessing that he would win in any verbal sparring-match they might have because, like many other Americans, he was unreserved and he wouldn't care who overheard him or what anyone else might think of him. He didn't put her down when they reached the lawn but carried her up the steps to the deck, where several of the older guests were sitting and talking. Among the many exclamation's of concern, she heard her aunt's voice with a feeling of relief.

'Rachel, what's happened?'

Dark-haired and immaculate in her blue mother- of-the-bride dress, Moira appeared beside them.

'She's sprained her ankle,' said Ross. Fraser. 'Where shall I take her?'

'Oh, right into her room,' said Moira. 'This way, come through the kitchen.'

'It's all right. I can manage on my own,' said Rachel, trying to assert herself, but no one took any notice of her. Ross's arms tightened about her and he heaved her a little higher as they passed through the kitchen, in Moira's wake, and then went along a passageway to one of the spare bedrooms of the big sprawling house.

He laid her down on the pink quilted cover of the single bed and stood up straight looking down at her, a slight mocking smile curving his lips.

'You're a lot heavier than you look,' he gibed and turned to Moira. 'I guess, having been a nurse, you know what to do, and we don't have to ask Charles to examine her ankle?'

'Charles has already left with Jenny to go to Kennedy. We looked for you and Rachel all over to come and say goodbye. They dared not wait any longer,' Moira replied briskly, bending over the bed and studying both of Rachel's ankles. 'You'll have to take your pantyhose off, dear,' she continued. 'It's the left one isn't it? Looks as if it's swelling nicely. I'll bring a bowl of water and you can soak it for a while, then I'll bind it up. I'm afraid you're going to have to rest it. No gadding off to Manhattan tomorrow to visit the art museums.'

'It's so disappointing,' Rachel complained, wincing, when Moira touched the tender spot on her ankle. 'Giles and I were looking forward to visiting the city so much.'

'Giles?' queried Ross, who had been looking in the mirror of the dressing-table and fixing his tie. A wave of his hair had slid down over his forehead and now he combed long fingers through it to lift it back as he turned to look at her. Again she was smitten by his physical attractions; his muscular strength sheathed in a silk shirt and

fine worsted wool; that glint of warm violet in the cool greyness of his eyes, like a flame encased in ice, sending strange delicious shivers tingling through her.

'He's my brother,' she murmured.

'Well, Giles will just have to go without you,' said Moira practically.

'If I had crutches . . .' Rachel started hopefully.

'Not even on crutches. You'd be worn out before you even got to the second floor of the Modern Art Museum.'

'Don't they allow wheelchairs?' asked Ross casually.

'Now I never thought of that,' exclaimed Moira in surprise?` swinging round to look at him.

He was leaning his hips against the dressing-table, his long legs stretched before him, his hands in his trouser pockets, and he was staring at Rachel intently, eyes slightly narrowed, on the verge of smiling at her. Feeling warm blood creep into her cheeks she looked away from him.

'But then she would have to get to town,' added Moira thoughtfully. 'She and Giles were going on their own on the train.'

'If a wheelchair could be found in Riverpark, the folding type that would go into the boot of a car, I'd drive you into Manhattan, take you round the museums and bring you back here,' he said softly to Rachel. 'It's the least I can do, since I'm partly responsible for your having sprained your ankle.'

'That's really kind of you, Ross,' said Moira warmly before Rachel could answer.

'I guess Giles is around somewhere,' he said, pushing away *from* the dressing-table, 'I haven't met him yet.'

'He was playing tennis with Kathy Van Dorp last time I saw him,' said Moira, following him to the door. 'I'll just fetch the water and a bandage, Rachel. Be back in a jiffy.'

Moira went out, but before he left the room Ross slanted a glance at Rachel, and once again his lips curved in that slight knowledgeable smile that made her pulses leap unexpectedly.

'See you soon,' he said softly.

'Don't count on it,' she managed to retort tartly, but her retort only seemed to amuse him. His smile widening to a grin, he made no reply, and disappeared from her sight.

When Moira came back carrying a large bowl of water, towel draped over her arm, she said, 'I don't know what's come over Ross Fraser. He's not usually so helpful or forthcoming. I introduced him to Giles and he invited him and some of the youngsters over to Chestnuts for the rest of the evening. I'm sure I don't ever remember him doing anything like that before. Now just sit up on the edge of the bed and put your left foot in the bowl, dear.'

Rachel did as she was told and the hot water engulfed her foot and ankle soothingly.

'What is Chestnuts?' she asked.

'Morton Fraser's estate, further up the river. The house isn't as big or as ostentatious as the Vanderbilt mansion that is near here, but it is lovely, and it gets its name from the avenue of chestnut trees leading up to it. Ross usually stays there when he comes upstate.'

'He told me he was born in Edinburgh. Is that true?'

'As far as I know, it is,' replied Moira, sitting down on the bed beside Rachel and beginning to unwind an elastic bandage.

'And who is Morton Fraser?'

'He's the descendant of a star-spangled Scot who made a fortune when he emigrated here in the nineteenth century, something like Andrew Carnegie did. Now Morton is President of Fraser and Allanby, a Wall Street investment firm. He's also on the board of directors of several important companies. He's rolling in money. Ross is his adopted son.'

'Adopted?' Rachel exclaimed.

'Yes. Such a romantic tale really. Morton never married when he was a young man because he was disappointed in love. Apparently when he was overseas during World War Two he met and fell in love with a Scottish girl, but she was engaged to someone else and refused to marry him. Anyway some years ago he began to regret he hadn't married and hadn't had children of his own, so he decided to look up his old flame. He learned that she was living in Nova Scotia, so he went up there to see her. Seems she had married the Canadian soldier she had been engaged to and had returned to Canada with him. But her husband, Bill MacPherson, had been badly wounded during the war and had eventually died, a little after their son Ross was born. Unfortunately when Morton found her she was already suffering from cancer. Even so, he asked her to marry him. She agreed and he brought her and her son to live at Chestnuts. They had only five years together before she died. At least they were five happy years. Morton was devastated when she died but he had Ross, halving legally adopted him as his son. Ross also works in the investment company. He went to school and university with Charlie and they have always been good friends which is why Ross came to the wedding today. Now, let me look at that ankle.'

When the ankle was firmly bound up Moira announced her intention of phoning around to find a wheelchair.

'No, please don't bother,' Rachel said urgently. 'I'd rather stay here with you and rest my ankle.'

'But I thought you were so keen to see all the works of art in the city museums,' exclaimed Moira looking puzzled.

'I was and I still am, but not in a wheelchair. I'll wait until my ankle is better.'

'Then you might never see them,' Moira pointed out. 'By the time you can walk on it without pain you'll be in Scotland. Remember you and Giles are booked to fly back next Thursday. Oh, I feel so disappointed for you, dear.' Moira's kindly face creased with distress. 'I'd planned so many outings for you.'

'You're very kind. And I'm sure within a couple of days I'll be able to get about on crutches. I. . . I just don't want to go into town tomorrow with Ross Fraser.'

'You don't like him?' Moira seemed surprised.

'It isn't that,' Rachel muttered, having difficulty in expressing exactly how she did feel about Ross. He attracted her more than any man she had ever met, and yet his lack of reserve in pursuing her that afternoon along the beach and in describing himself as the guy who was going to marry her had offended her. She felt he had been far too presumptuous and her feminine instinct was warning her not to let him have any advantage over her because, once she submitted to his powerful will, she would never be able to call her life her own any more. Forcing herself to smile, she looked at Moira and added, 'You know me, Auntie. I hate to be under an obligation to anyone.'

'Just like your mother,' Moira said drily. 'And I've no patience with such an attitude. You might as well know that many of the women out there are just green with envy because you were carried into the house by the most eligible bachelor in the State of New York.'

'I don't care if they are. I didn't want him to carry me. I found him far too—too—oh, I don't know, too overbearing, I suppose, and I've no wish to see him again or be under any further obligation to him,' said Rachel coolly, even though she knew she was lying in her teeth.

'Well, that's plain enough,' said Moira with a laugh, and then suddenly hugged Rachel. 'Oh, how like dear Dottie you are, so independent and obstinate. She always had to have her own way and to be the boss.'

'Yes, I know, and perhaps it's a good thing she was like that, since she married someone as easy-going and irresponsible as my father,' said Rachel with a sigh.

'But Hugh was such a nice man,' said Moira. 'So kind and generous. And you mustn't forget, Rachel, you inherited some of his characteristics, too. He was always very artistic, even if his attitude to life was a little happy-go-lucky.'

'Except that he was often unlucky in his financial dealings,' said Rachel drily. 'And Giles is more like him than I am. I'm so worried about Giles, Aunt Moira. I'm afraid he's inherited Dad's lack of thriftiness and also his gambling fever. Do you think you or Uncle Jack could have a word with him about it?'

'We'll try, dear. We'll try,' said Moira. 'But he is a grown man now, twenty-one years of age, and there's nothing much anyone can do after a person has turned eighteen. You shouldn't be mothering him, Rachel. You have your own life-to live.'

'I know. But you see, when she married again and went to live in Australia three years ago, Mother asked me to keep an eye on Giles, and even though he's twenty-one I just can't help being concerned. I do hope he won't get into any trouble while he's here.'

'And if he does, let him get himself out of it without your help. He'll never learn to be responsible if he doesn't,' replied Moira sharply. 'Now suppose you let me help you walk back to the deck. There's no reason why you should miss the rest of the party.'

Rachel didn't see her brother that evening because she had gone to bed before he returned from Chestnuts. Nor was he at breakfast the next morning when she managed, with the help of the crutches that Moira had hired from the local chemist, to make her way to the bright morning-room that overlooked the river.

'Giles has gone into town with Kathy and some of the others,' Moira told her. 'He said to tell you he's sorry about your ankle and he'll see you when he comes back on Wednesday.'

'But where is he going to stay until Wednesday?' exclaimed Rachel.

'At Ross Fraser's apartment in Manhattan. He'll be OK, Rachel, so for heaven's sake stop worrying about him. You're worse than a hen with her chick, yet you're only three years older than he is.'

'Did you tell Mr Fraser I wouldn't be going into town with him?' asked Rachel. In spite of her resolve to forget about her encounter with Ross Fraser, he had been at the forefront of all her thoughts, all last night before she had fallen asleep and this morning ever since she had woken up.

'Yes. I did that when he arrived to take Giles into town. Now let's talk about you. In view of what has happened to your ankle Jack and I wonder whether you would consider postponing your return to Edinburgh and would stay on with us for a couple of weeks? We'd

both love to have you. I always wanted Dottie to come and visit, but she said she couldn't afford the fare, because your father had lost so much money betting on horses or had gone bankrupt for some reason or other. And now Jenny's gone away.' Moira sniffed and wiped away the tears that had welled up in her eyes at the thought of her only daughter having left home. 'Do you see what I'm getting at, dear? Jack and I would love to have your company for a little while longer.'

'But Giles has to be back at university. The term begins next week,' Rachel demurred, looking out at the view, at the coloured hills and the smooth water, at the birds flitting about the bird-table, and wishing she could stay longer in that pleasant, comfortable house where time passed so serenely and nothing seemed to be a trouble.

'Then let him go back. It's time he learned to cope on his own,' retorted Moira, suddenly authoritative. She stood up and began to collect used dishes together. 'Anyway, think about it. You look so pale and thin, as if you need a holiday and some good home cooking. And it would be best if you rested that ankle really well before attempting to walk on it properly.'

Rachel thought about the suggestion all day as she lay out on the deck and sunned herself. In Edinburgh she worked in a department store, and to come to the wedding she had taken her annual holiday of three weeks. There was really no need for her to go back to Scotland yet. Possibly Moira was right, Giles should be allowed to cope on his own by now. By that evening she had come to a decision. She would stay on with the Vanways for the rest of the holidays.

Giles returned on Wednesday none the worse for his visit to New York City. He seemed not at all surprised by Rachel's decision to lengthen her stay, and was very enthusiastic about it.

'Be good for you, Rach,' he said to her as he packed in the bedroom he had used while staying there. 'And give you a chance to visit the museums and galleries.'

'Did you go to any of them.'

'Now you know I'm not into that sort of thing,' he parried.

'Then what did you do in New York?' 'Saw all the usual sights, Statue of Liberty, Empire State Building, Brooklyn Bridge, Central Park. But best of all, we went to a couple of nightclubs where the jazz playing was really super. We also took a run down to Atlantic City.'

'Oh, no,' groaned Rachel. 'I hope you didn't go to a casino.'

'Of course I did. Everybody did.' He avoided her eyes as he stuffed underwear into his case.

'But you had no money to gamble with.'

'Ross Fraser lent me some.'

'He was with you?'

'Sure he was. How else do you think I got there? I went in his car. You should see it, Rach. It has all the options you can think of.'

'Did you lose much money?' she demanded, refusing to be sidetracked by his enthusiasm for Ross Fraser's car.

'Won some, lost some.' His grin was, as usual, cheeky and cheerful, and his golden brown eyes, the same colour as her own, glinted with merriment. 'I had a whale of a time. But not to worry, Rach. All that's taken care of.'

'Meaning, I hope, you don't owe anything to Ross Fraser,' she said sharply.

'I've told you. It's all been taken care of. I'm a big boy now and can look after myself. I don't need you hovering around and watching everything I do, watching for me to make a mistake. Time you got off my back, Rach,' he replied testily and went over to the cupboard to take out the few shirts he had brought with him.

'Here, let me fold those for you,' she said taking them from him. Although hurt by his remarks, she acknowledged the truth of them in the light of Moira's advice. 'Where else did you go in New York?'

'Ross showed me round the offices of Fraser and Allanby, the investment company of which his adoptive father, Morton Fraser, is the president, and where Ross works too. It seems he's a whizz at knowing how to make money, buying and selling companies, stocks and shares and so on, and he's already a millionaire in his own right as well as being all set to inherit more millions when Morton Fraser kicks the bucket.' He gave her a curious glance. 'Just what happened between you and him when you met down on the beach, when you sprained your ankle on Saturday?'

'Nothing much. Why?'

'I just wondered. You see, he told me he'd like to marry you.'

Rachel stared at him, her mouth open. Then, snapping her teeth together, she said coldly, 'Well, I'm not going to marry him.'

'Why not?'

'Because . . . because. Oh, Giles, surely you know why? I hardly know the man, have only had a short conversation with him, and what I know of him I don't like.'

'I think he's a great guy,' said Giles, who seemed to be picking up Americanisms fast. 'I wish I could live the way he does. You should see his apartment. Has every luxury you can think of. And he goes skiing in the winter to all the best resorts and sails in the summer from Newport, of all places. He knows all the right people, too.'

'He's just a rich playboy, then, who makes his living gambling on the stock exchange with other people's money, and I don't like or admire people like that,' Rachel said haughtily. 'He behaves as if he owns the world and all that's in it and he's far too bossy and arrogant.'

'That's just female prejudice talking,' Giles jeered. 'You don't know what he's really like as a person. And it could be that he's just the match for you. You're awfully bossy yourself and you need a man who'll stand up to you. Anyway I gave him my permission, in our father's absence, to propose to you. I'm rather keen on getting a real live millionaire, who knows how to gamble and win, as a brother-in-law. I'm tired of us always being poor.'

Rachel flung down the shirt she was folding.

'Just for that you can fold your own shirts,' she retorted. 'I'm going to bed.'

Giles left for Britain as scheduled. Rachel's ankle slowly improved during the next few days and she was able to go out with Moira when her aunt went shopping in the small nearby town of Riverpark, hopping around with the help of the crutches.

She found she enjoyed being mothered by Moira, and realised for the first time how much she had missed her own mother ever since Dorothy had married again two years after the tragic death of Hugh Dow, her first husband and Rachel's father. And, though reluctant at first to admit it, she was enjoying not having Giles around. Overseeing her lively and mischievous brother had not been an easy

task for her, and had forced her into growing up a little faster than she might have done otherwise.

The surprisingly warm autumnal weather combined with the picturesque beauty of the countryside had a tranquillising effect on her. It was hard to believe she was only seventy miles from the hectic traffic and bustling life of the city of New York. Moira's friends were also soothing. Mostly married middle-aged women, they seemed quite happy to drop in for an hour in the morning or afternoon to chat and drink coffee and discuss various subjects ranging from local politics to the latest birth of a baby. One of them was actually a well known artist, and she brought a pad of D'Arches' watercolour paper, paints and brushes so that Rachel could use her enforced idleness to practise her recently neglected art of painting.

One sunny afternoon, over a week after Giles had gone back to Scotland, Rachel was alone on the veranda trying to capture in paint the scene before her. Her ankle had recovered sufficiently for her to manage without crutches, provided she didn't overdo the walking, and she had one more week left of her holidays.

Absorbed in what she was doing, she wished that she could spend all her time either painting or printing when she returned to Britain instead of having to work at the department store. It had always been her ambition to earn her living from practising and selling her art, but so far it had been more important to be able to earn enough money to keep herself and to help support Giles until he had graduated as a lawyer.

Sitting back in her chair, brush in hand, waiting for the paint to dry a little before adding another detail, she was looking out at the now familiar Catskills when suddenly the view was blotted out as a pair of hands covered her eyes.

Surprised that Jack Vanway would play such a trick on her, Rachel grasped two sinewy male wrists and tried to pull the hands away from her eyes.

'Guess who?' whispered a voice behind her and, recognising it immediately, she stiffened and let go of the wrists.

'Mr Fraser,' she said coolly and the hands dropped immediately from her eyes.

'Mister Fraser.' Scorn rasped in his voice. He stepped round to the other side of the table and hitched a hip up on the rail of the deck, blocking her view of the river. In a faded blue sweatshirt and jeans, his eyes covered by sunglasses and his tawny hair dishevelled, he looked younger and even more attractive than he had in his silver-grey suit at Jenny's wedding reception. 'Mister Fraser is Morton. I'm Ross. And don't you dare tell me you've forgotten me, because I know you haven't. How's the ankle?'

'Much better, thank you,' she said frigidly, nose in the air.

'Still on crutches?'

'No.'

'Can't have been such a bad sprain, then. Come and have dinner with me tonight?'

'No thank you.'

'Why not?'

It was one thing to tell Moira and Giles that she didn't like Ross Fraser but quite another to tell him to his face how she felt about him, that really she was afraid of liking him too much if she dared to be in his

company for too long. 'I think Moira has made other arrangements for this evening,' she began evasively.

'You think. But I happen to know,' he interrupted. 'I know because I've just met Moira in Mairi Street and she said you're free this evening. I'll call for you at seven.'

'No. Oh, please don't. I don't want to have dinner with you.'

'But it isn't a question of what you want, darling, right now. It's what I want that matters,' he replied, smiling at her confidently, and she felt as if her bones were melting under the warmth of that smile. 'And what I want I get. That's something you should always remember about me. It will save us both a lot of trouble. Wear your prettiest dress, because I want to show you off.'

'But...'

'Shush. No buts,' he ordered softly, leaning swiftly across the table and placing two long fingers against her lips to stop her from saying more. 'I'm staying at Chestnuts for the next week while I oversee some work that's being done on Morton's yacht before I take it down to Florida for him. He always spends the winter months at his Palm Beach house and likes to have the yacht in a nearby marina so that he can go out on the ocean to fish. Since I'll be in the Riverpark district I've decided to kill two birds with one stone by dating you while I'm here. So don't disappoint me. See you at seven.'

Without waiting to hear any remonstrance she might have made if she hadn't been so flummoxed, he left before she had time to think of a suitable retort. Feeling as if someone had hit her a knock-out blow to the solar plexus, she sat, breathless and bewildered, looking out unseeingly at the river and the hills beyond. After a while she leaned her elbows on the table and rested her head between her hands.

Never in all her life had anyone ridden roughshod over her as Ross Fraser had just done. And she had to admit it had aroused emotions in her she had never experienced before. Instead of trying to think up ways of avoiding him at seven o'clock, of pretending, perhaps, to be unwell, she found herself looking forward to another meeting with him. He challenged her as no other man ever had. 'Just the match for you,' Giles had gibed. Had he been right?

Surprising herself, she was ready five minutes before seven. Not having much choice about what to wear that evening because she hadn't brought many clothes with her for the brief visit, she wore an outfit she had made for herself: a long skirt of tartan in which the predominant colour was red and a brief top of matching red silk held up by thin straps over her smooth shoulders. The crimson colour accentuated and enhanced the creaminess of her skin and the sleek dark brown of her hair. Around her head she tied a narrow scarf of silk that matched the top, letting the long ends trail down her back and setting the band low on her forehead just above her arching black eyebrows. She knew the outfit was attention-getting and flattering to her tall, slender figure. Around her shoulders, in case it turned cooler, she wore a black shawl also designed and crocheted by herself.

'Ross is here,' Moira said entering the bedroom on the dot of seven. 'You look lovely, dear. And I'm so glad you've decided to go out with him. I know he'll give you a good time.'

It was when she saw Ross, as she entered the living-room where he was alone standing by the grand piano glancing through some music, that it happened to her again, that feeling of having received a blow, a shock not only to her body but also to her emotions, and she almost turned and ran out of the room, down the passage to the bedroom where she could hide from him like some shy Victorian miss.

But one glance from his grey eyes melted all her resold either to fight him or to run away from him. She stood as if rooted to the spot,

staring back at him, and later she realised that it might have been at that moment she fell in love with him.

He came across to her, his lips curling in the smile that narrowed his eyes. In a well tailored suit of charcoal grey and shirt of a lighter grey, his hair shining with the smooth reddish glow of chestnut skins, he was the epitome of the wealthy and sophisticated New York businessman.

'You look great, a real Highland princess,' he said in his open forthright way, the expression in his eyes leaving her in no doubt of his appreciation of her appearance.

'Thank you,' she murmured. 'What time shall I tell Moira I'll be back?'

'Do you have to tell her any time?' he asked raising his eyebrows.

'I'm her guest. It would be good manners to.'

"Are you always so considerate of others?'

'I try to be.'

For a moment his eyes were hidden by their lashes and his lips twisted as he thought. At last he said, 'Tell her . . . No, I'll tell her myself and then she'll know for sure.'

Turning on his heel, he strode out of the room and into the kitchen where Moira was dishing up dinner for Jack. Although she followed him, Rachel didn't catch what he said to her aunt, only heard Moira's answer.

'That's fine with me. Have a nice evening, both of you.'

Outside, the car gleamed opulently in the light, shed from the standard lantern-shaped lamps that lined the driveway. He was

everything she resented, she thought irritably, as she slid into the seat next to the driver's. He possessed more money than was good for him, spent it on luxuries like the car, led young men like Giles astray to places like Atlantic City and behaved in an arrogant way towards women. And to crown it all, he was an American, even if he had been born in Edinburgh and his real father had been a Canadian. If she was at all consistent in her opinion of people like him she shouldn't be there in his car or be going out to dinner with him.

But it was too late. The car was already moving smoothly and fast like the stealthy animal after which it was named. Headlights illuminating the high stalwart trunks of old elm trees, it swept along the riverside drive and turned right up the hill at a junction towards the town.

'What did you tell Aunt Moira?' she asked.

'To expect you when she sees you.'

'That was hardly specific.'

'I wasn't aiming to be specific. And having brought up one daughter and two sons she knows better than to demand to know the specific time of the return of someone like yourself after a night out. The way it is, she won't worry if you don't get back before morning and she doesn't see you until some time tomorrow. She knows you'll be with me,' he replied smoothly.

'But I'm not staying with you until tomorrow,' she said, even though a queer little tremor of anticipation about what might happen if she did stay with him all night tingled through her.

'Maybe you're not. But then maybe you are. Who knows? Relax and let the chips fall where they may,' he replied lightly.

The gambling term chilled her in a way no other words would have done, and for the rest of the drive through the town and on the fast highway she sat upright and tense, staring ahead, feeling as if she had been taken captive by some marauding pirate and that during the next few hours she was going to have to fight for her freedom.

CHAPTER TWO

THE full moon was rising, a yellow ball in a blue- black sky, as they drove along a two-lane road. On one side it was edged by thick woodland interrupted by dramatic spurs of rock where the way had been forced by blasting. On the other side a plantation of trees and grass divided the road from another road along which the lights of traffic going in the opposite direction lit up the foliage. Together the two roads were called a parkway, Ross told her, designed for motorists who wanted to avoid towns as well as the heavy commercial traffic they would find on the fast interstate highway.

After a few miles he took an exit road off to the right. The lights of a small town twinkled beckoningly. Soon they were driving along a main street of stone and brick houses. To Rachel they looked, with their rows of sash windows, wide panelled doorways and fanlights, as if they had been built in the eighteenth century.

Ross parked the car at the kerb in front of one of the biggest buildings outside which a sign hung from a wrought-iron bracket.

'It used to be a coaching inn,' Ross explained as he opened the car door for her. 'Now it's one of the most fashionable places to dine out in this neck of the woods.'

Big brass lanterns attached to walls on either side of a double front door set under a wide porch gave out a warm yellow light. An inner glass-panelled vestibule door opened into a wide hallway panelled in pine. The floor was made from shining strips of maple and was scattered with colourful rugs. Against the walls antique side tables and chairs were arranged and before a log fire in a wide stone hearth there were several wing chairs and wooden settles.

They were welcomed by the owner of the restaurant and his wife, who were both dressed in clothes that innkeepers might have worn in

the late eighteenth century. The host wore homespun breeches, thick stockings and heavy shoes with buckles, and his coat and waistcoat were both of blue cloth, fastened by brass buttons. His shirt had a high collar around which was fastened a white cravat. The hostess's dress, of the same blue, had a long full skirt and a wide white collar edged the neckline. On her thick blonde hair she wore a white mob cap.

'Welcome to our home,' said the host, shaking hands with them. 'My wife will be pleased to take you to a table and to show you our bill of fare.'

'We like the diners to feel as if they are indeed guests in our house,' the hostess explained to Rachel in answer to her question about the host's greeting. 'If you had arrived earlier you would have been able to mix with our other guests in the reception-room and to have aperitifs with them. And when dinner is over everyone goes into the lounge for coffee and liqueurs. We give you a choice of only two main courses and the recipes are based on the sort of meals that {night have been served in this place just after the War of Independence. Most of the food is fresh today. If we use anything that has been preserved it has come out of our own gardens and has been canned, frozen or preserved by ourselves or our staff.'

She led them into a room on the right where candles in brass candelabra glimmered on tables. The windows were draped in green velvet looped back with golden tassels. White linen, silver and glassware shone in the flickering flames. In the wide hearth, with its white Adam-style mantel, a log fire blazed.

There were already many people in the room. Bare shoulders of women shimmered, jewels glittered, teeth flashed as someone laughed, and several male voices called out greetings to Ross which he acknowledged with some pleasantry and a wave of a hand.

Their table was by one of the windows. The hostess introduced them to the blond young man who was to be their waiter. He was also dressed in period style, breeches made from homespun, thick stockings, a white collarless shirt and a green waistcoat.

They both chose to have the roast beef and drank a local Hudson Valley red wine which Rachel found surprisingly palatable.

'So what do you think of this place?' asked Ross.

'It's very elegant.'

'There's a lot of this sort of restoration going on, especially in the eastern states, where many of the places built in the seventeenth and eighteenth century are still standing. I guess you could say Americans have at last discovered that they have a heritage worth preserving.'

'I'm beginning to realise that,' she murmured politely.

'And you'd see much more if you visited Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia,' he said, putting his elbows on the table and resting his chin on his folded hands to look at her intently.

'I won't have time to go south. I'm going back to Edinburgh next week,' she replied, looking down at the table to avoid that intent stare of his. She had an odd feeling he was trying to mesmerise her.

'Why do you have to go back?'

'My three weeks' holiday will be over and I'll have to go back to work.'

'What sort of work?'

'I'm a display designer in a department store.'

'I thought you said you were an artist.'

'I went to art college and the work I do is artistic, but I'm not able to make my living by selling my own artistic creations yet.'

'You mean you'd like to paint pictures and sell them?'

'Mostly I like making silk-screen prints more than just painting. I do batik work also for scarves and dress materials as well as designing decorations on silk that can be framed and hung on walls. But it's difficult to get established as a free-lance artist and I have to eat.'

'No wealthy patrons around to support you?' he asked with an amused quirk of his lips. 'Give me half a chance and I'd be your patron for life.'

'No wealthy patrons,' she agreed lightly, although she felt blood warm her cheeks at his insinuation. 'What do you do for a living.'

'Don't you know? I thought your brother would have told you. Or Moira.' His lips twisted cynically as if he knew he must have been discussed since their last meeting.

'I've been told that you're with an investment company, but I don't really know what that involves in the way of work,' she replied. 'I can only guess that you buy and sell stocks and shares with other people's money.'

'And you don't approve,' he guessed accurately.

'No, I don't. It seems to me to be only another way of gambling.'

'You're right there. It is a chancy business to be in. Why don't you like gambling?'

'Because gambling ruined my father. He was always making unlucky investments and losing money. And he could never resist a bet or a wager on anything.'

'But I'm not like that,' he remarked. 'I don't suffer from gambling fever. When you're handling other people's money you have to keep a cool head and do a lot of research and analysis into the various businesses offering stocks and shares on the market to be able to predict their future behaviour. And I never make a bet on anything unless I'm sure I'm going to win. Also, I don't intend to do it for ever. One of these days, when I've made enough money to live on without having to work, I'll leave Wall Street, find something else to do.'

'What could you do?'

'Do I detect a note of scepticism?' he challenged with a grin. 'Don't judge a person by outside appearances or by how he earns his living.' She couldn't help flushing again. 'Basically I'm really an outdoors guy. My real father's father was a farmer in Canada, and so my father would have been too, if the war hadn't ruined his health. I'm only in Wall Street because Morton had me educated to follow in his footsteps and I didn't want to disappoint him by refusing. But I don't intend to be trapped in the city for ever, much as I enjoy all it has to offer in the way of bright lights and entertainment. Nor do I want to end up like Morton . . .' He broke off as if changing his mind about what he had been going to say about his adoptive father, and emptied his wine glass. 'I guess what I'd like to do most is buy some land and farm it, do something productive or creative.'

At that point the waiter came so Rachel made no comment. She had to admit to being surprised by what he had said. She had been sure he was really what he appeared to be, a clever and possibly unscrupulous materialist who cared only for money and whatever luxuries it could provide, a smooth and selfish sophisticate interested only in satisfying his own appetites. His confession that he would like to do

something more creative or productive impressed her and subtly her attitude began to change even more. Not only was she fast falling in love with him because of his appeal to her senses, she was beginning to like and respect him.

When the waiter had gone with their order for dessert, and before she could say anything else, Ross took command of the conversation again and directed it away from himself by asking her opinion of a certain artist. From then on they talked mostly about art, and she found he was very knowledgeable about the subject, and she remarked upon it.

'That's thanks to Morton,' he replied. 'He prides himself on being a connoisseur of paintings. He owns, many by famous artists, including a couple by Picasso, a Matisse and one by Marc Chagall, whom he once met personally, when the artist was over here some time ago. Originally he started collecting for investment purposes but now he buys only if he thinks the painting is good by his rather high standards. You could say Chestnuts rivals some of the museums in the city.'

It was a bait she couldn't resist.

'I'd love to see them,' she said, her enthusiasm for art completely overriding her prejudices.

'Then I'll come for you tomorrow and take you to see them,' he said autocratically. 'I'd like you to meet Morton. Or I should say it the other way round. I'd like Morton to meet you. He's very pro- Scots, his awn grandfather having emigrated from Glasgow to New York. Morton wanted to marry my mother years ago, when he met her for the first time in Edinburgh.'

'Moirra told me about that,' she admitted, and again his glance in her direction was knowledgeable and a little cynical.

'So you were interested enough to ask her about me. That gives me hope. I wouldn't mind having a Scots girl for a wife myself if she were like you,' he said softly.

In response to another intent look he gave her over the candle-flame she felt a strange flicker of nerves in the lower part of her body, a primitive physical reaction that disconcerted her. She was quite aware of what he was doing. By every look and almost every word he uttered he was wooing her, attacking her sensibilities with every weapon he possessed. And he possessed many, she admitted, glancing at his lean, aquiline features, still tanned by summer suns, at the humorous slant to his generous curving lips, at the sudden-flaring of violet flames in the greyness of his eyes when he looked at her. Listening to the pleasant cadences of his voice as he told her an amusing anecdote about Morton Fraser and watching for the sudden charming flash of his smile, she wished suddenly that she could be with him for ever.

By the time they left the restaurant she was totally disarmed and caught in a spell of enchantment from which she was reluctant to break out and, after another long drive along the moonlit parkway, it was, with a certain sense of disappointment that she found herself back at the Van ways' house half an hour before midnight.

'You see, I can also be considerate when I want to,' Ross said with a touch of mockery.

'Especially when you want to make an impression,' she said, feeling sufficiently at ease in his company to tease him gently.

'Especially then,' he concurred with laugh. 'I'll see you tomorrow about ten, and take you to Chestnuts to view the paintings and the garden.'

'Don't I get a chance to refuse your invitation?' she retorted lightly. 'Supposing I have another date?'

'You'll just have to call it off,' he replied turning to her.

'And if I don't?' she retorted, pretending to be irritated with his cool assumption that she was ready and willing to fall in with anything he suggested, but knowing that in reality his confident approach was fast destroying her few defences.

'I'd challenge whoever he is to a duel. Pistols at dawn in the woods behind Chestnuts,' he said with mock fierceness. 'So you'd better be ready at ten tomorrow if you don't want to be the central figure in a local scandal.'

She couldn't help laughing. 'Then I'll expect you at ten. I wouldn't like you to be sent to jail for disturbing the peace on my account. And thank you very much for taking me out to dinner tonight.'

'You were very welcome. Goodnight, Highland princess.'

His head tipped towards hers. Against her cheek his lips were warm. But such a chaste and considerate kiss from him was suddenly not enough for her, so she turned her head until her lips touched his, gently yet invitingly.

'Nice,' he whispered, and slid an arm around her shoulders.

Beneath the harder pressure of his lips she parted hers voluntarily, giving in to a delicious headiness and kissing him back with an almost innocent fervency. Not for a long time, not since the time she had imagined herself in love with one of the teachers at the art college she had attended, had she felt so strongly that she wanted to kiss someone of the opposite sex. Forgotten were all her prejudices against this man. Suddenly he seemed very close to her, a companion with whom she could share not only thoughts and opinions, but much

more, and in that brief moment of communication she recognised him as a person with whom she could happily share the rest of her life.

Much of what she felt was expressed, in the short embrace, and in his response to her kiss she sensed passion within him flowing deeply and strongly, all the more exciting and appealing because he kept it under control and withdrew from her, pushing her away from him gently, before it could burst through his restraint. In the light cast by the driveway lamps she caught the gleam of his eyes, the glint of his teeth as he laughed softly.

'That was good, but let's not be greedy. Let's save something for tomorrow and all the other days we're going to be seeing each other,' he murmured.

'We'll enjoy each other much more if we take our time.'

He let her out of the car, walked up the steps to the front door with her and saw her into the house. In a daze of romantic excitement she went straight to her room and for a long time lay thinking about him and all they had talked about. For a few hours he had been the perfect companion, attentive and not at all overbearing. That tomorrow couldn't come soon enough for her, was her last thought before sleeping, and she wasn't at all surprised or dismayed by the way her attitude to him had changed so quickly. Love had stepped into her life and, to borrow Ross's own phrase, she was going to gamble on it and let the chips fall where they might.

Next morning, casually dressed again in sweatshirt and jeans, he seemed somehow bigger and tougher and, in the close confines of the front seats of the car, she was very aware of him on a physical level. She wanted to touch him, to feel the sinewiness of his arm, of his thigh so close to hers, taut under tough denim. The purely primitive physical desire shocked her a little because she had never experienced it so strongly before.

Apart from her brief association with the art teacher, her previous relationships with members of the opposite sex had always been on a cerebral level and she had felt no strong desire to be physically united with any of them. Even the art teacher hadn't aroused in her an ache like this. Ruefully surprised at herself, she realised she wanted to possess this man totally and on every level. She wanted him to be not only her lover but also her husband, to belong to her alone and to no one else.

After greeting each other they didn't talk. They didn't have to. It seemed as if their minds met and were in tune immediately. He drove up to the town and then out along a road that wound past green fields and patches of forest with occasional glimpses of the sun-dazzled river. Shadows of tall trees slashed the sunlit paving. They reached stone gateposts on the right and turned in between them to follow a straight avenue edged by sturdy chestnuts, their fingered leaves brown and withered, ready to fall.

The house sat among a clump of cedars and birches. It had two storeys and was built in classical New England colonial style, with two rows of long sash windows and a panelled door set under a portico supported by pillars. The views from the front steps of the river and Catskills beyond were panoramic.

Once they were inside he took her straight to the picture gallery, an addition at the back of the house where temperature and lighting were carefully controlled in the interest of preserving the paintings. And yet the outside world was not shut out. The graceful trees, crammed flowerbeds and shrubberies of a well tended landscaped garden were invited into the gallery through two wide windows.

The paintings held Rachel spellbound for more than an hour, during which time Ross left her twice, called to the phone by the housekeeper. When he returned the second time she was still sitting

in front of one of the paintings, apparently oblivious of anything that was going on around her.

'Hey, I know I can't compete with a painting by Matisse, in your estimation, but I am the guy who brought you here. You could show a little appreciation,' he taunted, sitting down on the bench beside her and slipping an arm around her waist.

'Oh, I'm glad you brought me! They're marvellous. Thank you very much for letting me see them,' she said, turning to him her brown eyes alight with joy.

'Is that all?'

'What more should I say?'

'I'm not really interested right now in words,' he mocked softly, his glance going deliberately to her lips.

She knew what he meant, and didn't find it hard to comply with his suggestion. Leaning towards him, she kissed him on the mouth.

'Thank you once again for bringing me here,' she whispered.

'You'll stay to lunch and then we'll walk round the grounds,' he said, still holding her, both his hands at her waist.

'Only if you'll agree to come back for dinner at Moira's and Jack's house. It's the only way I can pay back your hospitality,' she said seriously.

'You just hate to be under an obligation to anyone, don't you?' he said. 'That darned pride of yours again. You don't have to be like that with me, you know.'

'I can't help it. And it's not just pride. It's the way I was brought up.'

'It's stubborn Scottish pride. I know because I have more than my fair share of it, too. But between friends, it, shouldn't exist. And I'm hoping we're already friends, Rachel. Aren't we?'

'We will be if you'll come to my aunt's for dinner tonight,' she persisted.

'OK. I'll come. And tomorrow we'll go to the city. We'll visit those museums you want to see and then go on to a concert at Avery Fisher Hall. You can't go back to Edinburgh without spending at least one day in the Big Apple.'

His reference to her imminent departure upset her for the rest of that day, although she tried hard to hide her distress at the thought of leaving. When she was alone that night in bed she took herself to task about it. What had happened to her? Where was her much vaunted independence of spirit now? What about that career she had mapped out for herself? Where had that immunity to romantic love gone which she had once believed she had possessed?

Here she was, head over heels in love with a man she had known only a few days, and already she was crying inside because in three days' time she would have to leave him and would probably never see him again. Nothing in her life to date had prepared her for this disturbance of her emotions. She longed to stay and be able to see him every day, to hear his voice, his laughter. And not only that, she wanted to do things for him, cook meals for him, please him in any way she could think of. Above all else she wanted to make love with him, be close to him in every way, go to bed with him at night and be with him in the morning when she woke up. It was incredible that this had happened to her, and she had no idea how to cope with the situation because she didn't really know what his real feelings were about her. For all she knew she could be just a passing fancy for him, a woman he could date conveniently while he was waiting for a yacht to be made ready.

The day in Manhattan passed all too quickly. There was too much to see in too short a time. As it turned out she saw only two of the art museums, the Museum of Modern Art where again she stood in awe of the paintings and paper art of Matisse for far too long, and the Whitney gallery where she admired the paintings of twentieth-century American artists. Then on to the concert, where she sat enraptured by the playing of one of Bruch's violin concertos by Itzhak Perlman. All the way back to Riverpark, driving along in companionable silence with Ross, she was haunted by the romantic bittersweet melodies.

In the darkness of the car in front of the Vanways' house she kissed him fervently to show her appreciation, and as always, much to her disappointment, he was the first to withdraw.

'Tomorrow we'll go on the river in Morton's yacht. It's all shipshape now and ready for going south,' he said.

'It will be my next-to-last day here,' she murmured, wondering what she could do to break through the barrier of her own pride and caution to let him know how she felt about going away from him.

'I know,' he said, his voice low. 'That's why we have to make the most of it. See you at noon.'

She liked Morton Fraser's yacht as soon as she saw it. Its sleek, rakish lines appealed to her sense of design. Over forty feet long, it was what is known as a motor sailor, having two masts on which sail could be hoisted but also having twin diesel engines to power it for hours at a time when sailing wasn't possible. Down below it was fitted out with every comfort possible, with a saloon for eating and socialising in and two sleeping-cabins, one for'ard and one-'aft. The fittings were made from oak and the cushions on the settee berths were covered in a sea-green tweedy material.

For three hours that day they chugged up and down the river, up as far as Rip Van Winkle Bridge and down as far as the town of Poughkeepsie. He showed her how to steer and told her about days he had spent ice-sailing on the river when it had been frozen in the winter. While they were out the sky clouded over and the air grew heavy and humid. The threat of thunder in the atmosphere seemed to underline the heaviness of spirit Rachel was experiencing because this would be the last time she would be with Ross.

When they returned to the yacht club and tied up at the dock, Ross produced cans of beer and they sat in the centre cockpit, drinking. On edge because parting from him was so close, Rachel could bear the thunder-threatening silence no longer and said abruptly, 'When are you going south?'

'Soon. I'd like to be in Annapolis, Maryland before the end of the month. Would you like to see the route I'll take?'

'Yes, please.'

In the pilot-house surrounded by electronic navigation equipment they leaned side by side over the chart he spread out on the sloping chart-table.

'From here I'll go down river and across the entrance of New York Harbour to Sandy Hook on the New Jersey coast,' he said, pointing to the places on the chart. 'If I'm lucky with the weather, from there I'll take a long trek down the Jersey Coast, around Cape May and up Delaware Bay. Then through the canal to Chesapeake Bay. I should be able to make Annapolis in three or four days from here. I'll stay there for a while to look up some friends, do some sailing. You'd like Annapolis. It has many old houses, some built before the War of Independence and some just afterwards. They've been preserved and restored. After Annapolis I'll go into the Intercoastal Waterway at Norfolk, Virginia and wend my way south with other like-minded

sailors taking their yachts to the sunshine for the winter. Many of them will be from the northern states and Canada. Snowbirds, they're called because they're escaping, before the severe winter weather comes and freezes the lakes and rivers, and so that they can continue to sail all winter.'

'What is the Intercoastal Waterway?'

'It's a series of canals and cuts joining natural waterways that lie behind the long islands and banks of sand that edge the eastern seaboard. It was engineered so that shipping between the north and south could avoid the areas of bad winter storms, such as Cape Hatteras, here.' He pointed to the chart. 'Many hundreds of ships have been lost off that particular cape in the past.'

'Will you take a crew with you?'

'Not this time.' He paused for a moment, then said slowly, 'Unless you would be my crew. Would you like to come with me?'

He turned to look at her. Leaning as they were, they were very close. If she turned to him, their cheeks would touch and possibly their lips. Already her head was spinning a little in reaction to the nearness of his warm temporarily unrestrained sensuality, so she kept her face averted from his gaze and stared down at the blue of the sea and the green of the land on the charts.

'Yes, I would like to go with you,' she admitted in a whisper.'

'Then come.' His voice was deep, seductive.

'I can't. You know I can't. I have to go back to Edinburgh tomorrow.'

'You don't have to do anything you don't want to do,' he said, taking one of her hands in one of his. 'Don't go back to Britain,' he urged. 'Stay and go south with me.'

'I have to go back. Giles . . .'

'Never mind Giles,' he interrupted her roughly, his eyes blazing with violet light. 'Think of yourself and of me instead. Think of what it would be like, Rachel, just you and I on the boat from sunrise to sunset, the long dark nights together and alone, away from everyone else.'

'I can't.' She tried to pull her hand free of his and somehow found herself within the circle of his arms as they stood facing each other. 'Oh, please try to understand. It isn't because I wouldn't like to be alone with you. I have to go back to earn my living. I can't afford to stay on and go with you.'

'You could if we were married first.'

It was the first time he had mentioned marriage to her since the day they had met.

'You're not serious,' she began.

'I was never more serious in my life. Remember the day we met when I told you I was the guy who was going to marry you? I meant it. I was serious then, and I'm serious now. I want to be married to you-'

'But you hardly know me,' she demurred, even though excitement was boiling through her veins. 'Why choose me?'

'Let's just say I recognise a good investment when I see it,' he said, mocking himself and his money-making ability as he drew her closer. 'I liked the way you looked, and after I'd talked to you I liked you even more and was determined to see more of you. Luckily for me, Moira understood how I felt and agreed to invite you to stay on until your ankle was a little better.'

'You asked Moira to invite me to stay longer?' she gasped, staring at him in amazement.

'Yes,' he admitted, with that slight smile which she realised was not only mysterious and mocking but full of mischief too. 'Having researched your background and analysed it, I was able to predict a great future for you and me together, so I had to make sure you wouldn't slip away before I had time to make my bid. And now I'd like to persuade you to stay on for a few more days so that we can get married and take a cruise south on Morton's yacht by way of a honeymoon.'

'I ... I don't know what to say,' she whispered, completely overwhelmed by his proposal. It was beyond her wildest dreams.

'It's quite easy,' he said, mocking her. 'Just Say yes and leave the rest to me.'

'But Giles...'

'If he weren't your brother and if I didn't believe you'd take umbrage, I'd say to hell with Giles. This has nothing to do with him. Anyway, last time I saw him he gave me his blessing, for what it was worth. In the absence of your father, he gave me his permission to marry you. Not that it would have made any difference to me if he hadn't.'

'I knew. He told me. But . . .'

'And if you're going to go all feminist on me and bring up the matter of your career as an artist and throw it down as another obstacle to marriage with me, just let me point out first that as my wife you would be able to free-lance at last. I would be your patron. You wouldn't have to work for a living. You'd be financially independent.'

'No, I wouldn't. I'd be dependent on you,' she retorted. 'Anyway I wouldn't, couldn't marry you or anyone else just for that reason.'

'Then for what reason would you marry me?' he asked tantalisingly.

'Only for love,' she whispered and hid her face against his chest.

'Are you trying to tell me you don't love me?' he asked.

'No, I'm not, but . . .'

'Then stop butting. As far as I can see there are no impediments to our marriage. I know you don't like the way I make my living, but we do have some things in common, and we should be able to make a success of marriage. So we'll take a chance on it and tie the knot as soon as we've both had the necessary medical examinations and can get a licence,' he asserted autocratically.

He didn't give her another opportunity to argue but kissed her with a domineering possessiveness he hadn't shown before and that she had secretly longed for him to show. At last she was able to give expression to the desire she had been struggling to suppress for days, the desire to touch and caress him, to stroke his face and the nape of his neck, to lift her fingers through his hair and to press herself invitingly against his hard muscular body. Eyes closed, lips clinging, hands moving caressingly, they swayed together, caught in a storm of passion and only vaguely aware that outside thunder was rumbling ominously.

Not until rain started to drum on the roof of the pilot-house did Ross let go of her and lift his lips from hers. He closed the hatches and turned back to her. No smile curved his slightly parted lips and his eyes flared with violet light as he reached for her hand.

'Sounds like the giants are playing ninepins amongst the Catskills. We're going to be stuck here for a while until the storm is over,' he said softly in her ear. 'I know of a place where we can spend the next hour very comfortably finding out much more about each other in the best possible way.'

He led her down the two steps into the wide after cabin and, lying close to each other on the double bunk, they entered a new world that belonged only to the two of them. They talked as they had never talked before, sweet lovers' talk that was interrupted often by sense-arousing kisses that grew longer and longer as their mutual desire to be even closer grew more and more intense.

'I can't help wondering why you haven't married before,' Rachel whispered, her lips moving against the strong pulsing column of his throat. 'Why has no other woman snapped you up?'

'I could ask you the same,' he murmured, his fingers sliding seductively within the open neck of her shirt and down to the first fastening just above the cleft between her breasts. 'Haven't you ever been in love before?'

'Not really. It was more like an adolescent crush,' she confessed, laughing a little at the memory of her brief liking for the art teacher. 'He just wasn't right for me. He was too old, had a roving eye and was a bit randy. He'd been divorced twice, both times for having become involved with other women. When I found *that* out I was put off him completely. Knowing he'd been guilty twice of infidelity, I guessed he would be unfaithful to me too. So I got out of that relationship as fast as I could, before I got too involved with him. I never slept with him.'

'I guessed something like that must have happened to make you so cautious and aloof, so anti- marriage, and, dare I say it, so anti-male. You were damned prickly and prejudiced when I first met you.' His smile robbed his words of any offence they might have given.

'I suppose you're right. That silly affair did put me on the defensive with regard to the opposite sex. And it's also why I have to know more about you. Although you're as handsome and fit as any twenty-five-year-old, I know you're older than that,' she said, daring to slide

her hands beneath the edge of his sweat shirt. The skin of his waist was as smooth as silk. Encouraged by his lack of resistance she let her hand wander upwards, her palm tingling, to the rough hairs that criss-crossed his chest.

'I'm thirty-three, nearly thirty-four, according to my birth certificate,' he said nipping the lobe of her ear with sharp teeth. 'In my prime. You think I'm too old for you? Nine years too much of a difference? You don't see me as a father-figure, I hope.'

'No, far from it.'

'Good. I wouldn't want that. I feel we're equals. Do you?'

'I hope we are, but what I was going to say was, because you're the age you are, you must have been in love before.'

'That's true. But not like this. This is the forever stuff,' he said softly and, framing her face with his hands, kissed her slowly but with passion.

'So why didn't you marry her?' said Rachel, gasping a little when they both came up from the dark and drowning depths of passion to catch their breaths.

'Who?' His fingers were busy with the buttons of the shirt she was wearing, slipping undone each button slowly, almost tormentingly, while she watched his face, the slight mysterious smile slanting his lips and narrowing his eyes.

'The woman you were once in love with.'

'I guess because we weren't right for each other,' he replied, and stroking the shirt away from her breasts bent his head to kiss the smooth white skin he had exposed.

'Were you hurt when you and she broke up?' she asked, her eyes closing as delicious sensations tingled through her and her body grew taut, arching to his touch.

'Not for long,' he said, and sliding a leg between hers, trapped her for ever with another burning kiss on her lips, stifling any other questions she might have asked and obliterating them from her mind.

The thunder rolled away, the rain stopped, the sun came out but neither of them noticed or cared as they caressed each other and stroked away clothing. Feeling his life-force throbbing under her hands, she lost all control. Her brain awhirl in darkness, her body moving against his urgently, she kissed him wildly, longing for him to come into her and to possess her completely.

'There's no going back now,' he said softly, a shake of laughter in his voice. 'After this you'll have to marry me to make an honest man of me.'

'I love you, I want you,' she moaned and after that she was aware only of the taste, smell and feel of him tantalising her senses and a growing ache within herself that could only be assuaged in one way and by him.

'Then will you marry me?' he whispered in her ear. 'You haven't said you will yet.'

'Oh, yes, I will. I will. I'd love to marry you, please yes, please,' she cried out of the desperation of her need, her hands clutching him closer.

'Thank you,' he whispered, and kissed her with such a sweet reverence she felt her heart would burst with emotion.

From then on he dominated her totally and she enjoyed every touch of his long fingers, every burning pressure of his lips, every probe of his

hard, hot tongue, her body rising and lifting to the thrust of his desire until at last they ceased to be two separate beings and were fused together by twin internal explosions. Shaken by her own complete submission to his demands, Rachel also felt oddly triumphant too because this man, who was considered so eligible by many other women, had chosen her to be his wife.

In a subdued yet happy mood, entwined with each other they dozed a little, both of them becoming suddenly wide awake when they heard voices close by.

'The storm is over, and so is our own particular storm of passion, until the next time,' said Ross, pushing up on one elbow to look down at her. With his hair tousled, his eyes heavy-lidded, his lips parting sensually, his bare skin golden in the shaft of light that came through a porthole, he was the lover she had always dreamed of but had not believed she would ever meet. 'And there will be many, many, next times,' he added, sliding a hand along her cheek and turning her lips to his. 'Shall we go and tell Moira and Jack now?' he asked when the kiss was over.

She agreed, and soon they were dressed and leaving the yacht. The two men whose voices they had heard were inspecting the boat tied up in the next berth, which seemed to have filled with rainwater and to be half sunk. They greeted Ross and then glanced curiously at Rachel, but he didn't introduce her to them.

Arms about each other's waists, they walked along the floating dock to the main concrete dock and then up, past the yacht-club building to the car park. Daylight was fading fast from the sky as they drove along the riverside road to the Vanways' house and electric light was glowing from the windows of the few houses they passed. On the way they discussed when and where they would be married, agreeing that they didn't want any fuss.

'Moira and Jack will be very surprised when we tell them,' said Rachel as they went up the steps to the front door.

'Why should they be?' Ross asked, pushing the doorbell.

'Because we only met about two weeks ago. We've not known each other very long.'

'Not in days, or weeks, or months, I agree, but we know all that matters; we know the essence of each other,' he argued. 'The rest we'll discover over the years. Wouldn't be much fun being married if you knew everything about your partner. Best to have some mystery in the relationship. And I don't think Moira-will be surprised. Want to bet on it?'

'No. Of course not.' She was suddenly sharp. 'I don't make bets.'

'Now that's a pity, because I was going to bet a nice long kiss that Moira will say when she hears the news: "I'm not surprised. I could see it coming." But since you won't bet I'll just have to grab that kiss now.'

They were still kissing when the front door opened.

'I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you two,' said Moira. 'That was some storm that came through and I was anxious in case you were still on the river.'

'No. We'd just tied up when it broke,' said Ross as he followed Rachel into the hallway. 'We waited until the rain stopped before leaving the yacht. And now we have something to tell you.'

'Really?' Moira's eyes glinted knowledgeably. 'No, don't say anything. Let me guess. You've proposed to Rachel and she's accepted you.'

'Right first time,' said Ross.

'I'm not surprised at all. I could see it coming,' said Moira complacently.

'I thought you might have done,' mocked Ross and couldn't resist slanting an 'I-told-you-so' glance at Rachel. 'We plan to be married here as soon as possible and then we'll go south on Morton's boat.'

'Oh, how wonderful!' Moira suddenly lost her smugness and hugged Rachel. 'I'm so happy for you both. Let's go and tell Jack and get him to open a bottle of champagne. And then we must phone Dottie. What time do you think it will be in Brisbane right now? But if you marry in such a hurry she won't be able to come. Couldn't you wait a while, until Christmas? Then we could have a real family gathering. Giles could come, and Jenny and Charlie would be here. Perhaps you could even persuade Morton to come up for it, Ross.'

'He never comes back north until May,' he said coolly. 'Anyway, that's the sort of wedding both of us would like to avoid. We don't want a lot of people around. The quieter the better, the more secrecy the better. This is just between Rachel and me. We'll go off one morning to the town hall and do it, just as soon as we can get the medical certificates and go for the licence.'

And that was exactly how it happened. One golden morning with a slight touch of frost, Ross called for Rachel as if to take her out for the day and, followed by Moira and Jack in their car, he drove her to the town hall where the brief ceremony was performed by a justice of the peace. Later the same day, aboard Morton's yacht, they left the yacht club and motored downstream, following the bends of the great river until, soon after they had passed the imposing fortress of West Point Military Academy, they reached the deepest part of the river where it narrowed between high cliffs on the eastern side and the State Park of Bear Mountain on the western side. As the sun set in a deep red glow

behind the spectacular mountain and long purple shadows shook across the silvery water, they anchored in a cove between an island called Iona and a wharf.

Long and dark was that night, their first together as a married couple, and its silence was disturbed only by the haunting wail of a train passing by.

CHAPTER THREE

IN Annapolis, capital of the State of Maryland, the last day of October was warm and windy. Pale sunlight slanted down into the street called Cornhill that connects the State Circle with the Market Square, an open area at the head of the inner harbour. It glinted on the white paintwork of houses and gave old bricks a warm glow.

Rachel, wearing jeans, sweatshirt and sailing shoes, her smooth dark brown hair tied back in a pony-tail, sauntered down the street, pausing now and again to admire one of the old restored houses. She knew by now that the street had been called after the busy mercantile street in London, and had originally been an artisans' street with a workingmen's tavern, the home of a silversmith and a coachmaker. The houses dated from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and none of them was very big. It was her favourite street in the whole of the town, and she had to admit to coveting one of the tiny terraced houses, wishing she could have bought it and set up a studio in it.

She had just been to the post office to send a letter to her mother and a postcard to Giles and was on her way to meet Ross at the Market House. They had been almost two weeks in the historic town, and during that time had sailed many times on Chesapeake Bay as well as taking trips to the city of Washington, DC in a rented car. They had cruised over to the yachting-centre of St Michael's where they had watched an exciting sailing race between Skipjacks, the low and rakish over-canvassed workboats of the Chesapeake region. They had visited the Naval Academy where one of Ross's ex-schoolfriends was an officer on the teaching staff and had also called on other friends of his who owned houses or yachts in the area. And everywhere she had gone Rachel had been surprised by the warmth of the weather for the time of the year as well as by the warmth of the welcome extended to her by Ross's friends. But most of all she had been impressed and overwhelmed by Ross's warm affection and generosity to herself.

Anything she wanted, it seemed she could have. Never before had her wishes come first with someone else. It was a heady experience for her to feel wanted and appreciated, and as a result she completely lost her caution with regard to him, the caution she had learned the hard way from her experience with the art teacher. Naturally loving and generous herself, she was at last with someone with whom she could show her deepest emotions. Loving and living with him, learning with him about sailing, she blossomed, realising at last her feminine potential. Not once during those first two weeks did she have reason to regret having married in haste.

Reaching the end of Cornhill she crossed the road to Market House and entered. At once her nose was assailed by a variety of smells, the aroma of coffee percolating, the scents of fresh vegetables and fruit, of smoked meats and fresh fish. She found Ross as she had expected in a corner store that sold mostly cheese, American and imported, choice foreign preserves, such as Scotch marmalade, and wines from South America as well as from France, Italy and Germany.

As always when she saw him her heart did a little leap of pleasure. Dressed like herself casually in jeans and sweatshirt, he looked lean and tough and thoroughly competent. During the time he had spent steering the yacht his skin had darkened to a golden brown and the sunshine had bleached his hair a little so that now his whole head looked like that of a Roman statue cast in bronze. She wanted to shout aloud to the rest of the women in the Market House, 'Hey, look over here. Look who I've got for a husband,' and then revel in their envious glances.

Smiling at her own silly fantasy, she had just reached his side and was looking at the bottle of wine he was holding and examining and giving her opinion of it, when she heard a woman's voice call out to Ross, and turning she saw a short plump woman, dressed in beige cotton trousers, an open-necked navy blue shirt and the inevitable rubber-soled dockside shoes, approaching them. Her blonde-rinsed

hair was cut very short and her teeth looked very white in her sun-tanned face.

'Ross, great to see you,' she gushed, shaking hands with him. 'Larry told us you were here on *Trillium*. Is it true, what he says? Are you married now and have your wife with you? Congratulations.'

The woman's bright hazel eyes slanted a glance from Ross to Rachel. About to offer her hand to Rachel, she opened her eyes wide in surprise. Her eyebrows shot up and the hand fell to her side.

'Oh, but you're not . . .' she started to say when Ross cut in.

'This is Rachel. Rachel Fraser now, I'm glad to say,' he said authoritatively, sliding an arm about Rachel's shoulders. 'Meet Carrie Duval, sweetheart,' he added.

'Well, this is a pleasant surprise,' said Carrie, recovering her poise and letting her smile widen. She and Rachel shook hands. 'I bet Morton is pleased with you.'

'He and Rachel haven't met yet, but they will in a couple of weeks' time,' said Ross easily. 'I guess you and Spence are on your way to the Abacos for the winter.'

'We sure are. Spence is in Middleton's Tavern right now having a few beers with a couple of sailing cronies, also Abacos-bound. Why not join us there for lunch?'

'We're leaving in half an hour. We've just been picking up a few-last minute items,' said Ross easily. 'It's good to see you, Carrie. Say hello to Spence for me. Come on, darling.'

In the determined way to which she was fast becoming accustomed, Ross swept Rachel out of the market without buying the wine they had chosen. Across the traffic circle, past the small green park, where

the city flag hung from a tall pole, and over to the pavement beside the long inlet of the inner harbour, spiky with the masts of fishing boats, they walked at speed, turning the corner into Compromise Street on their way to the marina where *Trillium* was berthed.

'Do we have to walk so fast?' Rachel complained lightly. 'And do you have to grip my arm as if you're afraid I might lag behind or not come with you?'

His grip above her right elbow relaxed at once and he laughed. 'Sorry.'

'Why don't you like her?'

'I don't dislike her,' he said with a lilt of surprise. 'What makes you think I do?'

'The way you spoke to her and your refusal to go to Middleton's for lunch with her and her husband. Your decision to leave today instead of tomorrow.'

'I can see I'll have to be careful when you're around,' he taunted. 'You're far too observant. But you drew the wrong conclusion from the observation you made just now.' He let go of her elbow, slid an arm around her waist and squeezed her gently. 'Don't forget we're on our honeymoon,' he whispered. 'We don't want to be hanging around with people like the Duvals. We don't need company. At least I don't. I need only you. I thought you felt the same.'

She did, of course, and so she said nothing more, but as they sailed down the wide, blue, sunlit, white-capped bay that afternoon, a brisk north-easterly wind behind them, she couldn't help wondering what Carrie Duval had been going to say before Ross had interrupted her.

'But you're not. . .' Carrie had started, and there had been no mistaking her expression of surprise. What name had she been going to say?

Whom had she expected to see with Ross? To whom had she expected him to be married?

They crossed to the eastern shore of the bay that day and, entering the mouth of the river, put the anchor down in a secluded anchorage overhung by trees where a solitary heron stood looking for all the world like a piece of driftwood washed ashore. No other yacht followed them into the anchorage. They had it all to themselves. The autumn evening was warm, and after a meal they sat for a while in the cockpit listening to the water lapping the shore and the rustle of a breeze among the trees. Above the moon sailed in a clear sky.

'Is there no habitation near here?' Rachel asked.

'There's a fishing village further up river, that's all. This side of the bay is very rural and unspoilt and the people who live here want to keep it that way. They still cling to the old ways, and have little liking for the hustle and bustle of the commercial world. You'd find if you talked to some of them that they still speak English like people in the west of England, from where their forebears came long ago.'

'It's so quiet, too. Quite different from anything I ever expected to find in this country. It seems as remote as any island in the Hebrides.'

'You've been to the Hebrides?' he asked, turning to look at her.

'Often. My grandmother owns a cottage there, on the island of Mull. My mother used to take Giles and me for our holidays in the summer when we were children. Didn't you visit the islands when you were over in Scotland?'

'No. I only went to Edinburgh to visit my mother's relatives. I didn't have time to take in the islands. But I'd like to. I have friends who have sailed among them. They say it's one of the best cruising areas in the world.'

'Then maybe next summer we could go. The islands are so remote and romantic,' she said with a sigh of nostalgia. 'I always used to be sad whenever I had to leave Mull at the end of our holidays there and I've always had an ambition to live there.'

'Then we'll go,' he said, taking her in his arms. 'Romantic and remote is what I like, and don't you forget it. And from now on no more marinas for us. We'll anchor off-shore and avoid the madding crowd.*', 'And people who know you and are surprised you're married to me?' she queried lightly, disguising her sensitive reaction to Carrie Duval's behaviour under a teasing note.

'What do you mean?' he demanded.

'That woman, Carrie Duval, was surprised when she looked at me. She was expecting to see someone else.' •

He stiffened and his arms dropped away from her. Immediately she felt chilly and wished she had kept her mouth shut.

'You read too much into her reaction,' he replied smoothly, rising to his feet. 'She was probably surprised at my good taste in choosing someone like you to be married to.' He yawned and stretched his arms above his head. 'I don't know about you but I'm pretty tired. I'll just check the anchor-line before turning in.'

That night there was no lovemaking and no talking either as they lay side by side in the wide bunk in the after cabin. Although Ross lay quietly on his side with his back to her she knew he was awake. Several times she tried to reach him, to break through the wall of reticence behind which he had hidden ever since she had mentioned the meeting with Carrie Duval, but whenever she snuggled up against him and slid her hand over his lean waist and upwards to fondle his bare chest he didn't respond. He had left their private world and she guessed, with a feeling of what was very close to rejection, that he

was thinking of what might have been if he had married the woman Carrie Duval had expected to see with him in the Market House.

Next day he was up early, his withdrawn mood evaporating under the warmth of the sunshine. Deciding that perhaps he had been right and she had read too much into Carrie Duval's reaction, Rachel abandoned suspicion and negativism in favour of hope and optimism. Ross had married her. The future was theirs, and not to be shared with the ghosts of old flames.

A brisk wind sent the yacht bounding down the bay over white-crested slate-grey waves, and they spent the next eight hours working together as a team to steer the yacht and trim the sails so that they could reach another secluded almost landlocked anchorage on the Virginia side where they spent another quiet night alone.

The following afternoon, after several hours of splendid sailing, they reached the busy shipping-lane approaching Norfolk, Virginia. Keeping to the right-hand side of the channel, they squeezed past huge container-freighters and oil-tankers, navy frigates and even surfaced submarines.

Ignoring the two marinas, the Waterside in Norfolk and the one under the towers of the Holiday Inn on the Portsmouth side, which sported the masts of many yachts, they entered the narrow canal or Intercoastal Waterway, that threaded past the hulks of abandoned or cocooned warships and aircraft carriers. Swing bridges swung and lift bridges lifted to let them go through and, after the lock at Great Bridge that lifted the yacht and several other boats into a higher reach of the canal, they motored on until sunset and anchored in another small cove, away from any habitation and other boats.

Next morning, after hearing a weather forecast predicting that a hurricane was coming up the coast. and might hit the area where they were on the following, day, Ross decided to push on to find shelter.

Across two shallow sounds of water they crossed, keeping to channels marked by buoys, lurching on the short, choppy waves, the winds sweeping in from the Atlantic just beyond a line of low-lying islands to the east, and howling ominously in the rigging.

Shelter was found that night in the Alligator River of North Carolina, where again they anchored in a remote, deep pool, surrounded by cypresses that grew out of the water and where the only sound was the call of the night heron.

Only once during the next week did they berth at a marina and go ashore. After passing through the beach resorts of North Carolina they lingered for a while in the beautiful Waccamaw River, its calm waters winding between untouched forests of yellow pines and cypresses, draped with Spanish moss and crowding right into the water. After the Waccamaw they wandered along the twisting waterway through abundant life-giving marshes, golden in the sunshine where white herons and other birds waded in the mud, until they arrived in South Carolina. Giving in to Rachel's request to see Charleston, that most romantic city of the American south, Ross berthed the yacht at a marina.

In weather that seemed very hot to Rachel for that time of the year, they wandered hand in hand through the old city, the architecture of which was richly cosmopolitan and showing the influences of many different cultures: British, French, West Indian, German and Jewish. Huge houses with shutter-edged windows and wide verandas decorated with lacy ironwork fronted many of the streets. Others of an earlier period were glimpsed behind high walls or through wrought-iron gates hanging between stone gateposts. The pointed white steeples of elegant old churches soared against a vivid blue sky, and local black women sold baskets on the pavements. They dined at an expensive hotel and stayed the night in one of its bedrooms and the next day shopped for clothes for Rachel that would be suitable for the

summer-type weather they would be experiencing for the rest of the trip.

From then on it seemed to Rachel they were never alone on the waterway as many yachts, both sail and power, caught up with them, all migrating south to warmer climates for the winter. In Georgia, once again Ross avoided marinas, seeking out anchorages in narrow creeks and river mouths. They visited the site of the old British Fort Frederica which had been established to defend the British American colonies from attacks by the Spanish and was destroyed by fire long after those attacks had ended. It was a pretty place, hidden in a backwater, among magnolia trees and live oaks, and all that was left of the settlement were a few walls of the fort and the cleared land still laid out in the lots where once the original settlers' houses had stood.

Across wide inlets of the sea where shrimp boats were silhouetted against a bright eastern sky and along winding rivers they motored until they eventually crossed into Florida. On a stormy day with thunder booming and lightning crackling they reached St Augustine, the oldest surviving settlement made by Europeans in the United States, and stayed a day there to visit the old Spanish fort which had been built to protect the Spanish colony from British and French assaults.

'Not far to go now,' said Ross when they left the anchorage and again entered the confines of the waterway. -We'll be in Palm Beach in three days' time. And that will be the end of our honeymoon, I guess.' He made a wry grimace. 'Morton will be wanting all his friends and relatives to meet you and it will be one social occasion after another. We won't get much time alone together. Think you'll be able to stand it?'

'How long will we stay with him?'

'Until just after Christmas. I have to be back in the city before New Year's Day for various reasons to do with business.'

'I'll be able to stand anything as long as you're with me,' she whispered, leaning against him.

'Good. And I won't be going far without you,' he replied.

'Where will we live when we go back to New York?'

'In my apartment. It's near Central Park at the top of a renovated brownstone house. You'll be close to all your favourite museums and art galleries. OK with you.'

'OK with me,' she agreed, surprising herself, because a big city like New York was the last place she had ever imagined herself living in.

The rest of the journey down the waterway was not as interesting or exciting as the previous part, as they passed sprawling urban developments, condominium towers and tourist resorts. Only the Indian River, wide and island-dotted like an inland sea, caught Rachel's interest. Many of the islands were refuges for wild life and everywhere there were warnings to boat-owners to be careful not to collide with and damage the manatees, those mysterious sea-animals whom many believe to be the original mermaids.

The sun was setting when at last they motored down the long stretch of Lake Worth on the last part of their journey. High-rise buildings, glittering with lights, made dark shapes against the crimson-flushed sky. They entered a marina, and soon after they had stepped ashore were whisked off in a limousine sent for them by Morton.

Rachel's first impression of the fabulous town was of the graceful shapes of tall palm trees lining the approach road. After a left turn along a main street they turned right to drive down a residential street until they reached the exclusive road beside the ocean, where wealthy

people not only of the United States but also of other countries owned huge houses and the beach in front of them.

Screened from the road by high laurel hedges, Morton's oceanside house was as different from Chestnuts as the shrub is from the big deciduous fruit-bearing tree. Again, for that particular place it wasn't big.

'Only twelve rooms,' Ross replied with a grin in answer to Rachel's question as she stared in admiration at the stucco facade of the Spanish-styled house. 'Bedrooms, that is, and each one with its own bathroom.'

'You're joking,' she said as they entered the cool hallway with its black and white tiled floor. 'It must be like a hotel.'

'Don't ever let Morton hear you say that. It's his pride and joy, his status-symbol. Just being allowed to live on this particular street in this particular town means he is someone, not only in this country but in the international set. Here, every winter, his neighbours are not only the wealthy, they are out of the top drawer. Here he can rub elbows with European royalty and aristocracy as well as top-notch American New England families and the descendants of Southern aristocrats. It gives him a real kick.'

Rachel had made up her mind that she couldn't possibly like Morton, knowing that he derived pleasure from having made a lot of money and found entertainment in having aristocrats and celebrities as his neighbours. He was bound to be insufferably snobbish, she thought, and possibly vulgar as well.

Hearing from the housekeeper that Morton was waiting for them in the solarium, Ross led her through a long living-room furnished with heavy Spanish-style furniture, carved from oak and upholstered

mostly in red and gold, into the room of glass where some of the blinds had been drawn earlier against the heat of the noon-day sun.

'Her^ we are, Morton, right on time,' Ross said cheerfully.

The man turned. Of medium height, he had silvered dark hair and bright blue eyes set in a lined sun-weathered face. He was dressed casually in well-cut trousers and a golfing shirt. In his right hand was a pair of secateurs with which he had been trimming one of the many tropical shrubs that flourished in the solarium. Carefully he put the secateurs down and held his hand out to Ross.

'Good to see you, boy,' he said in a husky voice, and gave Rachel a quick shy glance. 'I see you've brought a friend.'

'She's more than friend. Rachel and I got married end of last month in Riverpark.' There was a note of quiet triumph in Ross's voice.

'Well, well.' Morton's face creased into many lines as he put back his head and laughed outright. 'I should have guessed you wouldn't let any grass grow under your feet once you'd made up your mind to a course of action. Congratulations. You too, young lady.' Rachel's right hand was seized and shaken by two large hard hands. 'Rachel, eh? That's a fine old name.'

'Not only does she have a fine old name, she's from a fine old country,' said Ross, seeming intent on crowing about his conquest. 'Tell him where you were born, darling.'

'I'm from Edinburgh, Mr Fraser,' said Rachel, who couldn't help feeling a little self-conscious at all the fuss about her name and birthplace.

'Then you're doubly welcome,' said Morton, his face sobering, his eyes taking on a wistful expression. He glanced quickly at Ross. 'Am I allowed to kiss her before we get into the champagne?'

'Of course you are,' said Rachel quickly before Ross could say anything, all her prejudice suddenly pushed aside by a sudden rush of liking for this shy man and, leaning forwards she met his lips with her own.

The next few days passed in a blur as she came to terms with living in the luxury of that house where she had nothing to do but sleep and eat unless she was getting ready to go swimming, to play tennis or golf or to attend some social gathering at another even more luxurious house along the road.

The times she liked best, when she wasn't alone with Ross in their bedroom, were the moments they both spent with Morton either in the solarium or on *Trillium*, when they took the boat out through the narrow Palm Beach inlet to the ocean to spend an hour or two fishing with other yachts in the Gulf Stream.

But the curious dreamlike quality of living at the Laurels came to an abrupt end when Ross announced that he would have to leave her for a few days after all to fly back to New York to attend to some business for Morton.

Her first reaction was to cling, not to let him go without her, because she had a strange fear she might lose him, that he might never come back.

'Let me come with you,' she pleaded as she lay in his arms the night before he was due to leave.

'I would rather you didn't,' he murmured sleepily. 'It's only for three days and I'll be busy all that time. Better for you to stay here and help Morton greet his Christmas guests. The weather can be foul, wet and cold in New York at this time of the year.'

'I wouldn't mind as long as I was with you.'

'But you wouldn't see much of me. Please me and stay here, sweetheart,' he whispered, raising her face to his and raining light kisses over her cheeks. 'If I can I'll try to do what I have to do in two days instead of three and be back the day before Christmas Eve. And please believe I wish this hadn't happened right now, that it could have been avoided. But I guess we'll have to become accustomed to being apart, sometimes, much as I would like the honeymoon bit to go on for ever.'

After that she didn't press him because common sense dictated that he was right and they shouldn't expect the honeymoon to go on for ever. Also she had never wanted to be seen as or even to be the sort of woman who clings. He had accused her of being proud, so now she stiffened her backbone and brought out her pride. She could manage without him for three days, of course she could, and yet immediately after saying goodbye to him at the airport and seeing him walk away from her she felt depressed. Morton did much to cheer her up that day, taking her with him to the elite country club to play golf, introducing her to some of the well known people who were there, and treating her to dinner.

'I'm not much for expressing my feelings,' he said as they lingered over coffee and liqueurs. 'I always hope a person will guess how I feel from the way I treat them. It's a mistake I've made too often in my life. I'm a little shy and not good with people on a personal level. Only on a business level. So I want to tell you, while Ross isn't around and I've got you to myself for a while and before my sister and my niece and two nephews arrive tomorrow, how glad I am that he met you and had the good sense to marry you before you had a chance to escape back to Scotland.'

'You're not shocked that we married in such a hurry, then?'

'Good God, no. I think you did the right thing. Wouldn't have done any good to hang around waiting just to please a few relatives. Also

I've been afraid, you see, that Ross might never get married, that he might behave as I did when I was younger, and wouldn't marry because he had once been disappointed in love. And I didn't want that for Janet's son. I didn't want him to grow into a reclusive bachelor with only one thing to do in life, make money, as I was until I was able to find Janet again and marry her, too late for us to have children.'

'Was Ross disappointed in love at some time?' she asked trying to sound offhand and casual while all the time her brain buzzed with conjecture.

'Well, now, he's never said as much to me. Very secretive about his private life, is Ross. Proud, too. Not liking much to admit to ever making a mistake or failing at anything he undertakes. He likes to win, always. But I've known that there was someone he wanted to marry and couldn't because of some impediment or other. Anyway, that's all in the past and he's married to you now and that's all that matters. Don't you agree?'

She agreed, and kept telling herself over and over again that her marriage to Ross was all that mattered, yet she could not help wondering about that disappointment in love he had suffered, especially when she recalled how withdrawn he had been the night she had told him she believed Carrie Duval had expected him to have been married to someone else. For the first time in her life she felt the stirrings of jealousy of the woman he had wanted to marry but hadn't.

Next day the serene quiet of the Laurels was invaded by Morton's surprisingly noisy sister Wendy Cox, her twin sons Gerry and Todd, and her daughter Meryl.

'Ross married to you?' Wendy shrieked when Morton introduced Rachel to her. 'Oh, my God.' Small and grey-haired and apparently a bundle of nervous energy, Wendy rounded on her daughter who was

just behind her, a slim, slight woman of about thirty who was, for all her plainness and paleness, dressed very elegantly and in the height of the prevailing New York fashion. 'Well, what do you think of that, Mer? Seems you've missed the boat again.'

'I wish Rachel every happiness,' said Meryl, offering Rachel slim red-tipped fingers and showing small white teeth as she smiled.

'And so do I.' Wendy showed her teeth too in a wide, insincere smile at Rachel. 'Believe me, you're going to need all our best wishes, since you've been foolish enough to marry that cheating rogue and . . .' She broke off, as if realising she was being tactless, and swung to Morton, 'Well, which rooms have you put us in?'

'Marley will show you,' said Morton as his English-trained butler appeared quietly in the doorway. 'We'll see you all later at dinner, I guess.'

'Don't expect us for dinner, Uncle,' said one of the twins. Rachel couldn't be sure at that moment whether he was Gerry or Todd because although they weren't wearing similar clothes or colours they were identical in their looks. 'We've already got dinner dates.'

Wendy and the twins left the solarium as noisily as they had arrived to follow Marley to their rooms, but Meryl stayed behind, seating herself close to Morton.

'It's really good to see you again, Uncle. Thanks for inviting us. This Christmas would have been deadly at home, our first without Dad,' she said quietly.

'That's what I figured, Meryl,' said Morton with a sigh. 'My sister's husband passed away a few months ago after a long fight with heart problems,' he explained for Rachel's benefit. 'I guess Wendy is still cut up about it.' A slight smile softened his lips. 'You'll find her a bit

noisy and outspoken, Rachel, but underneath it all she has a heart of gold and means well. Right, Meryl?

'Right, Uncle,' said Meryl, and she looked across at Rachel. 'Did I detect a Scottish accent when you spoke just now?' she asked.

'You sure did,' said Morton, smiling and answering for Rachel. 'Why don't you two get better acquainted while I just go and have a word with Marley about the numbers for dinner tonight.'

'I didn't know Ross had been in Scotland recently,' said Meryl, her pale blue eyes taking in Rachel's appearance, noting the good fit of designer jeans and the elegant simplicity of a loose sleeveless silk top, the silky darkness of brown hair falling straight from a centre parting to the shoulders, the lightly tanned perfect oval of her face.

'We met at my aunt's home in Riverpark, New York,' replied Rachel. 'At my cousin Jenny's wedding.'

'When?'

'At the end of September.'

'So it was a rush job,' said Meryl with a lift of her marked-in eyebrows. 'I guessed as much.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Yours and Ross's marriage. You didn't know one another long before taking the plunge.'

'I suppose we didn't,' said Rachel coolly feeling resentment rising within her at Meryl's derisory tone.

'Mother is surprised, but I'm not,' said Meryl, getting to her feet and going over to look at the lawn at the back of the house that swept

down to a thick area of tropical shrubs dividing the land from that of another house. 'Ross had to do something in a hurry to stop the tittle-tattle that was going on in Manhattan.' She turned to look at Rachel across the length of the room. 'I work in the city too. I'm a financial analyst and I write for a financial magazine. What do you do in the way of a career?'

'I'm an artist,' said Rachel.

'I guess you married him for his money, then?' said Meryl and gave a little trill of mocking laughter. 'So it happened after all. After spending years dodging gold-diggers, Ross was caught by a penniless artist.' She advanced towards Rachel and looked down at her rather pityingly. 'I suppose he bribed you to marry him.'

Rachel rose then to her full height and knew a certain malicious triumph in towering over the provocative Meryl.

'No, he didn't. And I didn't marry him for his money. I married him because I love him,' she said.

'Oh, my,' said Meryl tauntingly. 'Listen to the romantic. And I suppose you believe he married you because he loves you. Then why isn't he here with you? Why is he back in New York?'

'He had to go to attend to some business for Morton,' Rachel retorted.

'You really fell for that old trick?' jeered Meryl. 'My God, I didn't think it was possible for a woman to be so naive these days. I bet you wanted to go with him and he persuaded you to stay down here.'

Rachel had no answer for that. She could only frown and bite her lip, remembering how persuasive Ross had been the night before he had gone away.

'I bet too he hasn't told you about Inci,' said Meryl, smiling slyly.

'Inci?'

"The name is Turkish. Female. She's very beautiful and an accomplished musician who is just beginning to make her way as a concert pianist. Ross has known her for years. He wanted to marry her but she turned him down. Imagine any woman having the guts to turn down the heir to Morton Fraser's millions. Ross was really cut up about it. A real blow to his ego, it was. But he still sees her when he can. I wouldn't be surprised if he's seeing her right at this moment, telling her about his marriage to you, explaining why he had to do it. to create a smokescreen so no one will suspect her of still seeing him whenever she visits New York. He probably had it all planned in that cold, calculating way he has of doing things. All he had to do was find someone like you, who didn't know him too well and was ignorant of his affair with her, and manipulate you into marrying him.' Meryl's lips smiled but her eyes didn't. 'You wouldn't be the first to fall for the charm he can turn on and off at will, you know.'

Rachel resisted the temptation to turn on her heel and leave the room. Her pride in arms, she even managed to smile.

'Does that mean you have been a victim of that charm? Have you been in love with him, too, and did you hope to marry him for his money?' she jeered, and had the satisfaction of seeing her barb go home as Meryl's eyes flickered. 'Well, I'm not surprised. Ross is something rather special. But you're wrong in supposing he's meeting another woman at this moment. He is, in fact, flying back right now and should be walking into the house within the next hour. You see, he phoned me just before you arrived' to say he'd managed to do what he had to do more quickly than he had anticipated. And if you don't believe me, I suggest you ask your uncle. That's why he wanted to talk to Marley. He wanted to tell him that Ross would be here in time for dinner.' Rachel forced another smile. 'But I do appreciate your effort to try and put me in the picture regarding Inci. I'm sure you meant it kindly, and I hope you enjoy your stay over Christmas.'

It was Meryl's turn to have no ready answer. Her pale eyes glittering, her thin lips pinched together, she swung on her heel and marched from the room.

Much to Rachel's relief, Wendy and Meryl were not the only guests for dinner at the Laurels that night. Morton had invited several neighbours mostly to meet her, so she was able to avoid any direct contact with his sister and niece. Ross arrived just as they were all about to sit down at the long table in the dining-room. She was so glad to see him that her emotions threatened to boil up and overflow and, as he took her in his arms and kissed her hard, ignoring the interested onlookers, she sensed that he too was having difficulty in controlling his passion.

'As soon as we can, without giving offence to Morton we'll leave this lot and go upstairs,' he whispered in her ear. 'I can hardly wait to be alone with you.'

'It's the same with me,' she replied, all the doubts and suspicions Meryl had managed to rouse in her wilting for the moment under the hot blaze of his desire for her, and they parted reluctantly to sit opposite each other on either side of Morton, who was of course at the head of the table.

'Well, Ross, you certainly get around,' remarked the guest who was sitting beside Rachel, a rather fat man who had a very loud voice that could be heard by everyone. The other guests stopped chattering to glance at him attentively. 'Saw you in town only yesterday,' he added.

Rachel had soon discovered that the only town that mattered to most of Morton's friends and associates was the city of New York.

'I didn't see you, Harry,' said Ross easily.

'No, you were too busy chatting up your dinner guest. Wasn't that Ihsan Kapadia's daughter with you? What's her name? Inci? The concert pianist?'

All the joy she had been feeling seeped out of Rachel. Not looking at anyone she waited to hear, as everyone else was waiting, Ross's answer. He didn't hesitate, nor did he look disturbed.

'As always, you're right. Harry. What great eyesight you must have. Why didn't you come over and say hello,' he said drily. 'If you had I'd have introduced you to Inci and her brother. He's with the Turkish consulate in New York. An interesting guy. He speaks six languages. Made me feel really uneducated, since I can speak only one.'

The moment passed. Everyone started talking again. But for Rachel the damage had been done, and for the rest of the meal she avoided looking at or speaking to Ross.

As it turned out, they weren't able to escape to their room as he had suggested until most of the guests had left. As soon as the door of the bedroom closed he took her in his arms and began to kiss her but she didn't respond. She couldn't until everything was out in the open, until she knew more about Inci.

'What's wrong?' he demanded, refusing to let her go when she would have escaped from his arms. 'What's happened while I've been away?'

'Nothing very much until today when your aunt and cousins arrived,' she said coolly.

'If you mean Meryl, Wendy and the twins, they are not blood relatives of mine, only of Morton's,' he replied tautly, his face set in harsh lines. 'I know they've hated me ever since Morton adopted me as his son. They always hoped to inherit all his money, you see, and believe me to be his sole heir. I don't really care for any of them, either, and I'm sorry Morton invited them, but I guess he felt he had to since

Wendy has just lost her husband. If you don't like them we don't have to stay on. We could leave, take a trip over to Nassau for a few days.'

'And disappoint Morton?' she said. 'You must know how pleased he is to have us both here. No, we'll have to stay at least until Christmas is over.'

'Then tell me what's upset you,' he persisted. 'I bet that creep Meryl has been telling tales out of school about me. What has she said to you about me?' He gave her a little shake and then pulled her closer to him as if he knew he could melt her resistance with his physical warmth.

Her face hidden in his shoulder Rachel felt his fingers in her hair and found the courage to speak outright.

'She said she supposed I'd married you for your money.'

Hands sliding to her shoulders, he pushed her gently away from him so that he could see her face. His face looked grim and his eyes were a very clear penetrating grey. He was looking at her as if he suspected her of hiding something from him.

'And didn't you?' he said softly.

'No.' Her denial rang out angrily. 'Oh, surely you know I wouldn't do anything like that.'

'I kind of hoped you wouldn't, but I could have been wrong in my hope, knowing what your brother is like,' he said with a wry curl of his lips.

Twisting free of his hold she turned away from him and went round to the other side of the bed. Facing him, her head high, her chin tilted, she said, 'Just what do you mean by that?'

'Giles wasn't above borrowing money from me when he was in New York. Didn't he tell you?'

'Yes. But he said it was all straight between you and him, taken care of, he said,' she said shakily. 'But . . . if you thought I might be like him over money, why did you ask me to marry you?'

'I wanted to be married too much to care about any ulterior motive you might have had in wanting to marry me,' he replied. For a moment he stared intently at her, then, with a shrug, began to loosen his tie.

'Then perhaps the rest of what Meryl said is true,' she said in a low, shaking voice. 'And you have married me to create a smokescreen.'

He tossed his tie down on the dresser and looked at her reflection in its mirror.

'Meryl said that?' he said, his eyebrows slanting satirically. 'My God, what a wonderful imagination that woman has. She should go in for writing mystery stories. Her talent is absolutely wasted as a financial journalist. May I ask why I would want to create a smokescreen?' He laughed suddenly, and her heart leapt at the sound. 'Makes me sound like a navy frigate or destroyer, belching out smoke to cover the activities of a battleship.'

His suit jacket off, his shirt unbuttoned to the waist, he came towards her, laughter flickering across his face and in his eyes.

'Can you see any smoke coming out of my head, sweetheart?' he whispered bending towards her.

'It isn't a joke,' she muttered, her glance going to the opening of his shirt. Its whiteness contrasted with the golden tan of his skin. Her fingers itched to slide within the opening and to caress his chest.

'It is to me, and I'd like to share it with you, just as I want to share everything with you, so tell me why I would need a smokescreen.'

His mockery of Meryl made Rachel see that perhaps the woman had been melodramatic, and she hesitated now about bringing up the matter of Inci. But if she didn't it would always be there at the back of her mind, poisoning her relationship with him, so without meeting his eyes, now aflame with passion, as he reached out to caress her cheek with gentle fingertips, she went on, 'She said you'd got married to create a smokescreen so that you could go on meeting someone called Inci, with whom you've been having an affair for years.'

The fingers stroking her cheek were suddenly still.

'The bitch,' he said, his voice hissing savagely. 'Do you believe her?'

'I don't know what to believe,' she cried, raising her head to look at him earnestly. 'I didn't want to believe her but then that man, Harry, who was sitting next to me at dinner, said he had seen you dining with Inci last night and so I couldn't help wondering if what Meryl said was true and that you went to New York, not for business purposes but to meet Inci.'

His hands fell away from her face and he paced away from her, hands in his trouser pockets. Feeling suddenly weak from stress, she sank down on the edge of the bed. He came back to her, went down on his knees suddenly so that his face was on a level with hers. His hands slid along the silky stuff of her dress where it was taut over her thighs, an intimate and possessive action that caused desire to throb suddenly within her.

'Look at me, Rachel,' he murmured. She raised her head and looked into his eyes. 'And then tell me, if you can, that I'm lying to you. I didn't go to New York to meet Inci. I met her quite by accident. She was in New York to give a concert. My affair with her is over. It came

to an end when she told me she couldn't marry me. She and I won't be meeting behind any smokescreen. ' He paused, frowning, and when he continued his voice was harsh with bitterness. 'I guessed it wasn't going to be easy once the honeymoon was over and we had to mingle with other people like Meryl and Wendy, who don't like me and who would do anything to undermine my relationship with Morton or anyone else. Unluckily we've come up against the first stumbling-block while our marriage is still very vulnerable, while we're still learning about each other. All I can do is say that I won't be planning any , meetings with Inci in the future, although there is always the possibility of running into her when she's in New York.' He leaned forward, rested his brow against hers. His lips only an inch away from hers he said, 'Believe me?' and it was hard for her to tell whether it was a plea or a question.

'But you did love her, didn't you?' she whispered.

'Yes, I did. But now you're my lover, my mistress and my wife, so why would I want to meet any other woman behind a smokescreen, or anything else?' His sense of humour got the better of him again and laughter shook through his voice. 'Forget what Meryl said, and don't let it come between us now. I've been looking forward to this night ever since I left you on Monday morning.'

'Oh, and so have I,' said Rachel with all her heart, and, giving into the desire that was suddenly surging up in her, she flung her arms around him and they fell across the bed together.

Their brief separation, plus the recent confrontation about his motive for marrying her, added a certain spice to their lovemaking that night. As if determined to obliterate from her mind the damage done by Meryl, Ross used every loving technique he knew to arouse her, taking time over each caress, seeking and finding what gave her most pleasure, his lips burning against her skin as they moved from her hips down her throat to her breasts and even lower, until, her senses

aflame, she pulled him down on top of her and into her and soared with him to a height of ecstasy she had never known before.

Yet, later, when she was curled up against him, listening to his even breathing as he slept, although Meryl's insinuations about him were forgotten for the time being, the woman Inci wasn't. She lingered, a vague ghost between them, the lover he had lost, and over whose loss he had been deeply disappointed.

CHAPTER FOUR

PROTECTED by Ross's attentive behaviour from any more attacks on their marriage by Meryl, Rachel was able to enjoy the next few days in Palm Beach. The weather was perfect blue skies, warm sunshine and a placid blue ocean, so that it came as something of a surprise to her on Christmas morning to receive and give presents around a decorated Christmas Tree, imported from Canada, and to attend a service with Morton, at the Episcopal church where all the usual carols were sung. She and Ross spent the afternoon swimming and sunbathing, and after a traditional dinner of roast turkey and plum pudding they escaped from the others to walk on the beach beside the whispering surf under the stars.

Yet, in spite of Morton's hospitality and the warm weather, she was glad to leave the luxury of the Laurels and the hostility that seemed to emanate from Meryl and Wendy all the time, and to fly back to New York with Ross. His apartment, as she had expected, was furnished in the latest contemporary style and had every modern convenience.

For the first few weeks of the new year she was quite content, spending her days visiting art museums and galleries and her evenings, nights and weekends walking, talking and planning for their future with Ross. One day they would find a place in the country, he promised, somewhere with fields to be farmed; a place with barns and horses, where they could bring up their children together. Meanwhile they would live right in the city near to where he had to work.

And where he could continue to meet Inci.

In spite of Rachel's efforts to root it out of her mind, the ugly seed of suspicion sown there by Meryl would keep sprouting up, and she would wonder whether he had been sincere when he had said he wouldn't be planning to meet Inci secretly although it was possible be

might run into her. Then he would do something for her, bring flowers home for her or take her out to see a new play that had opened on Broadway or to some other form of interesting entertainment, and she would forget Inci and try to convince herself that although he had never said so, he must love her at least as much as he had loved the other woman, if not more.

Big, noisy and dirty as New York was, it possessed a vitality that was infectious. Ross seemed determined to help her become established in her chosen career as an artist, and he introduced her to people he knew who belonged to the artistic community of the city, encouraging her to look for a studio for herself where she would be able to paint and also to practise the art of silk-screen printing in which she had specialised at college. Sometimes she went up on the train to Riverpark to visit Moira and Jenny, who was expecting her first baby, and sometimes they came to town for a shopping-spree in which she joined. Always there were friends of Ross's to entertain. It seemed there was never a moment to spare for introspection or reflection and rarely time for doubts or suspicions about Ross's motive in rushing her into marriage with him.

March was in, and the shoots of spring flowers were beginning to show in Central Park where she loved to jog in the mornings with Ross and other fitness-conscious people, when Rachel received a surprising phone call from her mother, who was in Edinburgh on a visit from Australia.

'Granny Dow is very ill and in hospital,' said Dorothy. 'She isn't expected to live much longer but she wants to see you very much. Can you come?'

'Of course I can. As soon as I can get a seat on a plane,' Rachel answered without hesitation.

'I'll have to go to see her,' she told Ross later that day.

'I guess you will,' he said, 'I'd come with you, only right now I'm really busy doing Morton's work as well as my own.'

'Couldn't you take Some time off and join me over there? Surely the investment company can get along without you for a while.'

'I'm sure it could,' he agreed equably, 'but it seems that Morton can't.' Seeing her make a face, he stepped over to her and put his arms around her. 'Would you like to fly over on Concorde?'

'Could I?' The suggestion distracted her for a few moments.

'Of course. Nothing but the best and the fastest is good enough for my woman,' he teased her. 'Tomorrow suit you?'

'Only if it suits you.'

'I guess I'll survive, as long as we're not apart too long/ he murmured, and stifled all her misgivings as usual with kisses.

Early next morning she was giving her appearance a few last touches before she left the flat with Ross to drive to Kennedy airport, when the telephone rang. Since Ross was still in the bathroom she answered it.

'Hello,' said a soft female voice with a slight foreign accent. 'Is this the residence of Ross Fraser?'

'Yes. He isn't available right now. May I take a message?' said Rachel, searching for and finding a pen and pad.

'You are?' the voice queried.

'His wife, Rachel Fraser.'

'Then I don't think it would be suitable for me to leave a message with you,' said the woman with a laugh. 'I guess I'll catch him later.'

She hung up before Rachel could say anything else and, puzzled by the mocking lilt in the soft seductive voice when the woman had said she didn't think it suitable for her to leave a message with Ross's wife, Rachel returned the receiver to its rest.

'For me?' asked Ross from the living-room doorway where he stood fastening the double-breasted jacket of his grey suit. As always when dressed for the city with his hair well brushed he looked very handsome and businesslike yet somehow coolly remote from her. She always preferred him in more casual clothes with his hair windblown.

'Yes. Most odd. I asked her to leave a message and she said it wouldn't be suitable for her to leave it with me. She'll catch you later, she said.'

'Really.' He was amused. 'She'll find it impossible. I've already been hooked by the most beautiful woman in the world.' Hands at her waist he twisted her round to face him. 'I wish you didn't have to go away.'

'I wish I didn't have to leave you,' she murmured, arms around his neck. 'But I have to; you do understand, don't you? Granny has always been so good to me. You'd go if it were Morton who was ill and wanting to see you.'

'I understand. Or at least I keep telling myself to be understanding, even while all of me is rebelling against you going away without me,' he said seriously. .

'You sometimes go away without me,' she pointed out.

'I know. But not far. Only to Washington or Chicago and I come back fast.'

'Please fly over to join me there.' She tried again to force him into making a commitment. 'It's time you met my mother.'

'I suppose it is.' His glance lingered on her lips.

'And you'd meet Giles again.'

'I guess so,' he said indifferently, and kissed her so long and hard that she was breathless when he had finished. 'That's so you won't forget me when you're back on your native heath and this place and all that has happened here seems just like a dream to you.'

'I won't forget you,' she said urgently, suddenly anxious about leaving him, the image of Inci rising unbidden in her mind. 'And please don't ever think it's been a dream. I do exist. Hold me tight, fed me. Am I as insubstantial as a dream?'

'I guess you're not,' he said with a laugh, squeezing her. Then, with a quick change of mood, he let go of her suddenly and turned away to pick up her cases. 'Come on,' he added roughly, 'let's get parting from each other over before I lose my cool and behave like a caveman and carry you off to the wilderness where no one can come between us.'

On the swift flight across the Atlantic she found herself thinking of his last remark about someone coming between them, and entangled with, the thoughts was a woman's soft voice asking for him and saying it was unsuitable to leave a message for him with his wife. A voice with just the slightest trace of an accent. Who? Inci? Jealous suspicion mushroomed in her mind again and this time wouldn't be banished. She wanted more than anything to turn right round and go back to New York to find out for sure if it had been Inci who had rung him that morning, thinking possibly that his wife had left for Scotland already, calling him to make a date to meet him somewhere.

She was so worried that she rang him at the flat in New York as soon as she had checked in at the hotel near Heathrow, where a room had

been booked for her for the night so that she would be near the airport to catch a flight next morning to Tumberry, not far from Edinburgh. Only when there was no answer did she remember it would still be mid-afternoon in New York, so she dialled the number of his office. Hearing his secretary on the line quite clearly she made herself known.

"This is Rachel Fraser, Sheila. I'm calling long-distance from London, England. Is Ross there?"

'Sorry, Mrs Fraser. He went out to lunch with a client and hasn't come back yet. Is there anything I can do?'

'No, not really.' Was he having lunch with Inci, Rachel Wondered jealously? 'Just tell him I arrived safely at Heathrow and I'm in the hotel now. Please give him the phone number here and ask him to call me later,' she said, feeling disappointment flood through her. When the secretary agreed, she gave her the hotel's number, her room number and then rang off.

Ross hadn't called her at the hotel before she at last gave in to fatigue and went to bed. Although the small *room* was cold and the bed felt damp, she slept as soon as she lay down. But her sleep wasn't restful because she dreamed nearly all the time, knowing she was dreaming and yet unable to wake up enough to shake off the dream. It seemed to her she was walking along a pathway. On either side there were high hedges. She was going to meet Ross, but as she walked the hedges seemed to crowd in on her so that the path grew narrower and narrower until she was fighting her way through a thicket of briar roses and hawthorns, the sharp thorns snagging her clothing and scratching her hands and face. Yet the more she tried to break through the thicket to reach Ross the further away he went.

Troubled by the dream, she decided to leave calling him again until she was in Edinburgh. The flight north didn't take long and she felt

excited anticipation rising in her at the thought of being back in her native city as she looked out at the neat fields of the Midlands and then at the golden brown moors of Yorkshire and Northumbria sliding by beneath the wing of the plane.

As she waited for her luggage at the small airport, hearing familiar accents all around her, she felt as if she had never been away and had lived for the last six months in the States. Ross had been right. Her marriage to him, their honeymoon, Christmas in Palm Beach, the two months in Manhattan were all becoming rather dreamlike.

But she mustn't let that happen, she admonished herself, yanking one suitcase off the conveyor belt. She must always be reminding herself Ross really existed and was her husband. She fingered the rings he had given her. At least she had them, the tokens of his love and respect for her, to remind her that all they had done together hadn't been a dream.

Giles, seeming somehow a little taller and more self-confident, was at the airport to meet her, and soon they were in a taxi being whisked into the city and along familiar streets, under the towering slab of grey rock on which the cascade sat, and out to the suburb where he said their mother was staying in a house lent to her by a friend who was out of town for a while.

'You look wonderful,' Giles said with a surprising lack of reticence. He hadn't been given, as a rule, to paying her compliments. 'Looks like being married to a millionaire is going down well with you. Must be nice to have money to spend and plenty of free time to spend it. Just wait until Mum sees you. I think she'll agree with me, at last, that you did the right thing in marrying Ross Fraser. Pity he couldn't have come with you.'

'He's going to try and come,' said Rachel. 'Has - Mother said something to you about my marriage to him? About it not being the right thing for me to do?'

'No. But I think she's a bit worried about you. You know how mothers are about their daughters.'

'Not having a daughter yet, how can I possibly know?' retorted Rachel. 'You're not looking so bad yourself. How's your term been So far? Are you going to pass all your exams?'

'So far it's been fine. No problems. Having a bit of extra cash . . .' Giles broke off suddenly as the taxi lurched to a stop, throwing him off balance. 'Ooops! Sorry about that. Here we are. I hope you changed some dollars for pounds and can pay the fare.'

The -house was typical of the neighbourhood, in a terrace of identical houses all joined together, and it had bay windows draped with lace curtains. The front door opened before they reached it and Dorothy, tall and slim, her still dark hair smoothly coiled about her shapely head, appeared. Feeling her mother's arms around her, smelling the familiar scents of her, Rachel swallowed back tears. It wouldn't do to show too much sentiment in front of her proud and extremely reserved only surviving parent.

'I hope you had a good flight, Rachel. When did you leave New York?' asked Dorothy, leading the way along a narrow hall to a big living-room-cum- dining-room at the back of the house.

'Yesterday morning, and I arrived at Heathrow yesterday evening,' Rachel said, taking off her rakish broad-brimmed black hat and shaking her shoulder- length hair free. 'It was exciting to travel so fast. I came on Concorde.'

'But that was very extravagant of you,' exclaimed Dorothy. 'The one-way fare is more than most people can afford to fly here and back again.'

'Not to worry, Mother. Rach wasn't paying. Her millionaire stockbroker husband paid. One thing about Ross that I learned when I was with him. He isn't mean like some people I could mention.' Catching Rachel's attention, Giles, his eyes glinting with malice, jerked his head in the direction of the man who was just getting up from an armchair by the fire. He was Alec Burgess, Dorothy's second husband.

'Hello, there, Rachel. Nice to see you again,' Alec said, his brown moustache twitching as he smiled at her. A big man dressed in tweeds, he had a rather high-pitched voice and spoke with an Australian twang that sounded very strange to her after living for months with Ross and hearing his pleasantly modulated voice speaking English without any noticeable accent.

'How are you?' she said. She had never been sure how to address Alec. She couldn't possibly call him Dad or Father, because she had too many fond memories of her own father to do that. Nor could she bring herself to call him Alec.

'Can't grumble,' he said. 'Although I wish the weather was a bit warmer. Too bad we had to leave Brisbane before summer there was over. Not much difference in the temperature between here and New York, I suppose.'

'No, not much difference.'

'I'll take you up to the room you'll be sleeping in while you're staying here,' Dorothy interposed. 'Giles has taken your cases up.' Her dark glance went over Rachel's elegant black suede, fur-trimmed coat. 'I don't think I've ever seen you look so nice, Rachel. Is that real suede?'

'Yes, it is. But tell me, how is Gran?' Rachel asked as she followed her mother up a narrow flight of stairs to the next floor.

'I believe she's only waiting to see you before she goes,' Dorothy murmured sadly, opening the door into a small narrow room with a single bed. 'It was kind of your husband to let you come,' she added, sitting down in the only chair in the room.

'Ross is kind and very generous,' replied Rachel spontaneously, sitting on the edge of the bed. 'I'm hoping he'll be able to come over and you'll meet him.'

'I'd like to meet him. I'd have come to see you married but you were in such a hurry. It upset me very much that I couldn't be present at my only daughter's wedding.'

'I'm sorry you couldn't be there too. Aunt Moira wanted us to wait until Christmas and have all the family present but neither Ross nor I wanted a fussy wedding, I thought you'd approve of the way we did it. After all it was the way you and Dad got married. And you and Alec.'

'But I'd known both Hugh and Alec for quite a while before I could make up my mind whether I wanted to marry either of them,' Dorothy pointed out. 'There was nothing hasty about either of my marriages. I didn't rush into wedlock as you seem to have done. I'm quite surprised at you. I thought you'd be more deliberate about marriage, somehow. I hope you didn't marry him for his money.'

'Oh, why do people always think that I might have done that?' Rachel complained. 'Do I look and behave like one of those women who marry a man only for his money?'

'No, you don't. And I would hope you, being my daughter, would never do anything like that. But you have to admit you and he married in haste. Perhaps there was some other reason he had for rushing you,' said Dorothy with an inquisitive glance, and immediately Rachel

thought again of Meryl implying that Ross had married her to create a smokescreen behind which he could hide his continuing affair with Inci. The thought kept her silent.

'Oh, well,' Dorothy went on, rising to her feet. 'I suppose you think it's none of my business, but I wouldn't like you to have made a mistake. So many young people seem to marry without -thinking seriously about it beforehand these days. And then, before you can turn around, they're getting a divorce because they have discovered that their life-styles and their opinions on important decisions such as whether or not they want to have a family are incompatible.'

'Is there a phone in this house?' said Rachel, quickly, uneasily aware that her mother was still fishing for more information about her sudden decision to get married. 'I must phone Ross later, let him know I've got here all right.'

'There is a phone but a transatlantic call must cost the earth.'

'Don't worry about it, Mother. I'll pay for it. I'll phone him when we come back from the hospital. He should be back at the flat by then.' Then, seeing the worried frown creasing Dorothy's high, white forehead, she said earnestly, 'I do hope you won't hold it against me or Ross because we rushed into marriage. So far we've been very happy together.'

'Well, I'm relieved to hear it,' replied Dorothy. 'Yet it's strange to think of you, of all people, living in such a busy commercial city like New York.'

'I know. And I'm a little surprised myself, because I like living there. Of course, it wouldn't be the same if we were ..." She had been going to say 'if we were poor' but that would have been another reference to Ross's wealth, so she broke off and, leaning forwards, she touched one of Dorothy's long hands which was resting on the other one. 'And

I hope you're happy, too, Mum. You look tired, and a bit anxious about something.'

Dorothy's brown eyes were hidden swiftly by their lids and her lips tightened.

'I'm as happy as it's possible for a woman of my age to be, given the circumstances,' she said evasively, 'but I have to admit that since Alec and I came to Edinburgh last week I've been worried about Giles.'

'Oh dear, what has he done now?' Rachel felt a familiar sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach which always happened when Giles got into a scrape.

'I'm not sure. But it seems to me he has more money in his pockets than he usually has. I thought perhaps he had earned it doing some job or other, but whenever I've tried to question him about it, he's either evaded the matter or made some joke about it. Rachel, I wish you could find out where he's getting the extra money from.'

'I'll do my best. I think he might have been going to tell me something in the taxi. He started to say that having extra cash had made a difference to him this year but the taxi stopped before he could explain. I suppose you think he's been gambling.' .

'No. I don't. If he was gambling he'd be losing more than he'd be winning,' Dorothy said drily. 'It's as if he gets paid regularly by someone. You see when we came I asked him if he had enough to get him through the rest of the university terms and he said I was never to worry about that any more. I do hope he hasn't got involved in something criminal, that's ail. People seem to do such terrible things to make money, like selling illegal drugs . . .'

'I'm sure Giles would never do anything like that, Mother.' Rachel was shocked that Dorothy would even think her own son might do such a thing.

'I hope you're right.' Dorothy looked up and smiled, her handsome long-jawed face with its high cheekbones lighting up and gaining a sudden beauty. 'But you'll be wanting to unpack your clothes and to hang them up. I'll call you when lunch is ready and then afterwards we can go and visit Gran. We're not far from the hospital here. So kind of Jessie Mackay to lend us this house. You remember Jessie? She and I went to school together. She's retired now and is away at the moment on a cruise.'

The visit to the hospital was a sad and trying experience. In the big white bed Ethel Dow looked tiny and shrunken, yet she attempted a smile when she saw Rachel and reached out her two withered hands to her.

'So glad you've come, darling,' she whispered. 'You look lovely.' Her eyes, once a deep warm brown but faded now, looked past Rachel. 'Where's your husband, dear? He's a Fraser, Dot tells me, and born here in Edinburgh.'

'That's right, Gran. His mother was Scottish and she married a Canadian soldier, went out to Nova Scotia after the war. I'm sorry Ross couldn't come with me,' Rachel said, feeling tears start in her eyes and thinking how much more emotional she seemed to have become since she had been married. 'But he will come. Just you hang in there and you'll meet him.'

'Hang in there, eh.' A little laugh that changed quickly to a cough shook Ethel. 'You've become quite American since you've been away. Now listen, child.' Ethel's face grew serious and her thin fingers tightened a little on Rachel's. 'The cottage on Mull is yours and there's a little annuity to go with it. I fixed it all up with the lawyer years ago. I could have left it to Giles, but I remembered how you always said you'd like to live on the island some day, and not have to work for anyone else. It'll give you something to fall back on in time of need, just in case your husband ever lets you down. Men often

have a way of doing that. Don't forget, now. It's all yours. I'm so glad you came, darling. I can rest in peace now.'

Ethel closed her eyes and her hand slipped away, and although Dorothy and Rachel sat by the bed for another half-hour, the old lady didn't open her eyes again while they were there.

As soon as Rachel returned to the house where they were staying she rang Ross. She let the telephone in the flat ring a long time before hanging up and then checked the time. He should be home by now. Living and working in downtown area, he didn't get held up in rush-hour traffic. Twice more she tried to reach him before she went to bed and even got up to creep down the stairs at three o'clock, hoping to get him when he went to bed, but there was no answer.

She didn't try again because she fell asleep at last and didn't waken until late morning, when Dorothy came in to the bedroom with a cup of tea to tell her that Ethel had died peacefully in her sleep soon after they had left the hospital.

Helping her mother arrange the funeral, visiting Ethel's lawyer and hearing the reading of her will, took up most of the rest of the day and she wasn't able to ring Ross until just before she went to bed. He answered after the second ring.

'Oh, I'm so glad you're home,' she said. 'I tried all yesterday evening but there was no answer.' He didn't say anything so she rushed on. 'Did Sheila give you my message?'

'Yes. I'd have phoned you but had no other number to call. Give me one where I can get in touch with you,' he replied, briskly businesslike.

'Ready?'

'Shoot.'

She gave him the number then said sadly, 'Gran died last night.'

'I'm sorry.' How far away and remote he sounded.

'She said she was sorry not to have met you.' Again he didn't comment so she added, "The funeral is the day after tomorrow. Please, Ross, will you fly over for it?"

'I can't. Too tied up. But you'll be coming back right after, won't you?'

'Not immediately. I have to go to Mull.'

'Why?'

'Gran's left me her cottage.'

'How long will you be there?'

'Only a few days.'

'And when will you fly back to New York?'

'I'll stay here until Mother and Alec leave in two weeks' time. Mother would like to meet you.'

'Then she'll have to come this way with you when you come back, bring her husband, visit Moira and Jack, see the sights.'

It sounded all so easy when he suggested it, the right thing to do.

'They can't afford it.'

'I'll pay. You make the bookings for them over there and charge it all on your American Express card.'

'She wouldn't let me.'

'So that's where you get that pride from,' he taunted. 'I noticed Giles doesn't suffer from it,' he added drily.

'It would be much simpler if you flew over and joined me here.'

'I can't. Not right now. I'm up to my ears.'

She suddenly got the impression that he wasn't alone in the flat, something to do with the terse way in which he was speaking.

'Ross. Is someone with you?'

'Yes.'

'Anyone I know?'

'No. Just someone who has dropped in for some advice.'

'Rachel.' Dorothy spoke sharply behind her. 'You've been on that phone long enough. You must be spending a fortune.'

'I guess you're not alone either,' Ross laughed in her ear. 'Is that your Mum? Put her on to say hello.'

Rachel turned and held out the receiver to her mother.

'It's Ross. He wants to speak to you.'

Dorothy stared at the receiver as if it was some wicked invention.

'Whatever shall I say to him?' she whispered in near panic at the thought of speaking to a stranger on the phone.

'Just say hello, how are you and ask him to come over to meet you and Alec.'

Slowly Dorothy took hold of the instrument and put it to her ear.

'Hello, Mr Fraser,' she said primly. 'Dorothy Burgess here. How are you?'

Rachel couldn't hear what Ross was saying so she watched her mother's face instead. At first Dorothy frowned then, slowly and unbelievably her face softened and she nodded her head as if agreeing with something he was saying. Then quickly but pleasantly she cut in.

'Oh no, we couldn't possibly let you do that, Mr ... er ... I mean Ross. It's very kind of you but we couldn't accept your offer. My husband has to return to work. He can't spare any more time off. Couldn't you possibly fly over before we go back to Australia? No? Of course. I quite understand. You're in the same position as Alec, and work must come first. Well, it's been nice talking to you. Perhaps you'll bring Rachel to visit us in Australia, will you? Next winter? Oh, good. I'll look forward to that. Goodbye.'

Still smiling, her fine skin just a little flushed as if she had received an unexpected compliment, Dorothy handed the receiver to Rachel and went back into the living-room.

'Ross?' Rachel said quickly.

'She doesn't sound like a dragon at all,' he mocked. 'We're committed to a holiday in Australia. OK? I've always wanted to go there.'

'I still wish you'd try to come here.'

'Sorry. Talk to you again soon, sweetheart. Must go now.'

He hung up, and the click cutting her off from him made her feel momentarily desolate because he was so far away. She hung up too and went into the living- room.

'What did he say to you, Mother?'

'He thanked me for having such a lovely daughter and offered to pay Alec's and my fare to New York if we returned with you. He's wanting you to go back this week.'

'I know. But how can I when I have to go and see Gran's cottage? Oh, I do wish he'd come here and go to Mull with me.'

Ross called her the evening after Ethel's funeral and once again she asked him to fly over to join her on the trip to Mull.

'I want you to see the place and advise me what to do about it,' she pleaded.

'I'd like to be with you, but I can't come right now. I have to go out of town.'

'Where? Where are you going?'

'San Francisco. I leave in the morning.'

If he had said he had been going to the moon she couldn't, have felt more deserted. In San Francisco he would be thousands of miles further away from her than he was now, on the shore of a different ocean.

'Where will you be staying? Please give me a phone number,' she asked urgently.

'I can't yet. I'll call you when I get there.'

'But I might not be here. I. .. I'm going north with Mum and Alec tomorrow.'

'Then call me at the apartment when you get back,' he said briskly. 'Gotta go now. Night, sweetheart.'

He rang off and she hung up. He sounded impatient and now she felt as if he had cut her off because he couldn't be bothered to discuss the possibility of him flying over to join her any more. He didn't want to come to Scotland to be with her. That was becoming very clear.

The feeling of having been cut off from him entirely worried her all that night. Not only did she feel separated from him by miles of ocean but also she felt as if someone had come between her and him, preventing them from communicating properly. The soft, seductive voice of the woman who had called him the morning she had left for Scotland whispered in her ear, causing chills to go up and down her spine.

If only Ross had agreed to come over and join her she wouldn't be suffering from all this doubt and suspicion. If he really loved her he would have come, wouldn't he? Since he had told her a little bit about his affair with Inci at Palm Beach, she had tried so hard to come to terms with the feeling that she was only his second-best love because she hadn't been his first love; that he didn't love her and would never love her with the total commitment of a young man's love, as he must have loved Inci, but she still resented the woman she had never met and would never know.

Might as well face it, she was downright jealous of Inci, and even now was suspecting that Ross had lied to her when he had said he would never plan to see Inci again. She had almost convinced herself that the woman who had phoned him the morning she had left New York and who was perhaps in the flat now with him was Inci.

She spent a miserable night, wanting him- and wishing he were with her holding her in his arms, and she was glad when daylight came and she was able to get up and start packing for the trip to Mull.

The sun shone out of a misty blue sky, and as Alec drove Dorothy and her to the islands over the moors and through the glens it seemed to

Rachel that the whole countryside sparkled, as it wakened from its winter sleep. High on mountain summits snow glittered. Streams swollen by melted snow rushed down craggy hillsides and babbled under old bridges. Pussy-willows shone silver-grey and the buds of birches glowed purplish pink.

They, reached the port of Oban on the west coast in time to see a spectacular sunset, crimson and gold clouds streaking a sky. of pale green against which the mountains of Mull made dark mysterious shapes, and they stayed in an old-established hotel facing the small island of Kerrera across the strait of water with the same name. Next morning they boarded the car ferry and sailed across to Mull. Standing on the deck in the crisp yet calm air, Rachel recalled with Dorothy the many times they had travelled that way years before, and named familiar landmarks for the benefit of Alec.

From a ferry wharf on the island they drove along a winding road over brown moors where pools of water glittered and green was beginning to show. In the tiny hamlet of Boskillen, a group of old crofting cottages on the shores of a western sea loch, they were welcomed by Margaret and Archie Maclaine who lived on the croft next to Ethel Dow's and had always kept an eye on it while she was away.

To Rachel the cottage looked the same as it always had. It faced west, looking down the long inlet to the Atlantic ocean, and its whitewashed walls were pale primrose colour in the light of the spring sunshine. Snowdrops drooped in its front garden and crocuses were showing their green sheaths. The house was one storey high, built of blocks of granite, and its roof was thatched. Inside there were two large rooms, a kitchen- cum-living-room furnished with table and chairs, a sofa and a winged armchair and a bedroom divided from the other room by a narrow hallway with a bathroom at the end of it.

Standing in the kitchen for the moment Rachel couldn't help being struck by the stark simplicity of the place compared with the homes she had stayed in in the States: The furniture looked very shabby and the whole place smelt damp. She couldn't help wondering, either, what Ross would think of it. Accustomed to living in luxury with every convenience, wouldn't he look down at it, perhaps make derisive remarks about it and refuse to stay in it with her?

'Are you going to keep it?' asked Alec as, after having some tea and home-made scones with the Maclaines, they walked to the cottage for a last look at it.

'I'd like to, but I'm not sure if I'll ever have much chance to come and stay in it. I don't know what Ross will think of it. It's so far away from New York and everything he likes to do,' said Rachel dubiously, trying to imagine her sophisticated husband staying in the cottage, hobnobbing with the Maclaines, fishing in the loch, and failing. 'I think Gran should really have left it to you, Mother.'

'She was trying to do what she thought best for you,' Dorothy replied. 'She made her will before you were married, when you were talking about wanting to come here to work and not have to be dependent on a nine-to-five job to keep your body and soul together. Remember what she said to you? While you own it you'll always have somewhere to come to that belongs to you. She was glad of the place after Hugh's father died. And you can never tell what might happen. You might be glad to come here one day and do your own thing.' Dorothy turned to look at the twinkling water of the sea loch and took in deep breaths. 'It's beautiful and peaceful here,' she enthused. 'And the air is so clear and fresh.'

'It seems damned raw to me, especially now the sun is beginning to go down,' grumbled Alec, shivering in spite of his tweeds. 'Come on, let's drive into Tobermory to the hotel. I'm looking forward to a dram

of malt whisky in front of a blazing fire. We can decide what Rachel wants to do with the place there, in comfort.'

Tobermory, the largest town on the island, didn't seem to have changed any more than Boskillin had, thought Rachel. The famous bay was smooth and placid in the late afternoon light, reflecting the tall, high-shouldered Highland buildings edging the shore-line. On its cliff top the well-known hotel still looked like an old Scottish manor house complete with turret, strong and sturdy, as if to withstand not only the often boisterous Atlantic weather but also armed invasions by an alien people.

After seeing their rooms, Rachel and Dorothy left Alec to have his malt whisky before a blazing fire in the lounge and walked back down the hill into the town to renew their acquaintance with it.

'Let's walk that way and see if Bessie Gowan still has her tweed shop,' suggested Dorothy.

'Didn't she always close for the winter?' said Rachel as they reached the bottom of the hill and walked along a pavement in front of the few shops.

'I'm not expecting to find her open. I just want to see if she's still in business. She said something about selling the place and retiring last time I was over here, five years ago. Here it is. Look, someone is inside building shelves.'

Light streamed out of the window of the shop into the slowly falling dusk. Peering inside, Rachel saw two men and a woman. One of the men had a beard and was standing on a plank of wood supported by two trestles and was painting the ceiling. The other man was sawing a plank of wood in half. The woman, who was slim and small dressed in denim overalls, had waist-long, honey-coloured hair. She was

painting another plank of wood, which was presumably to be used in the building of shelves.

"That's Morag, Morag Gowan,' Rachel said excitedly. She left the window to try the latch of the shop door. The door was locked so she went back to the window and tapped on it. When the young woman looked in the direction of the window Rachel waved to her. After a hesitation the young woman waved back and started towards the door. Rachel was at the door when it opened.

'Morag. Remember me, Rachel Dow?'

'Of course I do,' said the small fair-haired woman, her thin triangular-shaped face lighting up with pleasure. 'Ach, it's grand to see you. You too, Mrs Dow.'

'Mrs Burgess, now,' said Dorothy smiling. 'I married again.'

'Won't you come in for a wee while,' said Morag, standing back and gesturing towards the interior of the shop. 'We're in a wee bit of a mess as you can see, making alterations. What are you both doing on the island at this time of the year?'

'My grandmother died recently,' Rachel explained as they stepped inside. 'And we came over to see her croft, make sure everything was in order. She left it to me in her will.'

'Then will you be coming to live in the island?' asked Morag who, although the same age as Rachel, looked not much more than twelve or fourteen with her flat-chested slim figure, her smooth pink and white complexion and her straight hair falling almost into her round grey eyes.

'Er . . . no, not really. I might come and stay for a while in the summer,' said Rachel. 'What about you? Last time I saw you you were off to study dress design somewhere.'

'Ach, that was ages ago,' laughed Morag. 'I'm married now, to Lachlan Beton. He's the one with the beard and he owns a sheep farm on the island. Since Mother decided to give up this place we've taken it over and we're opening in May, still selling local tweeds, hand-made knits and home-spun wool but also offering other locally made crafts. Pete Corrie over there is our partner. He's a potter. I do the weaving and we have several island women doing the knitting.'

Morag introduced the two young men who acknowledged Rachel and Dorothy then went back to work.

'I'm quite envious of you,' said Rachel.

'Why?' Morag's eyes opened wide in surprise.

'You're using you skills as craftspeople and artists and you're going to sell what you create.'

'Aren't you? I remember you used to say you would like to set up a studio here on the island and turn out paintings and silk-screen prints and sell them,' replied Morag. 'What have you been doing since you left art college?'

'I've been working in a department store doing display designs. Getting started on one's own is really difficult when you don't have any financial backing.

You're lucky your mother already had an established business here.'

'You're right. I am. And of course being married to Lachlan helps. Most of the wool I use in the tweeds comes from his sheep. I do the dyeing of it myself, too,' said Morag, gazing at Rachel thoughtfully.

'Did I hear you say something about silk-screen printing?' asked Pete, coming over to them. Ever since she had been introduced to him Rachel had been aware of him watching her curiously .

'Yes. Rachel is a whizz at it. Won prizes at the art college she attended,' said Morag enthusiastically, and then clapped a hand against her forehead. 'Good heavens, I've just realised she went to the college where you used to teach pottery.'

'I thought I'd seen you somewhere before,' said Pete, his dark blue eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled at Rachel. 'I was in my first year of teaching there when you were in your first as a student.'

'Yes, I remember you now,' said Rachel. 'But you left before I graduated.'

"That's right. I got fed up with teaching. Went abroad for a while,' he said. 'This is really a stroke of luck you turning up here today. We've just been discussing the fact that we could really do with another partner. Is it possible you'd be interested in joining our little venture? We're looking round for someone who could contribute a different sort of craft or art form and also share the financial load with us.'

'Pete's just taken the words right out of my mouth,' said Morag excitedly. 'And with your shop-display experience you'd be a great asset.'

CHAPTER FIVE

RACHEL stared at Pete Corrie for a few moments, trying to assess the sincerity of his suggestion. He smiled back at her encouragingly and another memory of him stirred at the back of her mind. He had been very friendly with Ralph Bates, the teacher of punting with whom she had become involved. She remembered that Pete had also possessed a roving eye and a couple of times he had made a pass at her.

'We'd love to have you with us,' he said, his glance drifting over her appearance admiringly.

'Yes, we would,' said Morag enthusiastically. 'Oh, Rach, do say you'll join us.'

'I wish I could, but at the moment I'm not free to make such a commitment,' Rachel replied cautiously.

'I understand that. I mean, you've only just heard about it, haven't you?' said Morag. 'But I wish you'd think about it.'

'I'm sure Rachel is going to be thinking about it for the rest of the day,' put in Dorothy with a glint of amusement. 'I know it's something she has always said she would like to do.' She glanced at Rachel. 'And it does seem to fit in somehow with you inheriting Gran's croft, dear. You'd have somewhere to live while you worked .here.'

'Pete's setting up his kiln and wheel in one of the big rooms at the back of the shop, but you could have the other room as a studio,' said Morag. 'I do all my weaving in the barn at the farm.'

'It's very enticing, but. . .' Rachel began and broke off, for some reason not wanting to tell Morag that she had succumbed to the charms of a wealthy New York businessman and had married him. Artistic to her fingertips as well as having a strong antipathy to big cities and big

business, Morag would never understand how it was possible to be courted and eventually taken over by someone as worldly as Ross was. 'I wouldn't be able to live here all the time,' she finished lamely.

'You wouldn't have to. Just for the summer season.' said Pete. Not very tall, he was compactly built and was not unattractive with his black curly hair and brilliant blue eyes. 'Being natives of the island and having the sheep farm to look after, Mo and Lachlan don't mind living here all year round, but I like to go off to warmer climates, to Greece, preferably, in the winter. You could do the same.' Was it her imagination or was he hinting she could accompany him when he went abroad? She looked appealingly at Dorothy, hoping her mother could help her out.

'We have to go back to the hotel now, or we'll miss dinner,' Dorothy said smoothly. 'And tomorrow we'll be leaving the island to go back to Edinburgh.'

'Oh, what a pity,' sighed Morag. 'I was hoping we'd have more time together, Rachel, so that I could persuade you to come in with us before you left.'

'Could she get in touch with you by phone?' asked Dorothy, the determined organiser of other people's lives.

'Of course.' Morag found a piece of paper and wrote something on it, then handed it to Rachel. 'That's the number at the farm. Phone in the evening because in the daytime we'll be here in the shop finishing the alterations and haven't got the phone connected yet.'

'Thanks. It's been good talking to you, Mo.' Rachel put the paper in her handbag. 'And I'm really very interested. It's just that I have to consult someone else before I can make a decision.'

She and Dorothy didn't talk as they returned to the hotel. This was because they needed all their breath to climb the hill, but as soon as

they were in the entrance hall Rachel said, 'I'll have to talk to Ross about it. I can't do anything until I've talked to him. I wonder if I can phone him from here, this evening.'

'You must do as you wish, of course, dear but it will cost a lot of money,' said Dorothy. 'Why not wait until you see him? He might arrive in Edinburgh soon. Then you could discuss Morag's suggestion with him and even bring him up here to see the place.'

'Yes, I think I'll do that,' agreed Rachel, seeing that she might be able to use Morag's and Pete's invitation to job them as a partner to persuade Ross to fly over to Scotland. She wanted so much to show him the islands, to share the places she knew and liked with him as he had Shared the places he knew and liked with her during their honeymoon.

All the next day as they went back to Oban by ferry and then started off across country to Edinburgh she was silent as she held imaginary conversations with Ross, wondering what would be the best way to approach him, and she couldn't help thinking that if the opportunity had presented itself at the same time last year, before she had met Ross, she would have had no hesitation in agreeing to join Morag's venture. In marrying Ross she had lost her freedom to do something she had always wanted to do.

Not until she was back in the house in Edinburgh two days later was she able to ring him at the flat in New York. At last the telephone there was picked up. To her surprise^ soft female voice said, 'Hello.'

Thinking she had got the wrong number, Rachel apologised and put down the receiver quickly. Aware that the sound of the voice had given her an unpleasant shock, causing her heart to thump with unnecessary vigour, she tried again fifteen minutes later, noting that her hand was shaking when she dialled for the operator. Twice she

heard the ringing tone before the telephone was picked up and the same silky soft voice spoke in her ear.

'Hello.' It was the same voice she had heard the morning she had left New York.

'I'm trying to reach Ross Fraser,' she said sharply, and gave the phone number of the flat.

'I'm sorry, he isn't here right now,' said the voice.

'Then who is this speaking?' she demanded.

'Just a friend of his,' said the voice and there was a elide and the line went dead.

Slowly Rachel climbed the stairs to her bedroom. She was sure she had just been speaking to Inci. The woman was in the flat, in the place Ross had asked her to think of as her home until they were able to find the right place to buy in the country. He had lied to her when he said he wouldn't be seeing Inci again. He, to whom she had given all of herself, all her love, her entire body and soul, had deceived her after all in the way Meryl had insinuated he had. She wanted to sit down on the stairs, then and there, and howl out her anguish for everyone to hear. But, of course, she didn't. Calling on her pride, she kept quiet about it, and tried to pretend she had got a wrong number again.

Yet she didn't try to ring him again at the flat because she was too afraid of hearing the same soft voice answering her. She would wait, she decided, until Ross rang her when he returned from San Francisco; if he had really gone to California. Perhaps that had been a lie too, to prevent her from ringing him at the flat while Inci was there. Oh, God, was there to be no end to his deception of her?

For the next few days she went out as much as she could, sometimes with Dorothy and Alec, sometimes to visit old friends, 'doing

anything rather than be in the house waiting for Ross to ring. She even called in at the department store where she had once worked and was at last able to get Giles to herself for an hour, when she invited him to have lunch in the store's restaurant. Afterwards, the day being fine, they strolled about the park in Prince's Street and sat on a bench in the sunshine for a while.

She told him about the trip to Mull and the offer made to her by Morag and Pete.

'But you're not going to go in with them, I hope,' he remarked, frowning at her.

'Why shouldn't I?'

'Well, for one thing, you're married to Ross.'

'It's something I've always wanted to do,' she argued. 'And he said when he asked me to marry him that he would have no objection to my having a career as an artist. In fact he has been encouraging me to set up a studio in Manhattan, but I'd prefer to go in with Morag.'

'But Ross works and lives in Manhattan,' Giles pointed out. 'Surely you don't want to be separated from him so soon.'

'If I agreed to go in with Morag I'd only be in Mull for the summer, say from May to the end of September, the usual tourist season. It's just possible he might come and stay with me for that time,' she said slowly, then decided to change the subject. 'What are you going to do this coming summer?'

'I've been hoping a certain relative of mine would invite me over to New York to stay with her and her husband for a while,' he replied with his cheeky grin. 'Ross said I'd be welcome any time to visit him.'

'When did he say that?'

'Last year, when I was over there,' he replied, rather evasively, she thought.

'Won't you be trying to get a job, to make some money to pay your way through university next year?'

'I suppose I should. But I'd rather visit you and Ross in New York and maybe travel around the country a bit. You were in Palm Beach, weren't you, among the nobs? That must have been quite an experience. What's Morton Fraser like? I'd really like to meet him. Perhaps he'd give me some leads on how to get into business in New York.'

'He's a very kind person, but extremely shrewd. I wouldn't count on him giving you any help.'

'He helped Ross, adopted him.'

'Yes, but he had a personal reason for doing that,' she pointed out. 'Giles, would you mind telling me how you could afford to come to the States for the whole summer? Have you been earning money in your spare time?'

'What makes you ask that?' he parried quickly.

'Mother has noticed that you don't seem to be so short of money as you usually are and asked me to find out where you were getting the extra funds from,' she said bluntly, realising an oblique approach wasn't getting anywhere.

'Don't you know?' He opened his brown eyes wide, as if he was surprised at her ignorance.

'How could I know?'

'I thought Ross would have told you.'

'Giles, stop hedging,' she snapped irritably. 'What do you think Ross has told me?'

'Last year when I was with him in New York he offered to help me out financially until I graduated. I was pleased to accept his offer.'

Feeling suddenly chilled, Rachel stared at him in astonishment. 'You . . . you mean Ross has been lending you money ever since then?' she croaked. 'Why didn't you tell me he was going to give you a loan before you left the States?'

'Because I knew you would start objecting and might even tell him not to lend me anything,' he said defiantly.

'You're quite right, I would have. Oh, Giles, how could you sink so low as to ask him for a loan?'

'Now don't start criticising me before you know all the facts. I've just told you he offered to help me.'

'But you must have said something to him. I suppose it was when he lent you money to gamble with in Atlantic City that you got the idea of borrowing more from him. I can just imagine you going on about how hard you were finding it to make ends meet while you're still studying, whining, begging, playing on his generosity.'

'I didn't whine or beg,' he flared angrily.

'Then tell me how he came to offer to give you a loan?' she demanded.

'Rach, if he hasn't told you himself, I don't think I should,' he grumbled.

'Why not?'

'You're not going to like it.'

"That isn't any reason at all why I shouldn't know," she argued.

'Oh, all right. Have it your own way. Ross told me he wanted to marry you and asked me if I thought he had any chance with you. I said he might have if you could get to know him better, but for you to do that he'd have to come over to Scotland because we would be leaving the States in a few days' time. He said he couldn't come to Scotland then because of other commitments but he thought he could get Aunt Moira to persuade you to stay longer. Then he bet me you and he would be married before the end of October. I told him I had nothing to bet with and he asked me then how come I was always so short of money. I explained why and that was when he said that if he succeeded in persuading you to marry him before the end of October he would lend me money to help me finish at university. It would be the least he could do for his brother-in-law, he said.'

Again she stared at him in open-mouthed amazement.

'So if I hadn't agreed to marry him he wouldn't have arranged to give you the loan?' she whispered.

'Right.' His lips twitched into a grin again. 'Now you know why I was so keen for you to marry him.'

'And also why you didn't tell me before you left? You guessed, didn't you, that if I'd known the loan to you was conditional on my marrying him I would never have married him. Never,' she said vehemently. 'You had no right to agree to such an arrangement. No right at all. You should have told me.'

'I think you're making an awful lot of fuss about something that has nothing to do with you,' he retorted with a touch of hauteur. "The arrangement between me and Ross has nothing to do with you, really.'

'But it does have something to do with me. If I hadn't agreed to marry him he would never have lent you the money,' she insisted fiercely.

'Well, you did marry him and he arranged the loan immediately,' he muttered sulkily. 'It was done and can't be undone now.'

'Oh, yes it can. You'll have to pay back what you've already had from him and tell him to stop the rest of the loan,' she said.

'Why?'

'Because I can't have him thinking I married him just so he would lend you money.'

'But I can't pay it back yet,' protested Giles.

'Then I will,' she declared. Then holding her head between her hands she moaned, remembering Meryl's scornful insinuations. 'Oh, I feel as if I've been manipulated by the two of you. I've been bribed into marrying him, bribed by a loan to you . . . '

'Don't be so damned silly and melodramatic.' Giles had never spoken so harshly to her before. 'I'm sure Ross didn't have bribery in mind at all.'

'Then why did he make the loan to you conditional on my agreeing to marry him?' she challenged him.

'I dunno. Maybe he thought he could be sure of me paying him back if I was related to him through marriage first. You'll have to ask him.'

'I will, oh, I most certainly will, the first chance I get. And you're not to accept any more money from him until I've talked with him and worked out how to pay him back.'

'But Rach, if you do that, if you stop the payments he's been sending to me every month I won't be able to afford my share of the rent of the house I'm living in,' he complained. 'And I won't be able to stay on and finish my courses at law school.'

'You mean you're not living in the place we used to share?' ,,,

'That dump? I should say not,' said Giles, his lips curling in disgust. 'Two of the fellows in my year and I live in an old house in the city. We share the rent, but I couldn't have afforded to move in with them if Ross hadn't been so generous. I tell you, my life has been much more comfortable as a result of you marrying him, so I hope you're not going to do anything stupid to mess everything up. I know how foolishly proud you can be. Pride, the never failing vice of fools—didn't some English poet once say that? I. think it was Alexander Pope. It describes you to a T.'

'Oh, you're impossible,' Rachel hissed. 'If I have too much pride you have none at all, always borrowing money. How you could accept a loan from Ross when you hardly knew him I shall never understand.'

'You married him and you hardly knew him,' he sniped back. 'How do I know you didn't marry him because you knew he was wealthy and could finance any crack-brained arty scheme you might think up? I wouldn't be at all surprised if you're not thinking of asking for a loan yourself so you can put money into that business in Mull.'

'I'm not. I'd never think of doing that.' She was nearly spluttering she was so angry with him. 'You should never have accepted his offer to help you. Mother will be furious when I tell her.'

'Do you have to tell her?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then see if I care. She can't do anything,' he taunted, getting to his feet. 'I'm going now. I've got a lecture at two forty-five.'

He stalked *off* and with a sigh Rachel stood up and went to wait for a bus to take her back to the house, oblivious of the signs of spring all around her as she tried to cope with this new attack on her marriage to Ross.

She was telling Dorothy of Ross's loan to Giles that evening when she received a call from Ross at last.

'I called you as soon as I got back from 'Frisco on Wednesday but there was no answer,' he explained.

'I did call you once but the woman who answered the phone said you weren't in,' she replied stiffly.

There was a short silence then he said, 'When did you call?'

'Tuesday evening. A woman answered the phone. I think she was the same person who called you the morning I left. You remember? She wouldn't leave a message for you with me. She spoke with an accent. Who was she, Ross?'

Another short silence. Was he wondering how to answer her, whether to lie to her or not?

'That was Inci,' he said at last. She drew in her breath sharply. The truth hurt even more than a lie would have done, she thought miserably.

'What was she doing there? You told me you were never going to see her again.' She heard her voice rising rather shrilly.

'I said I would never *plan* to meet her again,' he said crisply. 'And I haven't.' She heard him sigh. Then, 'Look, Rachel, this is too

complicated to explain over the phone. Leave it until we meet on Friday.'

'I'm not coming on Friday,' she heard herself say in a cool little voice.

'Why not?' He was very sharp. 'What's happened?'

'As well as finding out that you've been deceiving me about Inci, I've also found out that you've been sending money to Giles, that you've given him a loan.'

'I thought you knew about that. I thought he'd have told you before he went back to Edinburgh last fall.'

'Why did you do it?'

'To help the guy out. He signed a promissory note to say he'd pay it back as soon as he was working. It's nothing unusual over here*for students to borrow money to help pay their way through college or university. I thought he'd told you about it. In fact I told him I'd only lend him the money if there was any chance of him becoming my brother-in-law, and I assumed he'd told you about that.'

"Then I think I should make it quite clear to you that if he had told me about it I would never have married you,' she said coldly and clearly.

'Why the hell not?' She could tell by the icy clarity of his voice that his temper was rising. 'That damned pride of yours again?'

'Yes. By offering to lend money to Giles if I married you first you put me in the position of being under an obligation to you. You thought I knew you would lend him money if I married you. You wanted a wife quickly so you tried to buy one.'

'Rachel, you've got it all wrong,' he interrupted her roughly. 'But I refuse to discuss this with you over three thousand miles of ocean on a bad line. Wait until we're together when you come back on Friday.'

'I'm not coming back on Friday,' she said again, too upset to think straight.

'Then when are you coming back?' he asked.

'I don't know,' she blurted rather wildly. 'I can't come back and live with you while Giles is in debt to you.'

This time he was quiet for so long she thought that they had been cut off. At last he spoke coolly, his voice faint and often interrupted by a sort of swishing noise as if they really were speaking through ocean waves.

'OK. We'll leave it like that for now. Any idea how long before he graduates and goes to work and can start paying me back?'

'No. I don't. I don't know how much he borrowed from you.'

'Twenty Ks.'

'What?' She felt suddenly a little weak.

'Twenty killer dollars.' He spoke more loudly. 'Twenty grand. Or if you want it in British currency, between twelve and thirteen thousand pounds sterling. That's what he asked for. It's being paid to him over a period of twenty-four months during which time he should graduate, he told me. He gets just over five hundred pounds a month.'

'Ross, you must stop it. Stop making the payments,' she said urgently.

'Only if Giles say so. It's between him and me,' he said in a hard voice. 'I'm going now. Call me if you climb down off your high horse, change your mind and decide to come back on Friday.'

He hung up without saying goodbye. Feeling shaken by his cool dismissal of her, she returned to the living-room.

'Well?' queried Dorothy.

'It's true. Ross has lent Giles twenty thousand dollars over a period of two years.'

'Good God. Why?' exclaimed Alec.

'To help him pay his way through university, Ross said. And he'll only stop making farther payments if Giles says he doesn't want any more money.'

'Giles must pay back what he has had to date immediately and cancel the loan,' said Dorothy sternly. 'We can't have you feeling under an obligation to your husband because he has lent money to your brother.' She sighed heavily. 'Money always causes trouble in families.'

'That's what I think, too,' said Rachel. 'But where can Giles get nearly three thousand pounds in a hurry?'

'No use looking at me,' Alec said. 'Dorothy and I have forked out enough for that extravagant brother of yours. And I think it's time we all stopped helping him. If you really don't want him to keep on taking the loan from your husband tell him to drop out of university and go and do some really hard work to pay off what he's already had.'

'I think Alec is right,' murmured Dorothy, 'Although I don't like the idea of Giles not graduating now that he's so far on in his studies, he is old enough to be responsible for his own debts.'

'But where will he get a job that will play the sort of money from which he can save enough to pay back what he owes Ross?' sighed Rachel. 'He isn't skilled in anything. It will take him ages to amass over two thousand pounds.'

'If you're so keen for him to pay it back why don't you help him?' Alec suggested. 'You'll be getting that annuity from your grandmother's estate.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Alec,' said Dorothy sharply. 'Rachel will be getting only about three hundred pounds a month from that.'

'You know it's really none of our business. It's just between Ross and Giles, and if Giles wants to go on taking the loan there isn't anything you two can do about it. Seems to me you're both getting worked up about nothing,' said Alec, getting to his feet. 'I'm off to bed. Dot and I have to make mi early start tomorrow.'

As soon as Alec was out of earshot Rachel said to Dorothy, 'I've told Ross I can't go back to New York and live with him while Giles owes him money.'

'Oh, dear,' sighed Dorothy. 'Why did you say that?'

'Because if I'd known he was going to lend money to Giles I'd never have married him. Giles guessed that, so he didn't tell me about it. He deceived me deliberately and now I know that Ross has deceived me too.'

'In what way?'

'He's been seeing another woman while I've been over here.' In spite of her effort to remain calm and cool Rachel's voice shook.

'So soon?' Dorothy looked shocked. 'But you've only been married about five months.'

'He knew her long before he ever met me. He wanted to marry her but she refused for some reason. It's been suggested to me that he married me to make a sort of smokescreen so that he and she could go on meeting in secret.'

'I guessed that no good would come of your getting married in haste,' said Dorothy, looking grim. 'You should have made him wait, then you'd have probably found out all about him and wouldn't be in this position now.'

'I suppose you're right,' whispered Rachel miserably.

'Are you in love with him?' asked Dorothy.

'I was when he asked me to marry him. He seemed so sincere, so protective and kind. Now I'm beginning to think it was all an act, to rush me into marriage with him. He even made a bet with Giles that he would be married to me before the end of last October and he persuaded Moira to invite me to stay on so he could date me. He must have planned it all in a cold, calculating way that I don't think I can forgive.'

'How did you find out about this other woman?'

'Moiipn Fraser's niece told me. But I didn't want to believe her and Ross even told me the affair was all over. But when I rang him the other night a woman answered the phone. Tonight Tasked him who she was and he admitted that she was Inci.'

'Didn't he offer any explanation?' 'No. He wouldn't discuss it over the phone, said it was too complicated.'

'Well, I agree with him there. Much better for you to have it out face to face,' said Dorothy.

'I'm not going back,' said Rachel stubbornly. 'And I'm not changing my mind. If he wants to have it out face to face he'll have to come to find me. I'm staying here.'

'That is one way of dealing with the matter, although it will take a lot of willpower on your part,' Dorothy remarked, 'But then if he really loves you he'll come running and looking for you.'

'And if he doesn't?' Rachel asked miserably, imagining suddenly what her life would be like without Ross.

'There are plenty more fish in the sea,' said Dorothy airily and unconsolingly.

Before Dorothy left the next day she had a few words to say to Giles that left him in no doubt about her feelings concerning his borrowing from Ross, but although his face was red afterwards he told Rachel, as they left the station after seeing Dorothy and Alec off on the London train, that he had no intention of giving up the allowance Ross had been sending to him.

'You won't do it even for me?' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'I can't go back to him while you're still taking money from him, that's all,' she replied.

'Have you told Ross that?'

'Yes.'

'What did he say?'

'He said OK.'

'I don't believe it,' whispered Giles, shaking his head incredulously. 'I don't believe that you're so stupid as to break up your marriage to him just because he has lent me money without consulting you first. You're nuts.'

'There is another reason why I'm not going back to New York,' she replied with a touch of hauteur. 'But I wouldn't expect anyone as lacking in pride as you to understand.'

'Are you trying to tell me he's been two-timing you while you've been over here?' Giles guessed shrewdly. 'Now that makes more sense as a reason for you to separate from him. But what are you going to do? Go back to the department store?'

'I'm going to Mull as soon as I can buy a secondhand car and move my printing equipment up there. You have still got it, haven't you? You didn't throw it out or sell it when you moved into your house.'

'I've got it,' he said, looking worried. 'Rach, I'm really sorry about what's happened. I like Ross. I think he's one of the best and I really believed he'd got your measure and could handle you. Isn't there anything I can do to help?'

'Other than paying back the money you already owe Ross and cancelling the loan, you mean?' she queried tartly, a little hurt to realise that he sided with **Ross** and not with her. 'Yes, there is. You can let me stay in your house for a few days and find a good used car for me.'

'All right. You can stay with us and I'll find you a car,' he agreed with a sigh. 'Have you told Ross about the business in Mull?'

'No, I haven't.'

'Well, you'd better. He has a right to know where you are and what you're doing. And if you're not going to tell him I will,' he threatened.

'I'll write to him as soon as I've settled in,' she said quickly. 'You don't have to tell him anything. Can we go to your house now? I'd like to ring Morag and tell her that I've decided to go in with them.'

Three days later, on a windy but sunny morning, the small second-hand car she had bought piled high with luggage and printing equipment, Rachel took the familiar road to the isles. Although it was warmer than when she had driven north with Dorothy and Alec, there wasn't much change in the appearance of the landscape. Maybe the moors were taking on a more greenish hue and there wasn't so much snow on the high peaks, but as yet there were no leaves on the trees. They wouldn't come out until late in May;

Primroses were peeping from the corners of the little garden in front of the cottage and the water of the sea loch was a deep turquoise blue when she drove into Boskillin the next day. On the distant sea some islands made blue smudges against the placid violet-tinged horizon. The whole scene was so peaceful she ached suddenly to have Ross there to see it, to share the romantic remoteness with her.

She called at the Maclaines' to tell them she would be moving in and staying for a while. Both of them were delighted to learn that she would be their neighbour all summer and would be working in the shop in Tobermory. They invited her to share their midday meal of fresh haddock and chips, and afterwards Margaret went with Rachel to carry luggage into the cottage and to make up the double bed with the brass ends.

'And when will your husband be coming?' Margaret asked.

'I ... he ... I don't think he will be coming,' Rachel said distantly, hoping by her manner to put the older woman off asking any more questions. Dorothy had told the MacLaines she was married during the visit earlier in the month.

'Ach, and why not? Is he away somewhere?'

He . . . lives and works in New York.'

Really now.' Margaret looked at her across the bed. 'So why aren't you there with him?'

'We came to an agreement that I should come here for the summer and work with Morag,' said Rachel evasively.

Margaret made no comment while she finished tucking in the sheet at the end of the bed, but when she straightened up she gave Rachel a rather pitying look from her small grey eyes.

'One of those modern marriages is it you have? Ye both gang in different directions. Ach, I don't hold with them myself. Ye'd be better off not married at all than to be separated in this way.'

Later that afternoon Rachel drove into Tobermory to the shop. Great changes had taken place since the last time she had been there. All the shelves and display areas had been finished and the place smelt of new paint. Only Pete was there to help her carry the printing equipment into the room that was to be her studio, next to his.

'Morag and Lachlan have asked us both to go out to the farm for supper,' he said, 'but before we go, come upstairs and see where I'm living. I'm rather pleased with the way I've decorated the place.'

In the long living-room which had views over the harbour to the hills beyond he offered her a glass of wine .and they made a toast to the success of the summer season and their partnership.

'I'm really glad you decided to come and join us. Three tends to be a crowd in a partnership, but four should work out just right. Did you have any problems getting out of your other commitment?' Pete said looking at her curiously. 'We all noticed your wedding ring when you came before and guessed the person you had to consult before was your husband. Did he make any objection to you joining us?'

'No, he didn't,' replied Rachel honestly. She didn't have to admit that she hadn't consulted Ross.

'So will he be joining you later on?'

'I'm not sure.' She searched her mind for another subject of conversation, looking around the room appreciatively. 'You've done a great job in decorating this room.'

'Thanks. How long have you been married?'

'Five months.' She sipped the wine in her glass. First Margaret Maclaine and now Pete Corrie. Why were they so interested in her marriage?

'Is he an artist too?'

'No. He's a stockbroker.'

'Really?' Pete raised his thick eyebrows. 'Isn't it working out, then? Is that why you're here? You never did strike me as the sort of woman who would marry for money and be happy.'

Ignoring his insinuations, Rachel set down her empty glass and turned towards the stairway that came straight up into the living-room.

'I'd like to go over to the farm now,' she said coolly.

'Morag said she was surprised you had married. Seems you used to say marriage was the last thing you ever wanted to do, that a career in art would always come first with you,' Pete persisted, following her down the stairs.

'I must have been all of nineteen when I said that,' she replied lightly, reaching the floor below and going into the shop.

'And had just given Ralph Bates the brush-off,' he reminded her.

'I wondered if you'd remember that,' she retorted. 'Do you have any means of transport?'

'Yes. I have a jeep,' he said as they went of the shop into the street. The sun was going down behind the purple-dark hills and the sky was crimson. 'But at the moment it's in the garage down the road being tuned up. I wouldn't mind a lift over to the farm. I can walk back after supper. It's only a couple of miles away.'

Much to Rachel's relief, he said nothing more about her married state or her brief affair with her one-time painting teacher, but chatted amiably about the island and how he had met Morag and Lachlan the previous summer when he had crewed on a friend's sailing boat in the annual Tobermory Race from the Clyde to Mull. He had been impressed by the beauty of the scenery and also by the number of artists and craftsmen who had already settled there and on a chance encounter, with Morag at a local *ceilidh* had mentioned he would like to find a place to rent where he could set up a pottery. Morag had suggested he go into partnership with her and Lachlan.

By the time they reached the farm they were on good terms and Rachel had forgotten the slight strain that had shown itself when he had about asked her marriage.

The first few weeks on the island passed quickly as she settled down to reviving her skills in printing. Every day she was up early, leaving the cottage soon after eight to drive to the shop and returning soon after five. Sometimes she went home with Morag and Lachlan to their farm and sometimes she stayed in the town to go to the local pub for supper with Pete. By sheer force of will she managed not to think about Ross during the daytime, but at night she couldn't keep him out of her mind. Several times she tried to write to him to tell him where she was and what she was doing, as she had promised Giles she would, but every time she gave up after the first few words as her pride got in the way of her expressing how she really felt about being separated from him.

If he loved her he would come running, looking for her, Dorothy had told her, she thought, one afternoon as she was slipping some new prints of a black and white drawing she had done of the house along the harbour into her portfolio, intending to take them back to the cottage with her to sign. It was the middle of May, two months since she had left New York, and the start of the tourist season on the island, yet still Ross hadn't come, nor had she heard from him. And she didn't really expect him, she told herself. She had guessed all along that he didn't love her in the way she loved him. He had given all his love to Inci and there had been none left over for any other woman. Oh, he had wanted her, had found her suitable to be his wife, but he hadn't let her possess him as she had wanted to. Always he had kept himself a little aloof from her so that she had never been sure of how he really felt about her.

'What's with you?' Pete's voice behind her mocked her. 'You've been standing there staring into space for the past thirty seconds and not heard a word I've been saying.'

'Oh. Sorry.' She turned and looked at him. 'What did you say?'

'You're beginning to let it show,' he said, walking over to her and looking at her closely. 'It's beginning to get you down, isn't it?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she snapped and slung her cloak of green tweed around her shoulders.

'I'm talking about your separation from your husband, love,' he said jeeringly. 'Haven't heard from him, have you?'

'No, I haven't. But then I'm not expecting to.'

'Gone off with another woman, has he? Given you the brush-off, like you gave poor old Ralph. Now you know what it's like to be rejected. But don't let it get you down. I'm here and you and I hit it off pretty well. There's no better way to get over a lost love than to start a new love affair.'

She let him kiss her then, just to find out what it was like, but his kiss didn't go right to the core of her as Ross's kiss would have done, to melt the cold knot of caution that lay there like a lump of lead. She went out to supper with him rather than return too early to the cottage, but when he asked her to return to his room above the shop and stay the night with him she refused coolly, telling herself that if she couldn't have Ross she didn't want any other man.

< The stars were pricking the sky and on the water in the sea loch moonlight had laid a path of silver when she drove up to the cottage. All around the hills were quiet and dark. She parked the car in its usual place on the grass at the side of the road and, opening the door of the cottage, stepped inside the small hallway. She snapped the switch and the ceiling light came on. Closing the door, she dropped the portfolio of paintings and prints she was carrying on top of the antique silver chest, the only item of furniture in the hall, unbound the long scarf from around her neck and pulled the knitted angora cap

from her head, shaking free her hair. Slipping her green tweed cloak from her shoulders, she flung it across the portfolio.

After stretching her arms above her head she whirled around to go into the kitchen. She stopped short before going through the doorway, her neat, straight nose wrinkling as she detected an unusual scent, unusual in that house anyway. It was the scent of an expensive cigar, something she hadn't smelled since she had been in New York.

Suddenly every nerve in her body quivered in alarm. Someone was in the room, lurking in the darkness waiting for her to enter. Suppressing a panicky urge to turn and run out of the cottage, she squared her shoulders and walked through the doorway.

CHAPTER SIX

HER hand reached automatically for the switch on her right. Light flooded the room. Someone was sitting in the wing chair beside the old-fashioned granite fireplace. She could see the top of a head showing just above the back of the chair. In a few strides she was in front of the chair. Her heart leaping excitedly in her breast, she looked down at Ross. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up straight, raked fingers through his tousled hair.

'I must have fallen asleep,' he murmured.

'How did you know where to find me?' she demanded.

'Giles told me,' he drawled, and rose slowly to his feet. The top of his head just touched the low ceiling of the small room.

'Oh. I asked him not to. I told him I would be writing to you.' In an attempt to control an urge to fling her arms around him in welcome, she folded them across her chest and paced nervously about the room, her pleated skirt swirling above the shiny black leather boots she was wearing. Stopping in front of the small window above the sink, she saw the reflection of her own face, pale as a pearl in the dark pane, then his shape as he came up behind her, darkly threatening. 'Why have you come?' she whispered tensely.

'To see you, of course.

'What do you want?'

'My pound of flesh. Isn't that what Shylock asked for when someone couldn't pay off a debt?' She saw the glint of his teeth in a familiar self-mocking grin.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Her self-confidence surging back, she challenged him, turning to face him, her chin tilting.

'Last time we talked you said you couldn't live with me until Giles's debt to me was paid off. I've been to see him and I've asked what he's going to do about paying up. He said he couldn't see his way to paying me anything yet and referred me to you,' he said coolly. 'If you pay me what he's had already I'll cancel the allowance I've been making to him and .we'll start all over again.'

She picked up the kettle and began to fill it at the sink. Placing it on the counter, she plugged it in, moving deliberately and slowly, playing for time while chaotic thoughts skittered through her mind in all directions. As always, his direct approach had disconcerted her. He had come looking for her as her mother had said he would, but he had taken his time about it, and he didn't sound at all loving.

'Tea or coffee?' she asked.

'You know I don't drink either. I've raided your drinks cupboard. I could only find sherry. I drank all there was left in the bottle and will replace it as soon as I can get to a liquor store in the morning.'

'We don't go in for liquor stores in this part of the world,' she retorted.

'I'd noticed it's a long way off the beaten track,' he said drily. 'When I flew over from New York the night before last I wasn't reckoning on having to drive miles over moors and through glens and then take a car ferry to find you. I'm feeling really bushed. Jet-lag, I guess, combined with a sleepless night on a lumpy and damp hotel bed in Oban.' He stifled a yawn with the back of one hand.

She swung round to look at him. With his reddishbrown hair, he was well named Ross: Under slanted eyebrows, his slate-grey eyes had taken on the violet shade she had always admired. He was wearing a bulky Aran sweater and well cut tweed trousers and she could see no signs of suffering in his handsome clean-shaven face. He didn't look at all pale, had no dark lines under his eyes as if he had been spending

sleepless nights pining for her, and contrarily she was annoyed. Why would he pine for her when he had had Inci, his former love, staying with him?

'I didn't see a car when I came into the house,' she said.

'That's because I parked it somewhere else,' he replied with another glint of mocking humour. 'I didn't want you to know you had a visitor until you were in the house. Do you always leave the doors unlocked?'

'There aren't any locks, only bolts on the insides of the doors. Anyway locks aren't needed in a small place like this where everyone knows everyone else and we're all good neighbours. This isn't New York City. Or Florida, for that matter,' she jeered.

'That's obvious. Why did you come to live here? Was it just to hide from me?'

'I came to live here because I like it, because I feel I belong here. My grandmother was born here and she lived in this cottage until she became too ill to live alone. She left it to me with a small annuity. I'm independent now and can live where I choose and do what I always wanted to do. If I'd had the opportunity to come and live here before I went to Jenny's wedding I would have done.'

'Implying that you wouldn't have been so tempted to marry me, I suppose,' he giped. 'So, if you have money why haven't you paid off Giles's debt as you offered to do and come back to New York?' There was no humour in his face now and his eyes had lost the warm violet colour, had become an icy grey.

Conveniently, the kettle began to boil, so she turned away to take a small sachet of camomile tea from a tea caddy and to put it in a mug.

'I haven't saved up enough to pay it off yet,' she said in a low voice. 'But I will. I've gone into a business with two other artists here on the island and we're doing quite well, selling hand-made pottery, prints, paintings of local scenes and hand-woven tweeds.'

'Small stuff. You'll never make much money that way.'

She swung round again.

'I should have guessed you'd sneer,' she retorted, flinging back her head to glare up at him. 'Making money is all you've ever cared about.'

'That isn't true and you know it. I care about many things that have nothing to do with making money. I care about you,' he said softly, advancing towards her.

'No, you don't,' she flared defiantly. 'If you'd cared about me you wouldn't have tricked me into marrying you.'

'I didn't trick you. I courted you fairly and squarely,' he replied sharply, his eyes hardening again.

'You rushed me,' she faltered backing into the counter beside the sink.

'There wasn't much time for dalliance, I admit. I wanted to be married before I had to go south and you were due to go back to Scotland, so I had to apply pressure. But everything would have worked out fine if that creep Meryl hadn't told you lies about me.' 'Were they lies? I don't think so. There's rarely smoke without fire. You were in love with Inci and wanted to marry her long before I came on the scene. Can you deny that?'

'No. And I never have.'

'I'd hardly left New York when you started seeing her again, letting her stay in your apartment-, living with her . . . ' She broke off, unable to go on because all the hurt she had felt on hearing Inci's voice answer her when she had phoned him rose up like unpleasant phlegm in her throat, almost choking her.

'She was staying in the apartment only while I was in San Francisco,' he replied coolly. 'I said she could stay there until I came back.'

'Oh, really,' she said scornfully. 'Is that the best you can do in the way of an explanation? I don't believe a word of it.'

'Then that's your loss, because it's the truth,' he snapped, his lips thinning, his shoulders stiffening, his head lifting proudly as he resented her lack of belief and trust.

She turned to the boiling kettle, unplugged it and poured water into the mug. Steam rose in her face, moistening her skin. She put the kettle down. She must make an effort to keep her cool.

'Would you consider a year's separation while I try to raise the money to pay off Giles's debt?' she asked.

'No.'

She turned again to look at him. He looked back at her, his, eyes as hard and cold as grey glass.

'Then what would you consider?' she asked.

'That depends on how we get on together during the next few months.'

'I don't understand.'

'Since you can't pay the debt, nor can Giles yet, I suggest we forget it and resume our marriage,' he said.

'You mean . . .?'

'Exactly what I say.' His breath hissed as he drew it in. She could tell by the ridging of muscle along his jawline and the cold glare in his eyes that he was only just managing to restrain his temper, and wondered what she would do if he got hold of her and shook her. 'I married you and I intend to stay married to you. I realise now that I should never have let you come back to Scotland. If I'd played the domineering husband and stopped you from coming we wouldn't be here snarling at each other now.'

'I'm not going back to live with you in New York,' she said, chin up, eyelids drooping. 'I'm committed to staying here the whole summer. I promised Morag and Pete that I would.'

'Then I'll stay here with you and we'll go back to the States when September comes. I think that's fair,' he asserted coldly.

'But you can't stay here.'

'Why can't I? I'm your husband and I have every right to stay and live with you,' he argued.

'There's no room.'

'I admit the place is a bit small and it needs some renovations and additions, but I'm a pretty good carpenter and have experience in house-building. I learned that from Uncle Duncan, my father's brother, when I stayed with him for a couple of summers in the backwoods of Nova Scotia. Between us we did up an old maritime farmhouse he had bought on the island of Cape Breton.' He must have caught the expression of scepticism on her face, because he added bitterly, 'I know you won't believe me. You've got it into your head I'm incapable of doing anything but gamble on the stock exchange. That's why I want us to have some time together. We don't really know each other.' He stepped closer to her, his expression softening,

his eyes beginning to glow with violet light again. 'In a place as small as this cottage we'll soon become intimate again, as we were on our honeymoon. Remember the long nights alone together?'

To her irritation her whole body tingled in response , to the suggestiveness expressed in his voice and his eyes. Reminding herself acidly that he was an old hand at making love and had often made love to her to stop her from asking him questions he had no intention of answering, she tossed back her head and looked him straight in the eyes.

'But I don't want you to stay and live with me,' she said clearly and firmly, raising her voice a little as if she thought he hadn't heard the first time.

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't,' he said, mockery beginning to curl his lips. 'I know that logic isn't your strong point, but I'm willing always to listen to your arguments.'

'Knowing you've been with another woman, I just can't bring myself to take you back,' she said shakily. 'You married me only because you couldn't have Inci. Now I suspect you and she have split again, so you think you can come running back to me. Well, it's just not on. I've had enough of being your second-best wife. I don't want you living here because it's possible I might ... I might want a divorce.'

'Why?' The abrupt question caught her off guard. She had given no consideration to divorce and had spoken of it only out of irritation with him, in an attempt to disconcert him.

'Because . . . because Inci stayed with you while I was over here,' she stammered.

'You'd never be able to prove that,' he gibed. 'And you'd have to have a better reason than that to get me to agree to a divorce.'

'Maybe I've met someone else,' she said haughtily.

'Someone better at it than I am?' he asked with mock surprise. 'Who is he?'

'I don't have to tell you,' she evaded.

'One of the arty guys you're in business with?' he suggested.

'Maybe.'

Turning her back to him Rachel sipped tea and watched their reflections in the window again. It seemed to her he hovered behind her like a predator and once again she tingled all over at the thought of him taking hold of her and asserting his marital rights.

'You'd never get a divorce in this country, because we haven't been married to each other long enough,' he said coolly. 'If you want a quickie you'll have to return to the States with me.'

'Never,' she said in a low voice, feeling a little thrill of malicious triumph. Was it possible she had shaken his self-confidence for a brief moment?

He stepped forward and, reaching round, took the mug out of her hand and put it down. Hands on her shoulders, he spun her round deftly. She had a brief glimpse of his face, white with anger, his blazing eyes, then too late she put her hands up to his chest to push him away. Like steel pincers his arms seized her and crushed her against him. She kept her head down hiding her face against his chest until, with a sharp tug on her hair that made her gasp, he jerked her head back.

The touch of his lips, cool and hard against hers, was an unforgotten torment, awakening memories of the uncontrollable passion that had erupted between them when he had proposed to her. She stiffened,

resisting the tantalising probe of his tongue against the tight line of her lips. Keeping her eyes wide open, -she struggled to rule her body with her mind. But when she felt his fingers at her nape, stroking it seductively, she couldn't help gasping with pleasure; and in that instant he was quick to take advantage, his lips pressing harder, his tongue entering her mouth to caress the tip of her tongue. Involuntarily her eyes closed and her body softened as the heat of passion flooded through her and she longed avidly for a return of the ecstasy she had experienced with him during the few months they had lived together.

Suddenly his mouth moved away from hers, although he continued to hold her close to him.

'We have company,' he murmured in her ear.

She pushed away from him and turned to look at the doorway. Archie Maclaine was standing in the small hallway.

'What is it, Archie?' she asked, moving towards him.

'Ach, it's sorry I am to be disturbing you, Rachel, but the wife was a wee bit worried about ye. She says she saw someone snooping about the house just at twilight and she sent me over when she saw the lights come on to make sure ye were all right. She was afraid for ye.' Archie's watery blue eyes looked suspiciously at Ross who had come to stand beside her.

'Tell Margaret I appreciate her concern,' Rachel was beginning when Ross moved forward, stretching out his right hand to Archie and saying,

'I'm Ross Fraser, Rachel's husband. Pleased to meet you, Archie, and to know that you and your wife look out for her.'

The suspicion fled from Archie's innocent blue eyes. He smiled and shook Ross's hand.'

'Well, now. It's a pleasure so it is to meet you, too, Mr Fraser, and to have you come to stay in Boskillin,' he said. 'We were thinking you wouldn't be coming. Rachel said you were too busy with your own business to come here this summer. Have you ever been in the islands before?'

'No, I haven't.'

'Then it'd a treat you've been missing. You'll be coming fishing in the-loch with me one of these days?'

'I'd like that.'

'I'll be away now to tell Margaret everything is all right,' said Archie.

'Goodnight.' Rachel followed him to the front door. 'And say thank you again to Margaret.'

'I will. I will.'

The door closed, Rachel turned back into the kitchen. Ross was standing on the hearthrug, long legs apart, hands in the pockets of his trousers. Colour had returned to his face and his eyebrows tilted satirically.

'I'm surprised you've admitted to being married,' he challenged her.

'Mother told them when I came up here with her and Alec in April,' she said.

'And what about the guy you've met whom you prefer to me?' he queried mockingly. 'Does he know?' When she didn't answer he continued tormentingly, 'I don't believe he exists. I think you've

invented him on the spur of the moment to back up your demand for a divorce, another spur-of-the-moment invention.' He stepped towards her and put his hands on her shoulders again. 'Now, where were we before Archie came in?' he murmured provocatively, drawing her towards him.

This time she was ready for him. With a quick twitch of her shoulders she slipped from under his hands, whirled into the hallway and through the open doorway of the bedroom. Quickly she slammed the door shut, regretting that there was no lock on any door in that house. Expecting Ross to come after her and push the door open, she leaned against it with all her weight.

Nothing happened. He didn't lift the latch and push the door, nor did he call out to her. She must have leant against the door fully five minutes before she moved, realising how cold it was in the room.

She switched on the light. The big old-fashioned bed with its brass ends that had a tendency to lean inwards over the mattress was still as she had left it that morning, unmade. Ears pricked for the slightest sound of movement on Ross's part, she moved towards the bed and made it quickly. Then she plugged in the electric fire and switched it on high. The fan began to turn with a clatter and immediately the electric light went out, plunging the room into darkness.

'Oh, hell,' she muttered and lunged in the direction of the bedside table, her fingers seeking the switch on the lamp there. Groping in the dark her hand collided with the small lamp and knocked it to the floor. She heard the bulb shatter. Muttering and cursing to herself, she went down on her knees to search the floor beside the bed for the lamp, hearing the latch lift on the door. Straightening up she looked across the bed in the direction of the door, expecting to see light slanting into the room from the hallway. Everything was dark.

'Rachel?'

'Yes?'

'All the lights went out.'

'Oh, damn. I put on the electric fire. It must have been too much for the fuse-box.'

'Got a flashlight?'

'Somewhere. I... I think it's in my car.' She got to her feet and began to walk round the bed, keeping her hand on the mattress for guidance and then on the foot rail. It was so dark she couldn't even see the outline of his figure in the doorway.

'I'll go and get it,' he said.

She waited where she was until she heard the front door close after him, then she went into action. Her eyes growing accustomed to the faint light from the moon that slanted in through the window, she ran out into the hallway. Finding the two bolts, she slid them into position. Then she started to drag the old silver chest towards the front door by one of its iron handles. To her annoyance the handle came away from the chest in her hand and she realised the screws attaching it to the side must have rusted through. Dropping it she went to the other side of the chest and began to shove, but it still wouldn't budge. She was sitting on it, puffing and panting, after her exertions, when the latch lifted and Ross tried to push open the door.

As she had expected when the door didn't open immediately he pushed harder, using all the weight of his hard muscular body against it. The bolts held but only just.

'Rachel. Open the door,' he yelled and she flinched. He seemed to care little that he might be heard by Archie and Margaret or what they might think of him standing outside at night, shouting at her.

'No,' she yelled back. 'Go away.'

'If you don't open up I'll kick the door down,' he threatened loudly.

'No. I don't want you.'

'That's a lie if ever there was one,' he retorted scornfully. 'Stand away from the door because I'm going to break it down now.'

The door shook as he launched himself at it and then kicked it. There was a splintering sound as a panel of the old wood split. Rachel slid off the chest and faced the door.

'Ross, if you don't stop it I'll take you to court for wilfully damaging my property,' she shouted.

'Then be sensible and open the door. I'm not going to spend the night out here sleeping in a car when I could be in there sleeping with you.'

'Oh, please stop shouting. The Maclaines will hear you and they'll think . . . '

'They'll think you're refusing me my marital rights,' he taunted, making no attempt to lower his voice. 'And they would be right. Come on, open up and I'll fix the fuse for you.'

'Oh, all right.' Then very quietly she slid the bolts back and tiptoeing into her bedroom she closed that door and began to push the chest of drawers across it.

'Rachel?' He called to her again. After a few moments when she didn't answer him she heard him open the front door and step inside. She sat on the edge of the bed, shivering a little.

'Where are you?' he said when he had closed the front door again.

'In the bedroom,' she replied.' Did you find the flashlight?'

For answer he lifted the latch of the bedroom door and pushed it open against the chest. She saw the beam of the flashlight.

'What the hell,' he started, then broke off to laugh. 'OK, I gpt the message. But will you just tell me where the fuse-box is so I can get some lights on.'

'It's in the hallway, high up on the wall by the bathroom door. There are new fuses on the shelf.'

'Then^ unplug the electric fire. We don't want everything fusing again as soon as it comes on.'

She did as he ordered, and going back to the bed, got under the blankets and covers so as to keep warm. She could hear him moving about, then there was a short silence. After a while the ceiling light came on.

He didn't come back to taunt her through the opening of the door and she thought she heard him go into the kitchen. For a while she sat where she was, listening warily for his approach to the bedroom, but he didn't come. Eventually, feeling stiff, she slid off the bed and tiptoed over to the chest of drawers to push it away from the door. She couldn't possibly go to bed without visiting the bathroom first.

There was no light on in the hall and none shining out of the kitchen. By the light from the bedroom she was able to see her way to the bathroom. A few minutes later she left the bathroom and went back to the bedroom. She closed the door quickly and dragged the chest of drawers across it.

Turning into the room, she pulled her sweater up over her head. When it was off she tossed it on the nearest chair, slid off her skirt and then took off her underskirt. Her skin goose-pimpling with the cold, she

went towards the bed to get her pyjamas from under the pillow. She pulled up short with a gasp of irritation. Ross, wearing black pyjamas piped with red, was sitting up in the bed, his legs covered by the bed covers, his grey eyes slitted with the sardonic amusement that also curled his lips.

'You've put on a little weight since I last saw you,' he drawled, his glance drifting observantly over her body which was bare save for the briefs and tights she was wearing. 'I like it.'

'Get out,' she said through gritted teeth, covering her breasts with her arms, hoping he wouldn't guess that she was pregnant. She had only known it a short while herself, and had hugged the knowledge to her, telling nobody.

'Ah, come on. Be reasonable. I tried the sofa and found it too short and uncomfortable. There's plenty of room in this bed for both of us,' he said.

'I'm not sleeping with you,' she shouted, and grabbing her sweater she pulled it on again and turned to the door. The chest of drawers blocked her way. Suppressing a desire to turn on him, to rant and rave at him, she began to push at the chest. For some reason, possibly because she was beginning to feel weak with the intense strain of trying to keep him at a distance, it seemed to be very heavy and wouldn't move. Straightening up she glared across at him.

'What have you done to this chest?' she demanded.

'Nothing. You dragged it across the doorway yourself.'

'Well, come and help me move it.'

'In the morning,' he replied smoothly and slid down under the covers. 'Right now I'm going to sleep. Don't forget to put the light out before you come to bed.'

Rachel wasn't sure what happened to her then. It seemed as if a red haze danced before her eyes. Irritated beyond bearing, she lunged across the room intending to pull the bedclothes off and somehow drag him from the bed. It was a mistake. As she launched herself forward she tripped over the edge of the woven mat beside the bed and fell across him. Her violent landing combined her weight suddenly with his and was too much for the ancient bed. The irons on which the mattresses were resting came out of their sockets and clattered to the floor. The mattress fell, too, and the precarious brass bed-ends leaned towards each other, trapping the two people on the bed in a sort of tent.

'I knew you'd see it my way, after a while, and would come to bed with me,' said Ross with aggravating calmness.

Beneath her she could feel him shaking with suppressed laughter. Then his hands were sliding over her shoulders as he tried to lift her. Afraid she might give in to the sudden aching demands of her body and seek comfort close to his warm vibrancy she began to squirm backwards from under the bed ends.

'I've not come to bed with you,' she said tautly, as she managed to slide off the bed and on to the floor, where she sat cross-legged wondering what to do next. 'And now the only bed in the house is broken,' she wailed and buried her face in her hands. 'It's all your fault. Oh, how I wish you hadn't come.'

There was a short tense silence. Then the mattress creaked as Ross moved. He swore softly as he banged his head against the brass rods that slanted above him. A few more creaking sounds and he slid from the bed to sk on the floor beside her.

'You don't mean that,' he said softly, taking hold of her wrists and pulling her hands away from her face,

'Yes, I do. I do,' she whispered shakily, keeping her head bowed refusing to look at him. 'I was getting on fine without you. Please go away.'

'OK. I will if that's the way you feel,' he said, his voice taking on a hard edge. 'But not yet. Not before morning.' Dropping her hands he stood up. 'Come on, give me a hand to move these bed-ends and to slide the irons out. The mattress will be all right on the floor.'

'I still won't sleep with you,' she said stubbornly as she got to her feet.

'OK, OK, ' he said irritably. 'But you can still help me move the ends.'

Too dismayed by his sudden agreement to her request that he should go away, she helped him move the irons and the bed-ends. When the mattress was flat on the floor and the covers were straightened, he turned to her and said, 'Do you still fancy sleeping on that old sofa? Shall I help you move the chest of drawers?'

'Yes, please,' she said wearily.

When she was curled up at last in a blanket on the sofa it didn't take her long to find out why he had given up trying to sleep on it. There was a spring jutting up right in the middle that either got her in the back or, if she was lying on her side, dug into her waist. For more than half an hour she tossed and turned, trying to find a comfortable spot and often losing the blanket. Finally thoroughly chilled, she crept through the darkness into the bedroom. Moving cautiously, she lifted the bed covers and slid under them.

Ross was lying right in the middle of the mattress on his side with his back to her. Judging by the quiet steadiness of his breathing he was asleep. There wasn't enough room for her to lie on her back so she turned on to her side with her back to him. Heat from his body radiated out to her. She lay still, hoping to relax in the warmth and eventually to fall asleep.

Ages later, so it seemed, she was still wide awake, lying taut on the edge of the bed as far away from Ross as possible. She turned restlessly, punching at her pillow to make it more comfortable.

'What's the matter?'. Ross spoke quietly as he turned towards her.

'I can't sleep.'

'I'm not surprised.' At her waist, under the edge of her pyjama jacket, his hand was hot and heavy against her skin. Slowly his fingers spread upwards over her breast and she felt his lips scorching the vulnerable curve between her neck and shoulder. The heat of his hard muscularity was all around her, warming her. The scent of his skin and hair was filling her nostrils, going to her brain and turning her dizzy with delight.

'No. I can't,' she whispered, even while her body was betraying her and arching to his touch.

'Sure you can. It will relax both of us,' he murmured. '

'But it won't solve anything, and besides I don't want you.'

'Tell that to the marines,' he jeered and, jerking her roughly against him, smothered any other protest she might have made with his mouth.

Inevitably it seemed, her lips parted to the fierce invasion of his tongue and against her loins she felt the hard pressure of his maleness arousing her with a swift suddenness that made her cry out against the heat of his lips. His usual tenderness when undressing her was in abeyance and he didn't bother to slip undone her pyjama buttons but dragged the jacket off her, and she heard the material hiss as it tore.

A wide and primitive hunger leapt up within her in response to his ravenous caresses, and she forgot all her earlier resistance to him. He

had come looking for her, and that was all that mattered. In spite of Inci, he still wanted to make love to her, and for the time being she was willing to be made love to by him. But only by him. Only he could penetrate her and melt the knot of cold caution that lay at her core. Only he possessed the magic to make her mind spin out of control and her body to erupt like a volcano. Only he could bring to her the sweet fluid easing of tension, the relaxation he had promised lovemaking would bring to both of them.

They both slipped into sleep without saying anything more, as if their physical union had solved all the problems that separated their minds. Rachel slept long and deeply, waking with a start to lie blinking bemusedly at bright sunlight. She sat up quickly, became aware that the mattress was on the floor and remembered how the bed had collapsed last night when she had flung herself at Ross.

Ross. Where was he? Beside her the bed was empty, the sheet smooth, the pillow straight. No sign of anyone ever having slept there.

Had she imagined that she had found him in the cottage when she had returned to it last night? Had she been longing for him to come so much that she had experienced some sort of hallucination? Was she going out of her mind?

From the bedside table she grabbed her watch and peered at it. Nine-thirty. She had overslept. Putting the watch down, she scrambled off the bed and ran across to the open door. Into the kitchen to put on the kettle, out again to the bathroom to wash quickly, splashing the clear, cold water on her face to wash away the last vestiges of sleep and to shake off the morning sickness which, she was beginning to accept, was due to the fact that she was pregnant with Ross's child, conceived two months ago in new York.

Ross wasn't in the cottage. Nor was there anything lying about to indicate that he had been there. No flung-off pyjamas, no other clothes in the kitchen, no suitcase or travelling-bag anywhere.

Yet the mattress was on the floor and the bed-ends were stacked against a wall, evidence that the bed had collapsed when she had thrown herself at him last night. That couldn't have happened if he hadn't been in the bed could it? Surely she hadn't imagined the rest, the way they had made love, avidly and fiercely.

So where was he now? Had he left to catch a ferry back to the mainland? Had he gone because he didn't like the cottage and its lack of amenities? Or had he gone because she had rebuffed him and had talked of divorce? Oh, she hoped not.

She had time for only one cup of very weak tea before she left the cottage, slamming the door shut behind her! Outside it was a lovely morning, the sun slanting down out of a clear blue sky. The sea loch shone like a mirror and the green and gold moorland was clotted with sheep. Waving to Margaret Maclaine who was pegging washing to a line, Rachel felt a lift of her spirits in response to the change in the weather, until she remembered that Ross had been to see her at last, she had said and done all the wrong things, and so he had left.

White houses sparkled in Tobermory and the bay was smooth and silken, reflecting the blue of the sky. She parked her car behind the Betons' van at the side of the building where the shop was located and hurried around. The shop door was wide open for the first time that season and there were actually three customers inside, obviously tourists.

'What happened?' Pete asked her when she entered the big room at the back of the shop where he had his potter's wheel and kiln. 'Flat tyre? Or petrol pump gone on the blink again?'

Neither. I overslept.' As she slipped off her jacket she eyed him surreptitiously, comparing him with Ross, and finding him lacking. No other man could compare with Ross, in her estimation. No other man could take his place in her life, so why had she rebuffed him last night? To try to hurt him, of course. To try to find out if he could be hurt in the way that he had hurt her.

'Rachel, now that you're here you might come and help,' hissed Morag from the doorway. 'We've actually got four people in the shop now. Did you bring those new prints of the houses along the harbourside? You took them home to sign last night.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot.' Rachel smoothed her hair behind her ears and dragged her thoughts away from Ross. 'Shall I go back for them?'

'No, not now: Come and serve in the shop now.' Morag looked at her curiously. 'What's happened? You look all het up.'

'I'll tell you later,' said Rachel, and forcing herself to smile went back into the shop to try to cajole a customer into buying a length of tweed.

Not until it was almost noon and there were no customers in the shop did she have time to tell Morag what had happened to make her late that morning, and then she didn't offer the explanation herself but waited until her friend asked her.

After glancing about to make sure Pete wasn't in earshot she whispered, 'The strangest thing happened. When I got back to the cottage last night Ross was there.'

'Your husband?' Soon after having become a partner in the business, Rachel had told Morag about her hasty marriage to Ross and how she felt he had deceived her.

'Yes. But this morning, when I woke up he had gone.'

'Did you quarrel with him last night?'

'Well, we didn't agree,' said Rachel evasively.

'What did you say to him? You must have said something to annoy him if he left without saying goodbye or without making any arrangement to see you again,' guessed Morag shrewdly. 'I bet you gave him the cold shoulder so he took the huff and left. Oh, Rachel, you are a fool. He probably came to make it up with you and you got all haughty and proud, the way you often do. How could you do it after all these weeks of wishing he would come running after you to ask you to start your marriage all over again?'

'I haven't been wishing he would come,' Rachel retorted.

'Yes, you have, because you're in love with him. I know you are because of the way your voice changes whenever you mention his name and your eyes go soft and dreamy. Why don't you drop the barrier of your pride and admit it? You love him and you want to live with him and make love with him. Why won't you give him another chance?'

'Because he's done things I find it difficult to forgive him for,' said Rachel forlornly. She glanced around again to make sure Pete was still in the kiln-room and said, 'Ross isn't in love with me. He loves someone **else** and he's been seeing her again while I've been over here. Could you forgive that?'

'No, I couldn't,' said Morag truthfully. 'But do you have concrete evidence he's been seeing this other woman?'

'The evidence supplied by my own ears,' said Rachel tardy, and thought how like Dorothy she sounded. 'One day I phoned his flat and she answered the phone. What conclusion would you draw from that? Wouldn't you think he was seeing her again?'

'It does sound rather as if he's in the wrong, but didn't he explain to you why she was there when he was with you last night?'

'Yes. But I didn't believe his explanation. And I said I might want a divorce.'

'Oh, lord,' Morag groaned. 'No wonder he left. But you don't really want a divorce, do you?'

'No,' sighed Rachel. 'I don't really. I only said it to . . . well, to try and find out how he really feels about me.'

'And what did he say?'

'He made a joke out of it. Asked me if I'd found someone who could do it better than he could.' Rachel felt the blood rise to her cheeks.

'Who can make love to you better, I suppose he meant,' said Morag with a chuckle. 'And have you?'

'No.'

'Did you tell him that?'

'No.'

'Rachel, you are just about the silliest woman I've ever met,' Morag said scornfully. 'You deserve to lose him.'

There was no more chance for talk about Ross for the rest of the day because they were busy in the afternoon with more tourists. By five o'clock, when they were thinking of dosing up, Morag was quite excited because they had sold two lengths of her tweeds and also wool for knitting, a couple of Pete's big vases as well as some woven place-mats and coasters.

'Like to come home for supper with us?' she said to Rachel. 'Better than you being alone and brooding about what might have been if only you'd held your tongue last night.'

'No, thanks,' said Rachel. 'I have some washing to do.'

'Well, don't forget to bring in the prints tomorrow.'

'I won't,' said Rachel and knew she wouldn't because there wouldn't be any annoying but lovable Ross around to distract her attention and make her absent-minded. Immediately she felt her heart sink into her shoes because Ross had gone and nothing had been resolved between them and it was her own fault he had gone.

She half-hoped he might be at the cottage when she returned to it, but he wasn't, and she spent a difficult night trying to decide what to do next. In the morning she felt washed out and weak, and it was a great effort to drive into the town.

Less than a month ago she had come to the island full of hope, believing that at last she was going to do what she had always wanted to do, establish herself in a career as an artist. Now she would have given anything to back out of the partnership and go back to being Ross's wife. Even if he didn't love her as he had loved Inci, she wanted to be with him again and not just because she wanted a father for their child.

If only she could see him again and tell him she hadn't meant what she had said to him when she found him in the cottage, explain to him why she had been so much on the defensive, if her pride would let her, that was.

'You look awful,' Morag said to her.

'I feel awful. I'm expecting a baby.'

'Oh, God,' breathed Morag. 'Ross's, I hope.'

'Of course.' Rachel was indignant.

'All right, all right. Keep your hair on. Does he know?'

'I haven't told him. But I wouldn't have wanted him to stay with me just because of that.'

'I would have,' sighed Morag. 'I keep trying to get pregnant but nothing has happened in four years of marriage to Lachlan and I'm beginning to wonder what's wrong.'

'You should go to a clinic, have some tests,' said Rachel urgently, rebuking herself for thinking she was the only woman with problems. 'Things can be done to help you have a child. You and Lachlan should both go. That is if you really want a child.'

'I'm almost dying with longing for a baby,' said Morag. 'And if I had been you last night I'd have shouted the news out to Ross as soon as I saw him. But then I don't have your pride. Do you know where he was going when he left?'

'No. I expect he'd go back to Edinburgh.'

'To your brother's place?'

'I don't know. I might phone Giles later, if you wouldn't mind.'

'Why should I? You contribute to the paying of the phone-bill.'

Rachel was lucky to catch Giles just before he went out for the evening. As soon as he heard her voice he asked quickly, 'Ross find you?'

'Yes.'

'So what happened? Is all forgiven and forgotten?'

'He left the next day. Giles, if he calls in to see you, would you let me know, please?'

'But I thought, at least I got the impression from him that if you refused to go back to the States with him he was going to stay with you all summer.'

'Well, he isn't.'

'Messed everything up again, have you? You need a good spanking, that's what you need. Pity Dad was so soft with you.'

'What a very chauvinistic remark to make,' she retorted loftily. 'No man is ever going to spank me.'

'I wish Ross would. I doubt if he'll come to see me, but if he does do you want me to ask him to phone you at the shop?'

'Yes please.'

Somehow she got through the next few days. There was no call from either Ross or Giles and she could only assume that Ross hadn't called in to see her brother on his return to Edinburgh.

He had probably gone back to New York, she thought disconsolately, and she would never see him again, unless she made the next move, trampled on her pride and asked him to take her back, and told him she would turn a blind eye to his affair with Inci if only she could live with him.

No. Never could she do that. She would rather stay on the island without him than do that.

So she struggled with the pros and cons of the situation while longing every day for him to be at the cottage when she returned to it at night, to be there sitting in the kitchen, even if he mocked her pride, her lack of logic. She loved him, she wanted him . . .

'There's someone in the shop asking for you,' Morag said, looking into the studio, where Rachel was working on the design of batik prints for silk scarves one afternoon.

Her heart leaping hopefully, Rachel turned to look at her friend quickly.

'Sorry to disappoint you, but it isn't him,' continued Morag, reading the expression on her face accurately. 'Her clothes are American but she speaks English with a rather mixed-up accent. She looks as if she's from Greece or somewhere in the Middle East.'

Rachel stared at Morag, hearing a soft voice speaking in her ear.

'Did she give her name?' she whispered.

'Yes, but I'm sorry I can't pronounce it,' apologised Morag, her eyes beginning to glint mischievously. 'And she's come with an escort, someone you know very well.'

'Who, for heaven's sake?' said Rachel becoming irritated by her friend's teasing manner.

'Come and see,' retorted Morag and left the room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

STILL feeling somewhat annoyed at having been interrupted while working on a print, Rachel followed Morag into the shop. Morag had been busy serving a customer who had just come in, showing off a length of tweed at the counter. Over by the display shelves two people, a man and a woman, were standing examining some of Pete's pottery. They both had their backs to Rachel. The woman was small and slim and had thick jet-black hair that stood out from her head in an ear-length bob. She was wearing a narrow dark blue skirt and a white blazer. The man, tall and brown-haired, was wearing jeans, and a fisherman's knit sweater over his shirt and was easily recognised by Rachel. He was her brother.

'Giles, what on earth are you doing here?' she exclaimed, moving towards him.

Hello, Rach,' he said easily, turning to her. 'Just thought I'd take a trip up to see you before exams start. I don't think you've ever met Inci, have you?'

Inci! The name, so sharp and icy, seemed to stab through to Rachel's heart. She was aware that the woman had turned and was looking at her curiously with big black eyes that seemed to fill the whole of the upper part of her thin classically featured olive-skinned face.

'No, we haven't met, but we have spoken to each other on the phone,' said Inci, and at the sound of that soft, seductive voice chills went up and down Rachel's spine. 'How are you, Rachel?'

'I'm quite well, thank you.' Rachel had stiffened and she was glad that the other woman hadn't held out a hand to be shaken. 'But I'm surprised to see you here with Giles. When and where did you two meet?'

'Inci was one of the crowd I met when I stayed with Ross at his flat in Manhattan, last September,' explained Giles. 'I told her then to look us up if she was in Edinburgh to give a recital. And she did. Sent me a couple of complimentary tickets for her concert.' Giles looked excessively pleased with himself. 'Afterwards I went backstage to see her.'

'And I was so glad you did,' added Inci, flashing him a warm grateful smile before she looked back at Rachel. 'I was able to ask Giles if he would be so kind as to drive me to this island,' she continued seriously. 'We left very early this morning. Is Ross staying here with you?'

'Er. No, he isn't,' said Rachel awkwardly. 'He was here but he left.' She became aware that Giles, who was standing behind Inci, was signalling to her, twitching his eyebrows and pressing a finger against his lips as if in warning, and she made an effort to recover her poise. 'It's a pity he couldn't stay longer.'

'But he will be back, won't he?' Qiles suggested to her, nodding his head at her as if urging her to agree with him. 'Before we have to leave, I mean.'

'I'm not sure. How long are you intending to stay here?' she asked, wondering what mischief Giles was up to now.

'Tonight, tomorrow and tomorrow night. We'll drive bade on Sunday,' he replied. 'I have a tutorial on Monday morning that I must attend.'

'And I have to be back to catch a plane to Paris on Monday,' explained Inci.

'Inci is going to stay at the hotel, but I was hoping I could stay at Gran's cottage with you,' said Giles.

'You can stay with me as long as you don't mind sleeping on the sofa,' said Rachel, thinking of the mess the cottage was in. Recently she hadn't felt like doing much housework and the mattress was still on the bedroom floor.

'I suppose I won't have to,' grumbled Giles disgustedly.

'It would be much better if you came to stay at the farm,' said Morag, coming over to them, the customer having left. 'You too, Miss Kapadia. We have two spare bedrooms. You'd be most welcome. It isn't often we have a chance to meet a celebrity and have her stay with us.'

Another charming smile irradiated Inci's dark face and her black eyes seemed to glitter light. She is beautiful, as Meryl said, thought Rachel with a sinking heart, beautiful and disarmingly gentle; no wonder Ross is still in love with her.

'I'm not a celebrity yet,' said Inci with a little laugh. 'I'm only at the beginning of my career as a concert pianist, I still have a long way to go. But I'd like to stay with you if it won't be too much trouble. I do get tired of staying in hotels and of hardly ever getting a chance to meet the real people of any town or country where I happen to be performing. It sounds like fun to stay on a farm.'

'Good. That's settled then,' said Morag. 'You can take Inci over to the farm now, Giles, if you like. I'm sure you know the way. Lachlan will be there. Just tell him who you are and that Rachel and I will be there in about half an hour, as soon as we've shut up shop.'

Inci and Giles left the shop. As soon as the door had closed behind them Morag said, 'What a charming person. So modest too. A bit old for Giles, though, I would think. How old do you think she is?'

'About thirty-two or three,' said Rachel coolly. 'And there's nothing between her and Giles. He'd have told me if there was.'

'I wouldn't be too sure of that,' scoffed Morag. 'Brothers, in my experience, have a way of being very secretive about their love affairs.'

'It's not my brother whom she's interested in. It's my husband,' retorted Rachel tardy. 'And I think die's got a nerve coming all this way to see Ross, knowing I'd be here, too,'

'You mean she's the woman who was at his flat when you phoned him?' exclaimed Morag, her eyes round.

'Yes.'

'You'll be wishing I hadn't invited her to stay at the farm then,' groaned Morag.

'No, I'm not wishing that. You did what you wanted to do and I know you can't help being hospitable.'

'I felt a bit sorry for her. She seemed so lonely and sad. It can't be much fun having a career like hers, wandering about the world and playing the piano in foreign countries, without the company of your husband or lover. Wouldn't be my bag at all. I like having my nice hairy Lachlan to cuddle up to every night.'

'I just wish I knew what Giles was up to, bringing her here,' said Rachel.

'Well, you'll be able to ask him when we get to the farm. I'll invite Inci into the kitchen while I'm getting supper. I bet she knows a few good recipes from Turkey I could use.'

Its whitewashed walls gleaming amongst the pine trees and clustered around it, the Betons' house looked solid and square on its green knoll, its windows brimming with golden afternoon sunlight. Only Giles was in the old-fashioned parlour. It was cluttered with huge

mahogany glass-fronted cabinets full of old china and souvenirs from India and Africa and big overstuffed sofas and armchairs, their backs still protected from the greasy hair of sitters by antimacassars which had been crocheted by Lachlan's grandmother.

'Inci has gone off with Lachlan to look at the pigs,' Giles explained to Morag, as he stretched and yawned. 'I was just having a little shut-eye. I'm not used to getting up at first light and having to drive nearly two hundred miles. The only time we stopped was when we were on the ferry.'

'Well, you didn't have to. come,' said Rachel sharply, sitting down on one of the sofas. Morag had gone, closing the door after her. 'Why didn't you let me know you were coming and bringing her with you?'

'Didn't get a chance to,' he replied, evasively she thought. 'She was a little surprised when I told her you weren't in Edinburgh, but insisted that she had to see you. She seemed so desperate and helpless that I offered to drive her up here if she would pay for the rental of a car. She jumped at the chance.' He leaned back, his hands behind his head. 'I think she's the most charming woman I've ever met,' he went on, as if he'd had a lot of experience with women. 'It's a pity she's already got a lover, or I wouldn't mind taking my chance with her. On the way here she told me she had a man friend with whom she lives when she's not on tour.'

'You and she must have got really chummy if she's been telling you about her private life,' snapped Rachel.

'And she seemed quite positive Ross would be here with you,' Giles continued blandly, looking up at the ceiling. 'Haven't you heard from him?'

'No. I was hoping you had seen him or had heard something of him,' she said, her shoulders sagging. 'Oh, Giles, I don't know what to do. I

think he believed me when I said I want a divorce and that he's left me.'

'It would serve you right if he has, that's all I can say,' retorted Giles with brotherly frankness, and that was the end of their conversation because the parlour door opened and Inci came in followed by Lachlan.

For supper there was roast lamb, tiny new potatoes and green peas followed by marmalade pudding and custard. Conversation was kept light and general, Morag, Giles and Inci doing most of the talking. Rachel was feeling too miserable to join in much and Lachlan was always shy and taciturn when strangers were present. When the meal was over Inci made some excuse to go to the room where she was to sleep and Lachlan and Giles went into the parlour to watch television. Rachel stayed in the dining-room to clear the table and carry the used dishes into the kitchen to Morag who had started to wash up. She had almost finished when Inci came into the room offering to help.

'They are talking about the sport they call rugby and I do not understand it,' Inci said with a shrug. 'And since you are alone in here I think I had better take the opportunity to say what I have come all this way to say to you. The trouble is I do not know where to begin.' She sat down suddenly on one of the dining- chairs. 'It's so silly,' she whispered. 'Look at me. My hands are shaking because I'm afraid of you.' She held out square, muscular hands. Both of them were trembling slightly.

'You are afraid of me?' exclaimed Rachel, also sitting down and facing the other woman across the corner of the big oak table that was still covered with a white linen cloth. 'Why should you be afraid of me?'

'You're so calm and reserved, so proud, so self- contained, a little like Ross in some ways, and I've always been afraid of him. Both of you

make me feel I am too mixed-up, over-emotional and excitable.' Inci laughed self-deprecatingly. 'What I am, of course. I am better at playing the piano than I am at dealing with people.'

'Everyone tells me I have too much pride,' admitted Rachel with a rueful smile, as she wondered uneasily what it could be the pianist had to say to her. Was she going to ask her to give up Ross? 'But please don't be afraid of me. I can be mixed-up and emotional too. What is it you have to say to me?'

Inci drew a deep breath, clasped her hands tightly together and plunged.

'I have to apologise for not telling you who I was and why I was staying in Ross's apartment when you phoned him last month. I wasn't there with him, Rachel. He was really in San Francisco. You see Ross and I. . .' Inci broke off, her hands pressed against her cheeks, and shook her head from side to side. 'Oh, I do not know how to explain to you about him and me,' she said.

'You and he have known one another for a long time, haven't you?' said Rachel gently, suddenly feeling sympathy for the beautiful and talented woman.

'Yes, we have.' Inci seemed to relax a little and her charming smile appeared. 'Over ten years and once, when we were young, we were very much in love with each other. It is so wonderful to be young, to have no worries or responsibility and to be in love, Rachel.'

'Yes, I suppose it is,' said Rachel, feeling envy uncoil within her because this woman had known Ross when he had been younger and had experienced with him something she herself had never known, the ecstasy of a young woman romantically in love with someone equally young.

'But then we were separated, rather cruelly, by my parents,' added Inci.

'Why?' exclaimed Rachel.

'It will be hard for you to understand, I know, but my parents did not approve of my going about with Ross. And they wanted very much for me to be a concert pianist. So after finishing my studies at the Juillard School of Music I was sent to Vienna to learn piano from a great teacher. Some years later, when I returned to New York, Ross and I started seeing each other again. It wasn't quite the same. We had both grown up and had changed. Some of the magic had gone. And then my parents were still against my having anything to do with him.'

'You let them influence you against him?'

'I guessed you would not understand because you have always been free to make your own decisions,' sighed Inci. 'You see, my parents suffer from what is known as the "ghetto" mentality. Even though they have lived for many years in the States they have never adapted to the American way of life. Their friends are all from Turkey and they want my brother and me to be like them, all the time. They are afraid they would lose us if they allowed us to grow up to be Americans. They want us to be Turkish always.'

'Then why didn't they stay in Turkey?' asked Rachel.

'A good question,' said Inci with a sad little smile. 'Why does anyone leave their own country to go and live in another? Often it is for political reasons but mostly it is for economic ones. Many people emigrate to the States because they feel they will have a better standard of living there. And if they work hard, it is true, they do. But often it is difficult for the children of immigrants to a new country. They are pulled in different directions all the time. My brother and I

always wanted to be like the American kids we went to school with, to adapt-to their culture and be a part of it. When we went home from school we found our parent^ wanted us to follow their culture and even to speak a different language. It made for great tensions in our family. You understand?'

'I'm trying to,' said Rachel.

'But to get back to Ross and me. A year and a half ago he asked me to marry him. It was time, he said, for him to marry and to have a family. He wanted that very much. I had to refuse.'

'Because of pressure from your parents?'

'Not entirely, although that did come into it. I had decided that my career was more important to me than marriage ever could be. I have a single-track mind, can only do one thing at a time. I knew I couldn't be the sort of wife he wanted or be the mother of his children. It wasn't fair to either of us to get married to each other, but it hurt me very much to refuse him.' Inci's voice shook with barely controlled emotion and she wiped tears from her eyes with the tips of her fingers. 'Especially when he would have nothing more to do with me and refused to be my lover,' she added in a low voice.

'You expected him to want to be your lover after you'd rejected his proposal of marriage?' exclaimed Rachel, feeling sympathy with Ross, knowing how she would have reacted to rejection out of her own pride and self-esteem.

'Yes, I did. I couldn't see why we had to sever our relationship just because I had refused to legalise it,' replied Inci. 'He didn't see it that way. He dropped me suddenly, as if I was something distasteful.' Inci's lips trembled and again she wiped tears away. 'I was very upset. It affected my playing,' she whispered.

'But you still tried to see him?'

'Of course I did. And why shouldn't I? I was still in love with him.' Inci managed to sound affronted, as if she had been the only one who had been hurt. 'But what does he do? He goes off in a huff and looks for someone else to marry, even though he still loves me. He found you and married you. I do not think I can forgive him for that.' Inci sniffed and blinked back tears.

Rachel stared at her. It looked as if Meryl had been right after all when she had suggested Ross had married only to create a smokescreen to hide his continuing affair with this woman.

'Is that why you have come?' she said stiffly. 'To tell me you and hie are still lovers and to apologise for that?'

'I am here because Ross ordered me to come,' said Inci, and drew a long, sobbing breath. 'And when he gets angry and orders you to do something you do it. I was so pleased to see him, when he came to see me at my hotel in Edinburgh.'

'When? When did he see you in Edinburgh?' Rachel interrupted urgently.

'On Wednesday evening.'

"This past Wednesday?"

'Yes. And he said I must come to see you and explain what happened last month in New York.' Inci's voice trembled and she clasped her hands together nervously. 'He threatened me,' she added in a shocked whisper.

'How? Surely he didn't. . .' Rachel broke off, afraid that Ross had let his temper get the better of him.

'Threaten to hit me?' Inci's smile was twisted. 'No. Ross is much more subtle than that,' she said drily. 'He threatened to expose my secret

affair with another man not only to my parents but also to my agent and the press. He said he would ruin my career if I didn't tell you the truth about why I was in his apartment when you phoned him. And I couldn't risk him doing that. I couldn't.'

'Why were you in the apartment?' Rachel forced the question out between dry lips.

'I was there because Ross had let me stay in the apartment while he was away in 'Frisco,' muttered Inci', who was obviously not enjoying making this confession. 'I was there with Julian,' she added in a whisper.

'Who is Julian?'

'He . . . we are lovers,' admitted Inci in a choked voice. 'He cannot marry me because he is already married to a woman who won't divorce him. He is an opera singer and we meet secretly wherever we can and whenever we can. He was appearing in New York last month so I asked Ross if he knew of a place we could rent for a few days, where we could be together without anyone knowing. He offered me his apartment. Ross wasn't there at all while we were there and we left before he returned.'

Rachel was silent, bereft of words by this story of romantic intrigue.

'I suppose I shouldn't have answered the phone,' Inci went on. 'But you know how it is when it goes on ringing. You always think it might be a matter of life and death, something important. I was scared when I heard your voice but I couldn't tell you who I was or why I was there. I couldn't betray my affair with Julian to a stranger.' She looked at Rachel. Once again her eyes were shining with tears.' I didn't think of how you would feel about hearing me. It just never entered my head that you would think Ross and I were . . .' She broke off to sniff and made a gesture with one hand. 'I'm sorry, Rachel.

Truly sorry. I hope you will accept my apology. I wouldn't want to be the cause of the break-up' of your marriage to Ross.' Now she sounded as if she was repeating a lesson she had been taught.

'I think you've come too late,' said Rachel, coolly. She no longer found Inci charming but saw her now as a selfish, egotistical careerist, caring sincerely for no one but herself. ¹

'Oh, no. Never say that,' Inci looked horrified and jumped to her feet. 'Please don't say that. Ross told me you had threatened to divorce him because of me. But you mustn't do that. You mustn't divorce him on account of his friendship for me. And that is all he is now, a friend. A most generous friend. But if you divorced him because of me it would really put a blight on my career, and it might come out that I have been having an affair with Julian.'

'It's all right,' Rachel said trying to sound reassuring, when it was she herself who needed reassurance most, she thought wryly. And comfort. The comfort of Ross's - arms around her and his voice in her ear saying he forgave her lack of trust. 'I didn't really mean it when I told him I wanted a divorce. I'll try to find him and tell him you've been here and that you've explained why you were in the flat,' she added, rising to her feet. She felt she had had enough of this spoilt child of a woman.

'Oh, thank you, thank you.' Inci's smile was dazzling in its relief and for a moment she looked as if she might fling her arms around Rachel and kiss her. But something in Rachel's cool expression and possibly the proud, upright carriage of her head deterred her. She backed off and said lightly, 'Shall we go and help Morag? I think she is wonderful, this friend of yours, having a career and being a farmer's wife too. How does she do it? I think she must be a superwoman.'

Inci's explanation and apology, far from soothing Rachel, had stirred up her emotions. She left the farm as soon as she could, after saying

she would see Giles and Inci the next day, and drove over the moors to Boskillin. If she couldn't be with Ross she had to be alone, tortured by remorse because she hadn't trusted him enough. Where was he? She longed to know so that she could rush to him and confess she had made a terrible mistake and that she was ready to resume their marriage, to live with him anywhere he wanted to live, to be with him always.

There was just one streak of light left in the sky when she reached the cottage and the loch glimmered with faint ghostly light. As usual all was quiet. She went into the cottage and as soon as she put on the light in the hallway she missed the silver chest. Puzzled, she turned into the kitchen and flicked on that light and stared in amazement. All the furniture had gone. The mats had been lifted from the flagged floor, and worst of all, the sink, draining boards and cupboards had been removed. Apart from the old-fashioned hearth and coal- fired oven beside it, the room was completely empty, cold, damp and unwelcoming.

Turning she dashed across the hallway to the bedroom. The mattress had gone from the floor and the bed-ends had been removed. Even the old wardrobe had gone. That room was completely empty too. The bathroom told the same story. The bath, the hand basin and the toilet had gone. There were only plugged drainage pipes jutting out of walls.

Someone had been in the cottage and had stolen everything out of it.

She ran from the cottage along the road to the Machines' house to bang on the front door with her fist. The door was soon opened by Archie, in his slippers. He was puffing at his pipe.

'Ach, so ye're home at last and himself only gone in the last half-hour to the town to look for ye,' he said in his sing-song voice.

'Who? Who has gone to the town to look for me?' she demanded breathlessly.

'Mr Fraser.'

'Ross? Ross has been here?' she squeaked and swayed against the jamb of the door.

'Come in and sit down for a wee while. You're all of a dither,' said Archie kindly, and she stepped past him into the narrow hall from which a stairway led up to the first floor of the house. She turned into the room on the right. Margaret was sitting at the table, knitting. She looked up and nodded at Rachel, her glasses flashing in the light.

'What pity ye didn't come home sooner,' she said. 'Ye've just missed him.'

'When did he come?' asked Rachel, sitting down on the chair that Archie pushed forwards for her and realising as soon as her hands touched the arms of it that . it was the wing-chair from the cottage.

'Soon after ye left this morning,' said Archie, settling into his own chair by the hearth. 'Ach, a great day we've had of it moving all the stuff out of the house. Everything had to come out, he said. And he made sure it did. Ye'll see your chair is here. We're just minding it for ye. The rest of the furniture is in the barn at the back and will do there, he said, until the place is fixed up and you could decide what you wanted to keep. He took the bathroom furniture and the sink away with him on that fine truck he came in, said he'd get rid of it to a junk dealer or just take it to the dump.'

'I didn't know Ross was going to do this,' exclaimed Rachel. 'I got such a shock when I walked in just now and found the place empty.' She struggled to her feet, resisting a desire to give in, curl up in the chair and go to sleep. 'Did he tell you where he was going when he left?'

'He waited as long as he could for ye, and then said he supposed you'd stayed on at your studio to finish some work and he would go there to look for you,' said Margaret. 'I think he said he had booked a room for both of ye at the hotel. Ye must have passed him on the road if ye came straight here.'

'No, I didn't. I've been at the Betons' and came back the other way,' Rachel replied, and hurried out into the hallway. Not finding her at the shop, Ross might go up to Pete's flat to ask where she was.

'Drive carefully now,' cautioned Archie as he saw her out of the house. "There's a lot of mist about.'

The mist came and went, drifting suddenly in white gauzy scarves right across the road in front of her and often causing her to slow down and stop until it had cleared, but there was none in the town nor on the water which reflected the clear starlit sky.

Feeling flutters of trepidation in her stomach at the thought that Pete might have said something about her to Ross, she parked the car in front of the shop and went around to the side door, from which the stairs led up to Pete's flat, and rang the bell. Soon she heard his feet clattering down the stairs. The light over the doorway went on, the door swung open and Pete stood there, looking dishevelled. He finished buttoning his shirt, raked back his hair and gave her a hostile glance.

'Sorry I'm not available tonight,' he sneered. 'I've found someone who isn't as strait-laced as you are.'

'I haven't come just to see you,' she retorted. 'I was told that Ross, my husband, has come here to look for me. Is he here?'

'No. But he was here. We had a few words and he left.' He rubbed the side of his jaw with his fingers and she saw it was slightly swollen.

'What happened?' she asked, but felt she knew. She was fast learning that, when Ross went into action, he acted forcefully and without compunction.

'You could say I collided with his left fist,' Pete said.

'Ross hit you? Why?'

'That is between him and me,' he retorted. 'He's not exactly what I expected. I thought you said he was a city gent. Seemed more like a lumberjack to me. He's gone to the hotel and he's expecting you. And the best of British luck to you. He's got one hell of a temper.'

She knew about Ross's temper, thought Rachel, as she coaxed her little car up to the hotel on the cliffs. He had never lost it with her, although she guessed he had come close to doing so. Usually he just smouldered and went about in a thunderous silence for a while. Then a couple of hours later he would be cool and calm, whatever had roused his rage apparently forgotten.

What had Pete said to him to make him lose it tonight? Something sneering about Americans? Or something of a more personal nature? Oh, she knew too well what a virulent tongue and filthy mind Pete possessed. He wasn't above saying something derogatory about her to Ross, just to get his revenge on her, for having turned down not only Ralph Bates but also him, the evening she had had supper with him and he had asked her to stay the night with him at his flat.

Noting that there was a red half-ton truck, loaded with the bathroom furniture from the cottage, in the car park of the hotel, she parked her car beside it and went into the entrance hall. It was quiet and rather dimly lit. At the reception desk she pinged the bell and waited. After a few moments the proprietor of the hotel came through a door behind the desk.

'Ah, Mrs Fraser. You've come just in time. It's almost midnight and I lock the doors then, for the night. As I was explaining to Mr Fraser, this isn't the United States and this isn't a motel or one of those big city hotels, where they have a night staff and guests can come and go at all hours. We're a private family' orientated hotel and we expect our guests to be in by midnight,' he said primly. 'Mr Fraser is in room five. That's on the first floor. Just turn to the right at the top of the stairs and go along the passage. You'll want breakfast in the morning?'

'I suppose so,' Rachel said, feeling suddenly exhausted. She hadn't realised it was so late and was glad that Ross with his usual foresight had booked a room for both of them and had told the proprietor to expect her.

Her legs ached as she went up the stairs and she had to rest at the top. It had been a long and rather traumatic evening, and the most difficult confrontation was yet to come. She had to force herself to walk along the passage to number five, all the way wishing that Ross had been given a room closer to the stairs.

Raising her hand to knock on the door of the room was a great effort but she made it, although she doubted if anyone inside could hear the weak tap. She tried turning the doorknob and pushing but, as she guessed, Ross, who was accustomed to staying in hotels and apartments in big cities where strict security rules applied and every room had to be double locked from the inside, had locked the door.

She knocked again harder and, drained of strength, leaned against the door and closed her eyes, not noticing the grate of a key in a lock. The door swung open and she went with it. She heard Ross exclaim 'Rachel. What the hell?' And then his arms were around her, supporting her and lifting her like a doll and she knew she was safe and could let go and let him take the responsibility for her. Her head

drooped against his shoulder and darkness swooped down all around her.

When she came out of the faint she was lying on a single bed and a blanket was covering her. Hazily she looked around the room. Lit only by the bedside lamp on a table between the twin beds it was full of shadows and the glint of mirrors on the dressing-table and on the front of the wardrobe.

'Ross,' she said and was surprised to hear her voice creak like a rusty hinge on an old door. There was no answer so she lifted her head slightly from the pillow, laying it back quickly when everything swam before her eyes 'Ross? Where are you?' Her voice rose to a note of panic. Had he been here and gone again? Or had she knocked on the wrong door and been caught and lifted up by a stranger? 'Ross, I want you,' she said out loud, and for some reason felt better immediately and, closing her eyes, drifted into a doze.

The sound of the door closing awoke her and she opened her eyes. In pyjamas and dressing-gown Ross was coming towards the bed, a glass of water in one hand. He looked very tall, his shoulders seemed very wide and his hair was tousled. More like a lumberjack than a city gent. She remembered Pete's recent description and smiled a little. 'Why did you hit Pete?' she whispered.

He came to the bedside, sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at her.

'I guess I decided the time had come for him to realise he couldn't get away with the sort of filthy remarks he was making,' he said curtly. 'Why did you faint just now?'

'I don't know. I've never fainted in my life before.' She felt rather affronted that such a weakness had overtaken her, of all people. She had always prided herself on both her physical and her mental

stamina. 'I think I'd just got over-tired, that's all. It was such a muddle of a day.'

She noted the sceptical glint in his eye and curl to his lip. She pushed herself up and took the glass of water from him. 'Thank you. There's nothing in it, is there? No drug or alcohol or anything like that?'

'I didn't put anything in it. Everyone in this place has gone to bed so there was no one to ask for brandy or anything else. I had to get that from the bathroom tap. Hope it's OK.' He watched her closely while she sipped some water. 'Is it?' he demanded.

'Yes. It tastes very good. But then the island water always does.' She put the glass down on the table. He was still staring at her, his expression dour and unrelenting. She guessed he was severely critical of her. She recalled Inci saying that Ross could be frightening and now knew what she had meant.

'Where did you go when the shop closed?' he asked abruptly*

'I . . . ' she began and stopped to give him another wary glance. Bone ridged white along his jaw, and his lips had thinned and there was a smoky flare in his eyes. She couldn't see his hands because they were thrust into the pockets of his dressing-gown, but she guessed they were clenched. Looking back at his face she said coolly, 'Why do you want to know?'

'Because I have a right to know.' He leaned towards her suddenly, his face so close to hers she could smell the soap he had used to wash with, and the strange sense-titillating musky scent of his hair. 'I'm your husband, remember.'

'Really?' she taunted, pressing back against the headboard, away from the sexy roughness of his unshaven cheeks and jaws. 'Since you left me over a week ago without a word I thought you had decided to give up the privilege of being my husband,'

His lips curved back over his teeth in a dangerous and tigerish grin but he didn't move away from her. In fact he inched closer and put an arm out across to support himself and effectively trap her, his hand resting on the blanket that covered her.

'A piece of advice, sweetheart: don't ever twitch the tiger's tail. He's likely to turn and savage you if you do. Now answer my question. Where did you go?'

'You wouldn't be jealous, would you?' she taunted, then gasped as he took over her shoulders and gave her a rough shake.

'You're damned right. I am,' he said through gritted teeth. "That's why I hit your arty friend. When I asked him if he knew where you were he implied that you were probably visiting a boyfriend somewhere on the island, that you'd had a reputation for sleeping with all and sundry when he had known you at the art college, that you had even tried it on with him only a few nights ago. I saw red and hit him. If that's being jealous then I'm jealous. Where the hell have you been since the shop closed?'

'Oh, how mean of Pete!' raged Rachel, all weakness forgotten in her anger at Pete's lies. 'I've never slept around with anyone. Never. I'm not the promiscuous type. And it was he who tried it on with me a few nights ago and when I was at college. He and Ralph Bates, the teacher I once told you about, were nothing but lechers, making up to all the younger women students, both of them thinking they were God's gifts to the opposite sex.' She broke off, her breath hissing in outrage. Then seeing he was still looking at her sceptically, she said urgently, 'You do believe me, don't you?'

'Why should I?' he drawled nastily, his narrowed glance sweeping her face insolently. 'You didn't believe me when I told you I wasn't having an affair with Inci. Give me one reason why I should trust you

when you've never trusted me. And answer my question. Where did you go when you left the shop?'

'I went home with Morag, to the farm, to have supper with her and Inci and Giles,' she replied steadily, warning herself that nothing would be gained by remonstrating with him about his arrogance.

'And?' he prompted her.

'And Inci told me everything, about you and her, about how you lent her and her lover the flat so that they could spend some time there.' She paused, not looking at him any more but very much aware, as always when he was close to her, of the fiery passion that swirled within him just below the cool surface. 'Inci still loves you,' she went on in a lower tone when he didn't speak. 'And now that I've met her I can understand why you still love her. It's a pity she felt she couldn't marry you because of the career. But I think if you were fire and you asked her again she would marry you . . . '

She broke off to look up quickly because, with a muttered curse, he had stood up and had walked away from her into the shadows beyond the shaft of light from the bedside lamp.

'Ross?'

He came back and looked down at her, his eyes cold.

'You'd better get this clear. You've as much chance of getting me to agree to a divorce and freeing myself from marriage to you as a snowflake has of surviving in hell,' he said between taut lips. 'While you're carrying my child and there's a good possibility of it being born I'll not be divorcing you, and I won't allow you to separate from me or divorce me.'

'How did you find out I was pregnant? I didn't want you to know.'

'You mean you weren't going to tell me?' he rasped, his eyes beginning to blaze. 'You weren't thinking of terminating it, I hope?' Sitting down on the bed again, he glared at her threateningly and his voice was silky with menace. 'If you dare to ... '

'No, no, of course I'm not,' she said quickly. 'I didn't want you to know because I didn't want you to think you had to stay married to me just because you'd made me pregnant. How did you find out? Who told you?'

'No one told me. And I didn't know for sure until just now,' he replied smoothly, the suspicion of a wicked grin flickering across his face before it hardened again. 'I'll just say again, there will be no divorce.'

'But now I know that you and Inci still love one another I'd rather not continue to be your second-best wife,' she complained.

'I do not love Inci,' he said, and every syllable dripped with ice. 'I lost interest in her when she refused to marry me because of her career. I think my feelings for her had changed while she had been away in Vienna but I hadn't realised it until she turned down my proposal. Your pride objects to your being a second-best wife, so you should be able to put yourself in my place. My pride won't let me play second fiddle to a woman's career, not even to yours. I warned you I had more than my fair share of pride, too, when we first met. Remember?'

He leaned towards her again and she felt desire begin to stir low down in her body.

'Yes, I do,' she whispered, not looking at him. She began to play with the tassel on the end of his dressing-gown belt which lay on the bed between them.

'You're my first and only wife, Rachel, and I'd very much like you to stay in that position. I've done my best to show you that I want you. I've taken you places, spent money on you. I let you come to Scotland

when you wanted to and, when you refused to return to me in New York, I came over to join you, as soon as I could, to be with you. I'm even prepared to live with you on this island while you fulfil your commitment to Morag. But I can't see my way to living in that cottage the way it is.'

'But you've never said . . . ' she began.

'How many times do I have to tell you to stop butting,' he snarled suddenly, and got to his feet. 'It's late and I have to be up early to start work on renovating the cottage.'

'And that's another thing,' she interrupted quickly when he paused to draw breath. 'You had no right to take everything out of the cottage. No right at all.'

'Do you want me to live here with you for the summer?' he asked with another hint of silky menace in his tone.

'Yes, I do, but '

'Then stop telling me what you think my rights are or aren't and get ready for bed. Your clothes are in your travelling-bags in the cupboard and the bathroom is along the passage. '

'You are . . . ' she began again, and saw him step threateningly towards her. She slid off the bed at once, glad that she didn't feel dizzy any more. It seemed as if confrontation with Ross had revived her. Or perhaps it was his dynamic presence in the room plus the knowledge that he didn't love Inci any more that had perked her up. She soon found her clothes and, taking a nightgown and a dressing-robe from among them, she left the room to go to the bathroom.

When she returned Ross was sitting up in the other bed. Going over to the wardrobe, she took off her robe and hung it up.

'Seems to me you're over-dressed,' he drawled, watching her walk towards her bed.

'So are you,' she retorted, as she got into bed. 'But you once said that having to undress me makes making love more exciting.'

'That must have been when I was feeling less impatient than I do now.'

He waited until she had settled her head on the pillow and had arranged the sheet and blanket over her, then he switched off the bedside lamp. After a while she said tentatively, 'I thought you wanted me.'

'I do and it's hurting like hell,' he growled. 'But what about you? How many weeks pregnant are you?'

'I'm not exactly sure. About nine and a half.'

'You gave me a hell of a scare when you passed out. How do you feel now?'

'I feel fine. I think I must have hurried too much, or got too worked up when I saw what had happened at the cottage. And then Pete was so nasty. I think it happened the night before I left New York,' she added.

'What did?' His bed creaked as he turned on his side.

'The start of the baby. You were very loving.'

'That was because I wanted you to come back,' he replied in a low voice.

'You almost convinced me you loved me.'

'Only almost?' His voice was sharp and she guessed from the sounds that he had sat up. 'Why weren't you convinced?'

'You've never said it to me. You've never said you loved me.'

'You think that words are more important than deeds, then?' he rasped.

'Yes. I do.'

'Ha.' His laugh was short and mirthless. "Then I've been wasting my time these past few months trying to show you by my treatment of you how I feel about you.' More movement and she guessed he had lain down again, his back to her. 'OK. We'll do it your way, since words are enough for you,' he taunted. 'I'll just say I love you, darling, goodnight, and you can answer in the same trite, empty way, and then we can both go to sleep.'

'Saying I love you isn't trite,' she argued.

'Sure it is. Too many people have said it to too many other people and haven't been sincere,' he retorted. 'It only means something when it's backed by deeds, by loving behaviour. You've told me you love me many times, but I've yet to see you back it up.'

"That isn't true. I have. I've . . . I've . . . ' She realised ..suddenly that apart from letting him make love to her and having cooked a few meals for him she hadn't done much at all for him, and she stuttered to a stop. She hadn't even trusted him.

The silence between them lengthened, became tense. Rachel acknowledged that there would be no sleep for her and probably none for him either, until one of them overcame the barrier of pride and made an approach to the other. Sliding out bed she went to him and lifting the covers, she got into bed beside him. There was hardly any room between him and the edge of the bed to lie comfortably. She had

to cling on to him, her hand sliding over his waist and resting on the smooth skin of his solar plexus beneath the pyjama jacket. She heard him draw in his breath sharply.

'What do you want?' he said gruffly.

'To tell you I'm sorry I didn't trust you while I was away from you. I didn't mean it when I said I wanted a divorce.' She rubbed the tip of her cold nose against his back to warm it.

'Then why did you say it?'

'I wanted to see if I could hurt you. And I did try to show you I loved you and would be happy to resume our marriage, in spite of still suspecting you loved Inci more than me, that night we spent at the cottage. I couldn't have made love with you if I hadn't still been in love with you. Yet you went off in the morning without telling me where you were going, as if you didn't care any more about me.'

'I'd got the message that you still wanted me all right,' he said drily. 'But I had to make sure there really was no one else you preferred to me so I left you, while you were still sleeping, to go to the shop and have a chat with your friend Morag.'

'You went to see Morag? She didn't tell me.'

Indignation made her rear up to glare down at all she could see of him in the faint light that slanted in though the window, across which he hadn't bothered to pull the curtains.

'Because I asked her not to,' he said coolly. 'And you want to watch it. One more move like that and you're going to fall out of the bed.'

'What did Morag say to you?'

'Only that she was glad you had decided to help her out this summer and that she knew you had been hoping I would come to the island to stay with you for the summer. From her I got a clear indication that there was no other guy in your life, not even that randy type who makes pottery.'

'Then why didn't you stay? Why didn't you wait for me to arrive at the shop? Or you could have gone back to the cottage to see me and tell me what you were going to do next.'

'Sure I could have. But I was sore because you still believed I was carrying on an affair with Inci behind your back and you'd threatened to divorce me. I knew that Inci was due in Edinburgh to give a recital because she had told me, when I handed the keys of the apartment to her before I left for 'Frisco, so I went to Edinburgh to turn in the rented car and to buy a truck. I saw Inci, made her agree to come and explain to you what she'd been doing in the apartment. I didn't feel that it was my place to tell you about her having a lover. It was her secret, not mine. I also saw Giles and asked him to make sure she got here if he wanted me to continue the loan to him.'

'And he pretended he hadn't seen you at all, didn't know where you were. Oh, just wait until I see him again tomorrow.'

'I also phoned Morton,' continued Ross calmly, ignoring her outburst, 'and told him I was taking six months off to be here with you while you do your thing. He was very understanding and wished me luck, as I knew he would. Then I came back here.'

'You've been in this country all the time!' she exclaimed furiously. 'Why didn't you tell me what you were going to do before you left me? And why didn't you let me know you were coming back?'

'I guess I wanted to you to sweat a little, believing I'd left you for good,' he replied with a lilt of mockery. 'Call it my revenge on you for not trusting me and for threatening to divorce me,'

'Oh, you ' . . . you . . . ' she spluttered.

'Are you speechless at last, my darling? Aren't words of Use to you any longer?' he taunted, turning slowly to face her. Then, his voice sharpening warningly when, after snatching up the pillow, she began to hit him with it, he said, ' Hey, look out. You're going to ... '

She fell out of bed and lay on the floor, all the breath knocked out of her.

'I hope you didn't hurt yourself,' Ross whispered as he knelt down beside her. He lifted her and held her close to him. She could hear his heart beating strongly beneath her ear. 'You're not crying?' Under her chin his fingers were gentle.

'No, I'm laughing. And I'm not hurt. Not a bit.' She touched his face. Beard bristles rasped against the tips of her fingers.

'I did ask for a room with a double bed but it seems they don't go in for them. The tourists they get must be a lot of celibates,' he said.

His lips found hers in the darkness with the hard, dominating kiss that she had been longing for and, while he had her at his mercy, he began to slip the straps of her nightgown down until her breasts were bared. As soon as his lips burned against her delicate skin her body arched against him and she moaned in an agony of pleasure, her fingers sliding into his hair and slipping down to caress his nape.

'I've been longing for you to do that,' she groaned.

'Please do it again.'

'You know what will happen if I do.' His voice was thick with passion. 'Dare we risk doing it?'

'I think so.'

'But not here, on the floor. Nor in one of those narrow beds,' he said, standing up and helping her to her feet. 'We'll take the mattresses off the beds and put them together on the floor.'

Soon they were lying entwined. He was very gentle with her, so gentle that tears brimmed in her eyes as she realised how much he cared for her welfare and for that of the embryo in her womb and, although she could tell he was eager to possess her, he kept his passion in check until she was fully aroused and pleaded with him to come into her, so that together they could experience again the magic and mystery of physical union and fulfilment.

'I love . . .' she began when it was over and at once he stopped her mouth with kisses.

'You don't have to say it. You're beginning to lean to show that you do,' he mocked.

'You didn't have to go to all the trouble of renovating the cottage,' she whispered, her head resting on the satin smoothness of skin, stretched taut over the bone and muscle of his shoulder. 'I was going to tell you, that morning you left before I woke up, that I was sorry I hadn't trusted you over Inci and that I would go back with you to New York.'

And what about the little matter of my loan to Giles?' lie asked with gentle mockery.

'I'd decided forget about that because I wanted to live with you again so much,' she admitted in a low voice.

'Good, I'm glad that it's sometimes possible to get through that pride of yours.'

'But I hope you still don't think I married you so that you would give him the loan,' she said anxiously.

'You were so adamant about wanting to pay it back and about asking me to cancel it that I believed you when you said you knew nothing about it when I proposed to you. I guess I should never have told him I'd lend him the money once I had persuaded you to marry me. Then there wouldn't have been any misunderstanding on your part. And I had no intention of bribing you into marrying me. I wanted you badly but only on the up and up. There were to be no underhand deals. I know it was a hasty marriage, but I was scared you'd get away before I could catch you. I took a gamble on love and hoped it would pay off. Do you believe me?'

'Yes.'

'And trust me?'

'Oh, yes. It's going to be so wonderful living with you again without having to worry about Inci or Giles,' she said with a happy sigh as she snuggled against him.

'I agree with you. I like living with me, too, especially when you're around.'

And for once Rachel didn't argue with him. Warm and safe in his arms she relaxed, not wanting to spoil the intimacy of the moment. Through her own pride and wilful behaviour she had almost destroyed their hasty marriage. Now she could only be glad that he was proud, too, and determined always to get his way, using whatever means came to hand. If he hadn't been like that ...

It didn't bear thinking about, she decided hastily. He was here, they were together, and never, never would she let anyone or anything come between them again.