



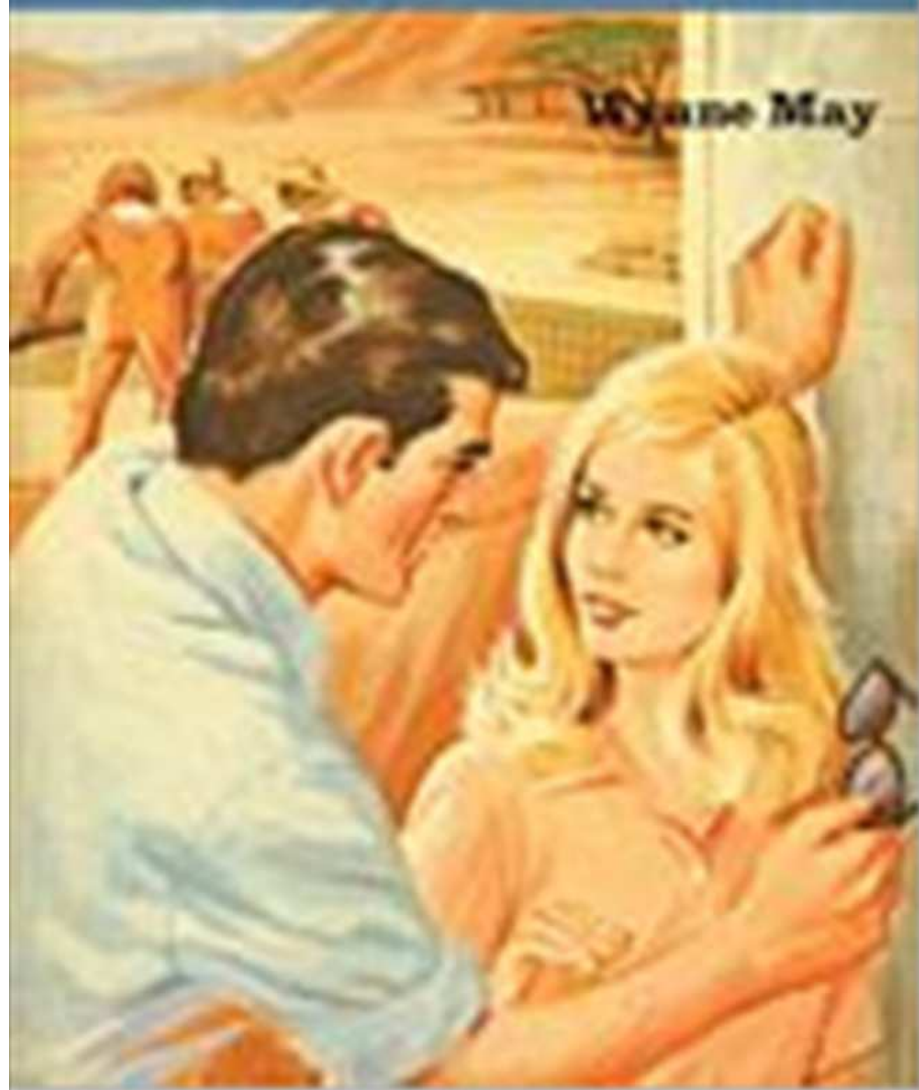
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A HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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# A BOWL OF STARS

By Wynne May



# **A BOWL OF STARS**

**Wynne May**

It was a new life for Cyndy when she inherited a house and a swimming pool business in the Drakensberg Mountains.

The only fly in the ointment was Max Steele, who owned a rival firm. There had been friction between the two firms even before Cyndy came on the scene. But now Cyndy was determined to make an impression -- on Max?

## CHAPTER I

GAZING down at the turquoise-blue swimming-pool, Cyndy Collins said, "And the ironical thing is that I barely knew my uncle Cliff. I've made up my mind, though, that I'm going to carry on where he left off." Shaking bad: her champagne-gold hair, she added, "I happen to be very business-minded, and this will be a terrific challenge." As she took her green eyes away from the water to look at Ken Harris she narrowed them against the bright sunlight. Her skin was very golden and contrasted excitingly with her eyes. "I'm hoping that everything will remain just as it was while my uncle was alive and that you'll stay on with Blue Champagne Pools. You will, won't you? I understand that you were my uncle's right-hand man?" she smiled at him with her eyes. "I'm hoping you will be *my* right-hand man now and that my inheriting the pool business and the house isn't going to make any difference to you. If you decide to leave Blue Champagne I don't know what I'll do. I just wouldn't know which way to turn, quite frankly."

There was a small silence before Ken answered her. "You may as well know this - I was hoping to buy your uncle Cliff out when his health started failing. So you see, anything concerning Blue Champagne Pools concerns me too. Everything happened too quickly in the end. I'm telling you this to give you an idea of my interest in the business. Frankly, I didn't know you existed until things were wound up, and I've spent sleepless nights wondering whether you intended selling the business." Ken let his breath out on a soft laugh, but Cyndy was vaguely disturbed, without knowing why.

"I haven't thought along those lines - not once. The whole set-up appeals to me tremendously. What's more, I couldn't bear to part with it now that I've seen what it's all about. I don't quite know what I imagined, but it had something to do with an untidy yard full of bags of cement, pipes and wheel-barrows and things. I simply couldn't visualise the house, and then Mr. Sebel, the solicitor, showed me

several coloured photographs and I was utterly staggered. It's beautiful."

"What will you do if the entire staff decides to pack up?" Ken Harris asked.

Of medium height, he was compactly built, tanned and affable with a ready smile. At the moment, his fair hair was trapping the sun and, although he was wearing sun-glasses, she knew that his eyes were a light brown. Later, she was to discover that Ken often wore sun-glasses, especially after a day of guniting a pool in harsh sunlight.

"Do you mean leave Blue Champagne Pools?" Her eyes went wide. "But they wouldn't, would they? I mean, there's no reason to. I want everything to go on just as it always has done. Apart from the actual running of the business and trying my hand at advertising this inheritance has come as a terrific challenge. It's like something out of a story-book. I still can't get used to the idea that this has happened to me. While I don't know the first thing about pool construction, and don't intend interfering, I do want to make a big thing of advertising. I did a three-year course - Institute of Market Management - as a matter of fact. By the way, did my uncle know that so many chalets were going to spring up all over the Berg when he started the pool business? I've often wondered."

Suddenly Ken grinned. "Well, what do you think? Do you think that Cliff Collins came down to Tugela River on a bicycle? He knew this was going to be the turn of events a long time ago - and he wasn't the only one, let me tell you that."

"Oh?" Automatically, Cyndy's voice tightened. "You mean you knew - and that's why you wanted to buy him out? "

"I was thinking of your rival, as it so happens." Behind the amusement in Ken's voice, however, she could sense tension. "We have a rival, but perhaps I should stop talking."

She knew, at once, how much this meant and lost some of her animation. "No, keep talking, please. After all, I've got to know."

"Well, he happens to be a chap by the name of Max Steele," Ken told her and, because she did not want him to see the utter despair in her eyes, she lowered her lashes. Without thinking about it, she noticed the tiny blond hairs which glistened, like bright gold threads, against Ken's tanned skin. Lifting her eyes, she said, "I see. Who was here first?"

"He was."

She gave a disappointed sigh. "Oh, well, what does it matter? I have a business head on my shoulders, if nothing else. Anything he can do, I can do better - that will just have to be my motto. I don't intend just to concentrate on pools, anyway. There'll be sidelines."

Now it was his turn to say, "Oh?" After a small silence he said, "What kind of sidelines? Cliff had already got started on making our own coping tiles and we're at present turning out pre-cast walls - on a small scale, of course."

"Yes, I know," she said. "Mr. Sebel told me, as a matter of fact. But I have other plans."

"Like what?" His manner became teasing.

"Well, off-hand - fencing - not only ornamental pre-cast walls, but childproof fencing. I want us to be able to fence all our own pools, if need be. I know that precautions have to be taken to make pool areas safe areas and I don't intend that our clients should go elsewhere for this service. Why should they pay out money to someone else when

they could be paying it to us? The way I see it is that we must start not only our own pre-cast walling but our own childproof fencing into the bargain. What do you say ? "

"Max Steele was of the same opinion, actually," he said, watching her face.

"You mean he's already started this?" She felt suddenly deflated. "What's he doing?"

"Walling, fencing—"

"What's the name of his pool business?"

"Berg Pools."

Shaking back her hair, she said lightly, with a lightness shefar from felt, "I see. Well, that offers no problem, of course, but it only goes to show that we must do the same. Fencing must not be put out to contract by our clients - I mean, they mustn't seek this service elsewhere until they've been acquainted with the fact that we do walling and fencing. They must be made familiar with our prices which should be able to hold their own. I also have in mind poolside and patio furniture, pool and indoor plants, windscreens, natty little cabanas, pool covers, planters - to hold plants - and those dramatic metal baskets in which to burn charcoal. Then there are blackboards, for pool rules --" She broke off, laughing. "Honestly, when you work it out there's just no end to it. All this will come in good time. It won't happen overnight, naturally."

Her spirited remarks appeared to amuse him. "All in good time, I agree."

"Do you really agree?" she asked, still smiling, "or are you just trying to humour me? You do agree that there's great scope? I mean, the way I see it - the sky is the limit."

"Quite. I'm in complete agreement. I'm all for building up, myself. Whether or not there happens to be scope in the Berg is another matter."

"If there isn't scope - we'll just have to make scope." She felt very ambitious. "If the worst comes to the worst, which I can't see happening, we'll move the business to some town, or other, but that would mean selling the house. No, I couldn't. I couldn't sell that wonderful house." She tilted her golden face to the sun and drew a breath.

In the distance the magnificent rock wall of peaks which formed the Drakensberg Mountains presented a spectacular sight. The precipices of the finest part of the range, where the mountains formed a stupendous amphitheatre, were broken by fantastic rock pinnacles and awe-inspiring gullies which, from this distance, appeared slashed with shadows.

Cyndy was aware of the delicious bite of the sun through her thin iris-coloured mandarin-collared shirt which she wore with off-white slacks.

With the problem of Max Steele at the back of her mind she made an effort to control her thoughts. After all, Max Steele would only be a problem if she allowed him to be.

"By the way," she said, "did this Max Steele present a problem to my uncle?" She said this just at the time as Ken Harris had started to say, "You'd better ... " and they broke off together and laughed in the clear Berg sunlight.

Shimmering reflections danced on the sun-dazzled swimming-pool. Cyndy turned again to gaze, in utter disbelief, at the house which she had inherited. Along with the house she had also "inherited" Judd and Norah Dixon. Like Ken Harris, Judd Dixon knew all there was to



know about building swimming-pools while his wife, Norah, acted as housekeeper.

The house, long, low and elegant, complete with its own Blue Champagne pool, had come as a staggering surprise. The essence of the house was an uncluttered space of indoor/ outdoor, open-plan living and, to Cyndy's way of thinking, carried the atmosphere of Beverly Hills itself. Judd and Norah's small flat was part of the house but it had its own private entrance. Ken Harris, however, occupied one bedroom in the main part of the house and, right now, Cyndy was wondering what she was going to do about Ken Harris.

"Ken," she said, "you haven't answered my question about Max Steele and my uncle."

"Why do you want to know?" he asked, smiling.

"Why do you think? I'm a woman, that's why. I won't rest until I know the set-up."

"Well, Max Steele and your uncle were great rivals. So far as Max is concerned Berg Pools happens to be a mere sideline."

"Why? What else does he do?" she asked, caution and resentment in her voice.

"He owns a massive guniting concern."

"Guniting?" She lifted her shoulders and spread her hands in a gesture of inadequacy. "I haven't a clue about guniting. What on earth does that mean ? "

"Gunite," Ken said, "happens to be a mixture of hydrated sand and cement ..." he laughed. "Do you want me to go on?"

"Yes, I do. I'm tremendously interested." She laughed with him. "No, honestly, I mean that."

"Then I'll go on. It's pneumatically applied over steel reinforcing rods and directly against the soil. The mix is dry and is shot from a nozzle, under great pressure, to form a shell that's considered stronger than any other type of concrete. To cut a long story short, Max's firm has just signed a big contract and work will begin, in the very near future, on a tremendous tunnel."

"Does that mean he'll be going away?" There was undisguised relief in her voice.

"Don't you believe it. Although he might go off for a short spell, from time to time, Max concerns himself with a sideline bearing the name Berg Pools. That's what bugs us. We're struggling. Pools happen to be our main concern while, with him, pool building is a mere sideline."

"Oh, that's not fair," she said. "Tell me, though - do we gunite? Does one gunite a pool? You see, I'm terribly ignorant."

"Yes, we gunite. A gunite rig consists of a compressor, a mixer which contains cement and sand, a long hose and nozzle where it is mixed with water and blown against the excavator. Are you any the wiser, Miss Collins ? "

She shook her head and laughed gaily. "No, not really, but I'll soon learn - and not so much of the Miss Collins. Cyndy, please."

"By the way," he said, "our guniting machine is more or less on its last legs. That means we'll have considerable expense to face in the near future."

"Oh, no! Don't depress me, please. I'm far too happy to be depressed."

There was a silence as they ran out of something to say and then Ken said, "Look, I'll be brief - I'll move out of the house before you move in."

"But where will you go?" Her grape-green eyes widened. All of a sudden she felt strained.

"There's a self-contained rondavel in the garden. By self-contained I mean that it has a bathroom and that will suit me fine."

"I see." Her eyes flickered away from his and rested on the mountains, natural forests and flower and game sanctuary right in the distance.

"Is that what you'd prefer?" she asked, keeping her eyes away from him.

"Yes. I'll be perfectly happy there. Don't give it another thought," he said.

One of the mountain resort hotels could be seen, its position marked by a ribbon, which was the dusty road leading to it, and dark patches of trees. It was in fact the Kathlamba Hotel.

Cyndy sighed at the sheer beauty of everything. Her thoughts were busy, though. Busy with Ken Harris, who had been her uncle Cliff's right-hand man and now was her right-hand man. She knew, without being told, that Ken was needed by Blue Champagne Pools.

"Well," she said, her hair hanging forward as she looked down at her feet, "think about it. It seems ridiculous that you should have to move out of the house ... " She broke off, shrugging helplessly. "I mean, the Dixons are here." When she looked up at him her smile ended by clenching her lower lip with her teeth.

"Don't," his voice was mocking. "I'm beginning to be persuaded." He stared frankly at her legs and she felt angry with him. "No, but seriously, I think it will be best all round, if I move out into the garden." He laughed a small laugh which made her feel that the suggestion that he should remain in the house had triggered off some absurd thought on his part. His sun-glasses focused on her face.

On the slasto pool apron a tiny thin lizard lay soaking upsun and Cyndy went over to it and moved it to a safe place, away from the water. Ken looked on. He had pushed his dark glasses up past his forehead, now, into his blond hair, and she saw the amusement in his light brown eyes.

Coming to stand next to him again, she said, "All this is so - riveting, honestly."

"Riveting?" His eyes flickered over her wind-blown hair and she found herself wishing that she had swept it back from her face in a tight chignon. It would have been more fitting, somehow. As it was, the breeze kept blowing golden strands across her eyes, cheeks and lips. It was hard to remember that she was now the owner of a business.

"What I mean is, I'm so excited about everything." She combed her fingers through her hair with considerable impatience. Turning from him, she gazed past the house in the direction of the yard with all its equipment which was hidden and screened by whitewashed walls and a headdress of green fluttering leaves.

"Where does Max Steele have his pool business? Is he nearer Lindeque, or somewhere quite close by?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, Max Steele is uncomfortably close to us," Ken replied.

She thought about this for a moment and then she said, "It strikes me as odd that my uncle, not to mention Max Steele, should set up business right here in the Berg. You would have thought that the logical thing to do would be to conduct a business - er - to situate a business in Lindeque, or on the outskirts of Lindeque. It's only a small town, but still, it's nevertheless a town."

"Mountain chalets are going up in, and about, this area. People who want - or who may want, or who can be talked into getting pools - are right on our doorstep. All our equipment is here. That's the way we planned it. Outlying farmers also go for summer dips in their own filtered domestic pools now. They're no longer content merely to dive into the farm dam," Ken said!

"I'm making discoveries all the time," she replied. "I - I hadn't taken a lot of things into account. I hadn't taken Max Steele into account, for instance. Still," she laughed lightly, "I guess we can deal with Max Steele?" It was a question. Her green eyes looked troubled.

"Well, I guess you could say that," Ken answered. "We've coped up to now."

At their feet the pool collected sunlight and glittered it back on to their faces, making patterns, and Cyndy narrowed her eyes. "I suppose I'll have to be getting back to the hotel," she said, with some reluctance.

Ken Harris had picked her up at the Kathlamba Hotel where she had arrived from Johannesburg, by luxury bus, some hours ago. "Thank you for picking me up at the hotel and bringing me here to show me everything," she said. "Mr. Sebel said you would."

"Yes - he was in touch, actually." Ken shoved his glasses back down on his nose and ran his fingers through his fair hair.

"I'm going to need every bit of help you can give me - every bit of support - all sorts of advice - but I guess you already know that, don't you? If you leave Blue Champagne Pools, Ken, I think I'll die." She lifted her arms in a gesture of helplessness.

"I won't leave - not unless it's to start my own business."

Laughing, she said, "The Berg won't take three pool builders. Things are going to be bad enough as it is. After all, in all this vast space, there are only a smattering of hotels, guest farms and chalets - for all that. By the way, you did say that Max Steele calls them Berg Pools, didn't you?" She felt suddenly sick, thinking of opposition, when she knew so little.

"That's right - Berg Pools," Ken answered.

She refused to be discouraged. "Not that it matters," she said, "one way or the other. It's all in the pool game."

"What are you doing tomorrow?" Ken asked. "I understand you're combining business with pleasure and that you'll be spending a few days at the Kathlamba before you go back to Johannesburg to pack up on your first step to taking over Blue Champagne?"

Giving him a smile she said, "Yes, that's so. I'm so excited." The tiny gold cap on one of her front teeth, where she had chipped it against her bicycle handlebar as a child, gleamed in the sun. This, strangely enough, added to the kind of glamour she carried around with her, especially on those occasions when she scooped back her gleaming hair into a loose chignon, giving her an almost tall cool look.

"I'll be walking, most probably," she went on. "It's madly hot to walk, though. Imagine climbing in this heat!"

"Would you like to visit our pool site of the moment?" he asked. "If so, I could pick you up at the hotel. You'll be able to see the men at work."

"Oh, fine, I'd adore that. Where is the pool being built? Is it a chalet pool?"

"As a matter of fact, it's being built for a chap who owns a garage, just outside Lindeque - this side of Lindeque."

"Oh." She laughed again. "Somehow I was hoping that it would be a chalet pool."

"Beggars can't be choosers," he said. "We build 'em where- ever - and whenever - we can."

"And Max Steele?" Her voice was all on edge again. "What is he doing right now? "

"Ah, that's a sore point," Ken said. "A very sore point with us."

"Oh?" Cyndy's green eyes did not leave his face. "Why is it a sore point?"

"We thought we were in the running for that one. Max is building a pool for the Escarpment Guest Farm."

"I saw it," she said, "on the way to the Berg, in the bus. Or rather, I saw the road leading to it. There was a sign post - To Escarpment Guest Farm "

On the way back to the hotel in his Fiat she said, "I'll try out my uncle's car another day - perhaps tomorrow, if there's time - before I go back."

It was like a dream, she thought. Some fantastic dream, and in technicolor, at that.

"Fair enough." Ken changed down and the car rattled over the corrugations, spraying-dust and small stones from beneath the tyres. He drove well, but too fast. "You do have a licence?"

"Yes - not that I drove much. I suppose I was lucky to have got through the-test. I only drove when Athol let me."

"Athol?" She was aware of a quick glance in her direction.

"Is Athol the boy-friend ?"

"One of the boy-friends. There's safety in numbers." She gave careful casualness to the words just to let him see how it was with her. "I'm not ready to be tied down yet."

The hotel came into sight and, by the time they reached it, the sun was beginning to lose some of its strength. Ken said, "I'm going to have a drink before I go back. How about joining me?"

Although she was longing for a spell in the bath before changing for dinner she said, 'Yes - why not? That would be lovely. Where shall we have it - here on the veranda?"

"Well, it's cool here," Ken answered.

The mountains looked terrific. It was difficult to believe that she was going to settle here in the Berg and Cyndy found herself thinking of her tiny bachelor flat in the centre of Johannesburg. She was so alone. It was incredible what a jaunt in the light aircraft could do to one small girl. In one day it could render her to the shock that she would no longer be seeing her parents. Somehow, invisible strings had been pulled. She had remained at boarding school. The only difference here lay in the fact that there were no more loving letters from her



golden-haired mother, with postscripts, or enclosed notes, from her tall handsome father. There were no visits from them, and when the holidays came along, she had been collected by a comparatively strange aunt. She had learned to work out her own salvation and if she had a motto it could have been - the way to avoid disappointment is to expect nothing, which made her inheritance all the more fantastic.

Vaguely, only very vaguely, she remembered the man who had been her uncle Cliff - the man who had, according to relatives, resembled Humphrey Bogart. With those looks, her aunt had said, Cliff could have been a ladies' man, and yet he had cut himself off from the opposite sex. This was no doubt due to the fact that Cliff Collins had lost his bride in an avalanche disaster while they had been honeymooning in the Alps. After that, Cliff Collins remained alone.

Was that, Cyndy wondered, why he had remembered her and left all that he possessed on this earth to her? Apart from a smattering of relatives she had ended up comparatively alone. It was through a harassed kind of affection shown to her by aunts and uncles that she had lived on, without her parents. After all, and she only began to realise this as she got older, these aunts and uncles were all people with their own particular worries and disappointments in life.

While they sipped at the long expensive drinks upon which Ken had insisted, and watched the changing moods of the mountains, he told her more about the pool business which she had inherited, but she was beginning to feel restless now, longing for a hot and perfumed bath. Somebody had told her that there was to be a film show after dinner.

"Ken," she used his name again, with that Johannesburg brand of ease, "would it be too much to ask you to come back to the hotel for dinner?"

"Would it be too much?" He grinned. "You must be kidding?"

"No - what I meant is simply this. You've just driven here and presently you're going to drive back to the house. If you have dinner with me that will entail another drive back here, and then after dinner a drive back home. Do you see what I mean?" Already planning what she would wear, she flickered a glance over Ken's shorts and open-necked shirt.

"You could have stayed on," she said, "but...." breaking off, she gave an embarrassed laugh, "I hardly think you would be allowed into the dining-room. I was an idiot, actually. I should have thought of it before we left the house."

"I'm glad you thought of it at all. That sounds great." He removed his sun-glasses. "I get so used to wearing these things," he said. "Sometimes all this sun and constant working in the open can play havoc with one's eyes. You should see my eyes after a day of guniting!"

Dusk was working its way over the mountains and shrouding the crags, near the tops, and softening the roses in full bloom in the hotel gardens. Through a break in some flowering shrubs Cyndy could see the dusty ribbon of road which led back to the house - her house. Something kicked over inside her and her whole being tingled with the shock of this wonderful realization. She sat savouring the moment.

Presently she said, "I'll have to get used to the roads, won't I ? All that spurting dust and gravel."

He made to stand up. "You'll get used to it, don't worry."

Glancing at his watch, he said, "I'll meet you in the African Drum in, say, just over an hour's time. How is that?"

His skin looked warm and healthy and, instinctively, one just knew that he was accustomed to a lot of sun and water. He probably used

the pool at the house whenever he could spare the time, she thought, with excitement. That pool was waiting for her, to use whenever she felt the inclination to swim.

"Fine." She gave him a smile. "Just wait for me, Ken, if I'm not there. Order yourself a drink. I forget myself in the bath sometimes."

He rubbed a tanned hand along his jaw. "Okay, then. I'll be seeing you." She stood watching him, as he ran down the shallow steps. His movements were swift and silent and he did not look back when he reached his car.

Half way down the dusty road, outside the hotel grounds, she saw the tail-lights of the Fiat go on, smudged over by the dust which it was tearing up. He seemed to be travelling very fast - faster than when she had been his passenger - and that was saying something. She hoped that one of the horses, which always seemed to be on the side of the road - and on the wrong side of the fence, as it so happened - would not choose that particular moment to cross over in front of the car.

Cyndy discovered she was hungry. She was not only hungry but wildly happy, and her mind was filled with her inheritance.

Nevertheless, she set aside time to think of Max Steele.

## CHAPTER II

CYNDY ran a bath, adding oil and salts. The bathroom was hot and perfumed by the time she was ready to step into the foaming water and then, soothed and contented, she closed her eyes and lay back.

The girl she was sharing the room, bath and tiny balcony with was moving about, opening cupboards and sliding drawers backwards and forwards. Her name was Tessa and she had turned on the radio.

Later, when Cyndy came out of the steaming bathroom, Tessa said, "I've been thinking about what you told me - you know, about having inherited that swimming-pool business and a house to go with it. Isn't it fantastic? Don't you have to keep pinching yourself to remind yourself that it's all true?"

"Yes, I do, actually. It's like a dream." Once again Cyndy felt the surge of excitement and panic which seemed to go hand in hand every time she thought about what had happened to her. Her smile was wide. "This afternoon I met my right- hand man."

"Did he come up to expectations?" Tessa asked. "What's more important - is he young? "

"He's young, yes. I'm having dinner with him, as a matter of fact. He's coming here to the hotel. I'll have to get a move on. I'm meeting him in the Ladies' Bar for a drink first."

"This could be it," Tessa said. "This could be the beginning of something big." She studied Cyndy in a way that was most embarrassing.

"It could be, but it won't be," Cyndy laughed, and then, still with the taste of tangy toothpaste in her mouth, she began to look out her clothes with hurried movements.

The African Drum was full of people talking, but Cyndy was aware of a sudden silence as she stood at the door, looking for Ken.

Behind the leopardskin-topped bar stools there was a view, through huge sliding glass doors, of the evening mist as it rolled down from the mountain. It was dark now and the stars were visible, hanging over the silence of the Berg.

Ken Harris was at the far end of the counter and when he saw Cyndy he slipped from his stool and came round to meet her. "Hi," she said, thankful that the drone of voices had started again, "am I very late?" All of a sudden, she was glad that she had decided to wear her long cream and bronze silk jersey print. The material felt soft and sensual against her sleek legs.

Beneath Ken's easy smile she could sense his tension. "Not at all."

Something told her that he was trying to bear in mind that she was his boss, and she felt embarrassed and touched at the same time. She took the stool next to his and he asked her what she would have to drink, and when she had told him she said, "This is the first time I've been inside the African Drum. It is attractive, isn't it?" Her excited green eyes took in the beams, copperware, leopardskins on the hessian-covered walls, primitive African carvings and the huge stone fireplace, at one end, which she knew would come into its own the moment it snowed. Apart from wooden masks, which also adorned the walls, there were several African drums dotted about the place.

"The African Drum doesn't take long to fill up," Ken told her, while she allowed her eyes to travel from stool to stool, without making it too obvious, taking in what the other women were wearing and how they were wearing it.

Givifig her attention to Ken again, she said, "No, I don't suppose it does. That's typical of all bars, I think. They're like gluepots, don't you think? The hotel appears to be completely booked up."

"WeU, people go for the Berg in a big way. The latest craze, as you know, is to build your own mountain chalet. You don't have to beg, borrow or steal a chalet - you just build your own."

"You should have said 'after borrowing the moneys you just build your own," she said, slanting her eyes at him.

"Money comes too easy to a lot of people these days," he answered.

"Well, yes, I agree, but that's all to the good, so far as Blue Champagne Pools is concerned, don't you think? It's thanks to these monied people that we're where we are. It just goes to show that we shall constantly have to be on our toes, or should I say, we'll constantly have to keep in the swim?"

The awareness of the mountains and the cocktail which she had chosen at Ken's suggestion were working magic in her.

"You don't have to remind me," he smiled back, easy with her again.

"And you are going to stay on?" Her voice was teasing, but she was feeling tense. "You really meant what you said? You're not going to go back on your word?"

"I'm not going to go back on my word - not if that's how you really want it."

"I told you," she blinked quickly. Her dark lashes were always such a surprise against that champagne-gold hair *which* was arranged, now, in a loose chignon. How many people had told her that? She was looking very sophisticated. She had an easy chic, a fashionable elegance which *she* had inherited from her beautiful mother. "I don't

know what I'd do without you - sink and go under, most probably. I think my uncle felt the same way about you - according to Mr. Sebel, anyway. Now that I've met you and sized up everything for myself, I can see that Mr. Sebel wasn't exaggerating."

"Let's face it - Mr. Sebel was exaggerating." Ken's laugh was embarrassed.

"No, he wasn't. Tell me more about the business. I can never hear enough. Is it really going very well?" She put her elbow on the counter and her chin on her palm.

"Far better than we anticipated - seeing that Max Steele was here first. We have our ups and downs, of course, but who doesn't?" Ken shrugged his shoulders. He had changed into a dark suit, and at first she had found it difficult to identify him with the Ken Harris who had worked his way into her mind.

There was a small silence and then she said, "You mean that my uncle pinched Max Steele's idea?" She was watching Ken's face, wondering if she was on dangerous ground.

"It's all in the game - let's face it," he said, looking down at his glass.

"Not just a matter of - principles?" she asked, and he looked up. The expression in his brown eyes made her think that Ken Harris and Max Steele were not on good terms.

"That's beside the point. Business is business. The problem of who was here first shouldn't come into it." He looked down again and began to twirl his glass round and round. She found herself looking at the golden-amber liquid as it went flying dangerously near the rim of the glass. "Now that you're in business, or about to be in business, you're going to find out things for yourself. You're going to make discoveries just about every day, believe me."

"Anyway," she lifted a hand and tucked the fingers into her gleaming hair, "I guess I'm first to hit on the idea of pool- side furniture and plants, aren't I? I guess Max Steele doesn't have a shop?"

He ignored her question. "I wish you could hit on the idea as to what we're going to do about a new guniting machine." His eyes mocked her. "That would be more to the point, right now."

"Couldn't we just borrow Max Steele's machine, whenever we needed one?" she asked, and then popped her tongue into her cheek and giggled at his expression.

"You must be joking," he said, because it was expected of him. "By the way, if you turn your head you'll see him right at the end, near the door."

"Oh?" Cyndy's voice was suddenly tight. She did not turn her head. "I'll look presently," she said. "He mustn't be allowed to know we've been discussing him."

"I think," Ken went on, "that after you have seen him, you'll need cheering up." He signalled the barman and, while he was ordering their drinks, Cyndy turned her head slowly, giving careful attention to the very casual way in which she did this. She was quite unprepared for the fact that Max Steele might be looking at her.

He was, and across the dimly lit space, their eyes met and held. Even in this discreet lighting it was obvious that, beneath the dark stroke of his brows, his eyes were intensely blue and fringed by blunt, thick lashes which looked very black. The rest, before she looked away, because it was plain that he was not going to be the first to do this, made a quick imprint upon her mind - richly tanned skin, dark hair and the kind of mouth that could play havoc with a woman's feelings.



Max Steele had kept his eyes on her all the time he was lifting his glass to his lips, and before she turned away, she noticed that, like her, one front tooth had a tiny glinting gold cap on it.

She knew she was going to be in for a bad time over Max Steele.

Turning to Ken, she put one elbow on the counter again and rested her chin on her palm to hide the fact that she was shaking.

"They couldn't have given him a better name, could they? All I got was a steely look," she said.

"Well, what did you expect?" Ken asked.

"Well, I don't quite know. Tell me, are you going to introduce me to him?"

"Hardly."

"Why hardly?"

"For the very simple reason that we're barely on speaking terms," Ken grinned. "Neither were Max Steele and your uncle on speaking terms."

"I had gathered there was *feeling*," she said, "but why are you not on speaking terms? What happened?"

"In a nutshell, we had a barny."

"Do you think he knows about *-me?*"

"Why do you think he went out of his way to give you a Max Steele look? He was merely letting you know that he considers this to be his stamping-ground - just as he went out of his way to let Cliff know the same thing."

"But that's absolutely ridiculous." She was indignant now. "As I see it, this is anyone's stamping-ground."

"You tell him that, then."

"I most certainly intend to, don't worry."

"It's anyone's stamping-ground, while the going is good,' Ken said, a moment later.

"That's exactly how I see things," she replied. "That makes sense - it goes without saying, doesn't it?" She lifted her glass. "Here's hoping it will be a good stamping-ground for a long, long time yet."

"Cheers," Ken said, and smiled. He clinked his glass against hers.

When they finally left the bar to go through to the dining- room they had to pass Max Steele's leopardskin-covered stool and, from beneath her lashes, Cyndy studied him. She could sense the hostility which existed between the two men and she saw how Max Steele's own lashes dropped. He studied her without giving her a direct look. It was a good old "cowboy" look, she thought, smiling inwardly. She had seen that very same look on cold handsome cowboy faces in a good many motion pictures.

"Where does Max Steele stay?" she asked, on the way to the dining-room.

Ken was silent while the head waiter showed them to a table for two. When they were seated he said, "Max has a chalet, not«ofar from here, as a matter of fact."

"He would. I can just imagine the kind of set-up ... concrete pillars and rough stone walls, contrasting with planked ceiling, rough-finished plastering, white paint, old floor tiles and colourful

furnishings. The result is exhilarating but, at the same time, surprisingly restful. Am I right?"

Ken gave her an admiring glance. "Right."

"With his wife, of course?"

They were interrupted and they ordered fish, and while they were waiting, Cyndy said, "You didn't answer my question, by the way."

"Max Steele doesn't have a wife," Ken told her.

"I see. No wonder, then, that he lounges about in the African Drum."

"I think you could safely say that Avril Goddard is at the back of that."

"Avril Goddard?"

"Yes. Avril Goddard is a receptionist here at the Kath- lamba."

"Is she the dark-haired, dark-eyed one - the one on duty at the moment?"

"You're very observant. She is the one." Grinning, he added, "By now you must have formed a good many impressions?"

"Yes, I have, and most of them happen to be disagreeable. Still, I guess the Berg is big enough - certainly vast enough - to take us all."

"I'm getting depressed," Ken said. "Let's change the subject. How long is it going to take you to pack up and leave Johannesburg?"

"Well, I've already worked my notice at the office."

"It didn't take you long to make up your mind that this was what you wanted," he said, and she laughed lightly.

"No, it didn't. This is exactly what I want - but, Ken, without you I'm a dead duck. I mean that. Please don't walk out on me." Laughing again, she went on, "Do you know, I don't even know the difference between what you called a gunite rig and a filter. I only know that both are associated with swimming-pools."

"Well, that's what I'll be there for. I know the difference," he said, grinning, and she permitted her mind to relax. She began to enjoy her dinner and watched, with green excited eyes, as the wine steward topped their glasses.

The following day Ken took her to the pool site which was on the outskirts of Lindeque. There was a strong wind blowing, scorching everything in its path. A relentless sun burned down on the excavation.

"We have here what's known as a problem soil," Ken told her.

"Really?" Her eyes flickered around the scene of activity. "It looks like any other kind of soil to me, of course."

"This is rocky soil and there's only one solution, and that is to use air hammers. This happens to be jolly expensive. On the other hand, though, rock can be an advantage, since it provides a solid foundation - but this isn't one of those times, I'm afraid. There's nothing advantageous here. Very sandy soil presents its own problems too, by the way."

"Oh? Why?" she asked innocently.

"Because of caving - walls caving in. Sometimes, in case of this, a thin coat of gunite has to be sprayed on walls until the shell is erected."

"I seem to hear the word gunite, or guniting, constantly." She narrowed her eyes against the sun as she looked at Ken. "What shape is this pool going to be, as a matter of interest?"

"It's what we call a free-form shape."

Glancing back at the excavation, she said, "It's difficult to visualise it as a pool, with the sun dancing on the glittering blue water."

"Come," Ken said, "I want you to meet Judd Dixon. He wasn't at the house when you were there yesterday."

"No," she said, feeling unexpectedly nervous at having to meet one of her staff. "He wasn't."

"Mind you don't trip over these cement bags," Ken touched her arm lightly.

Picking her way, she asked, "Why are they all filled with sand? Do you cart all this sand away after you've excavated?"

His smile was laced with amusement. "We use about a hundred and fifteen bags of cement on a pool this size. In a case like this, where one or more sides of the pool have to be built up we fill the empty bags with the sand which has been excavated from the site. These are placed along the sides of the excavation, on top, for building up purposes. Briefly, what I'm trying to say is this - there'll be a complete new terrace here, eventually."

"As a result of this building up. I see." She pretended not to see his look of amusement.

Judd Dixon had been busy behind a tripod and he came forward, a slim, quiet man with sparse greying hair. Ken made the introductions and there was a look of embarrassment on Judd's thin face as he acknowledged his new boss.

"I met Mrs. Dixon yesterday, of course," Cyndy said.

"She told me all about it - yes," Judd replied.

The African men, in their blue overalls with the words Blue Champagne Pools written across the back in white, stopped working while Ken explained who Miss Collins was.

"I'll never remember all the names," Cyndy told them, laughing. "You'll all have to give me time."

A few moments later Judd said, looking at Ken, "The truck broke down again."

"Oh, no!" Ken sounded exasperated. "What did he have to say *this* time?"

"He's having a look at it," Judd answered.

"Is *he* the Garage owner?' Cyndy asked, interested and worried at the same time. After all, this concerned her.

"Yes," replied Judd.

"The man for whom this pool is being built?"

"Yes."

She turned and gazed at the house with its thatched roof. It was a rambling house, but otherwise of nondescript architecture. A dark-haired girl sat on the veranda.

Ken slapped Judd lightly on the back. "I'll have a chat to him, Judd. In the meantime, everything all right?"

"Everything is okay, yes."

Obviously not affected by the heat, the African men began to chant as they resumed work. Only the blue of their overalls, thought Cyndy, was suggestive of the glittering blue water which would eventually fill the excavation which by then would have been gunited and marble-plastered. Crisp white coping tiles and a wide slasto surround would add more excitement to the finished product.

Tiny beads of perspiration had begun to form on her upper lip. Looking at her, Judd said, in his soft voice, "You want to see it here when we're guniting. By the way," he glanced at Ken, "Max Steele is guniting today."

Cyndy, who had been visualizing a white cast-iron table and chairs and a blue umbrella, with white fringing, on the apron of the completed pool, found herself tensing.

"Well, good luck to him." Ken's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"That will be the pool which is being built for the Escarpment Guest Farm?" Cyndy said. "The one we thought we'd get?"

"That's right." Judd laughed. "It sounds like you know the general set-up, Miss Collins?"

"I'm learning all the time," she answered.

"Is there anything else you would like to do?" Ken asked, looking at her.

She thought for a moment before she said, "What I would like to do probably wouldn't suit you."

"Go ahead and try me. You never know," he grinned.

"I'd love to try out the Cortina - on my own." Her green eyes slanted in the direction of the gold Cortina which Ken had used to drive her to

the pool site. "I'm sure it won't suit you, though. I'm interfering enough with your works as it is."

"As-a matter of fact, I was going to suggest it," Ken told her. "That would suit me very well. It would give me a chance to go to the Garage and find out what's going on about our truck. How long do you expect to be away?" He glanced at his watch.,

"An hour, maybe. Certainly no longer. If that suits you?"

"Fair enough. That suits me very well. I'll use the light truck," he nodded in the direction of the vehicle which was parked nearby, "and if you drive back to the house in, say, an hour's time, I'll be there to drive you back to the hotel. How does that suit you, Miss Collins ? " His voice was teasing.

"That suits me fine. In fact, it's super. Thank you. Are you certain you don't mind?"

"Not at all. It suits me, it's your car, and I'm at your disT posai"

"That is very kind of you." She thanked him again. There was a tight, excited feeling in her chest - because she new just what she was going to do. She was going to spy on Max Steele.

"There's plenty of petrol," Ken was saying. "Take it easy - until you get the reel of the car."

"I'll do that. Shall I take it now?" She sounded surprised.

"Yes, why not? We have the other truck here, as I pointed out a moment ago. I'm not stuck for transport, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that's marvellous." She laughed at him, closing her dark lashes to screen her eyes from the glare of the sun. "Just show me where everything is and then - don't look - and I'll take off."



Her mind was completely made up. She was going to spy on Max Steele. In order to do this she was going to drive back to the hotel and then, after she had disguised herself, she was going to drive to the Escarpment Guest Farm.

Diving an almost new Cortina proved to be nothing short of thrilling. She parked it in the hotel parking ground while she went to her room where she donned a sombrero-type straw hat over a peasant-tied green scarf. Then she added to her disguise by adorning outsize sunglasses. When she had applied fresh lipstick she felt elated - she barely recognised herself.

Once again the Cortina responded to her touch and, still with that dreamlike sensation, because she still couldn't believe that she owned it, she drove to the turn off where a signpost read "To Escarpment Guest Farm" When she had parked the car beneath some peeling blue-gum trees she stepped out and stood looking at the gardens where tanned tourists sat at tables and chairs beneath bright yellow umbrellas.

Then she became aware of the noise the sound of machinery - the throb of which was accompanied by hissing. Thus she was guided to the pool site, and she felt another surge of excitement when she saw the scene of activity which confronted her.

She chose a spot next to a long white wall which was covered with emerald moss. The wall had obviously been part of the layout before the pool was under construction, and Cyndy stood there, watching Max Steele's Berg Pools team in operation.

This then, she told herself, was what her uncle Cliff had been up against. This then was what she was up against, simply by inheriting Blue Champagne Pools. This was the opposition.

She found herself trying to count the men in an endeavour to see whether Max Steele employed more men than Blue Champagne. There was no sign of Max Steele, but then why should there be? According to the information at her disposal everything undertaken by Max Steele ran on oiled wheels.

In its own particular way it was a colourful scene. Instead of blue overalls marked Blue Champagne these men wore red overalls with the words "Berg Pools written across the back. Scattered over the bare tawny earth there were red-handled spades and shovels, white string, rolls of copper wire, red, blue and green wheelbarrows, constantly on the move. To one side of the activity the guniting machine appeared to tremble with heat as it hissed and performed. It alarmed her just to look at it. Some way off there was what she took to be a compressor. She made out the words: Max Steele Plant Hire. Portable Compressor Division.

There was one similarity between both concerns which caused her to smile, and that was the type of headgear worn by the African men. The variety ranged from schoolboy straw bashers, ski-hats, crash-helmets, tweed caps, felt hats, vivid scarves and knotted handkerchiefs. The two white men present wore sun-bleached khaki linen hats in camouflage colours of green and brown.

When Max Steele, clad in sun-faded khaki drill trousers and a blue shirt, came from behind the white wall, she swung round in a panic! and her heart gave a sickening lurch when she saw the look of recognition in his blue eyes.

"Well, well!" His smile was sarcastic and she could see the tiny gold cap glinting on one front tooth. "If it isn't Miss Cyndy Collins herself." He used her name with a flick of contempt. "What is it you want, exactly, because whatever it is, I'm going to make sure you won't find it." He laughed softly.

Her decision had been taken, but she was beaten - and she knew it. "I don't happen to be Miss Cyndy Collins. You're mistaking me for someone else - I'm sorry."

"I don't think so," Max made a knowing face. He came to stand in front of her and she felt at a disadvantage seeing that she had her back to the wall. With him, she thought, I'll always have my back to the wall. When he put one hand out and leaned against the wall, hemming her in, she heard the catch in her breath.

"I should know my own name, I think." She tried to get past him, but he blocked her way with his tall body. Giving him a look of fury from behind the outsize sun-glasses, she said, "Your behaviour is insulting! Now you've had your fun perhaps you'll allow me to get past?"

Work on the swimming-pool went on. What Max Steele was doing to Cyndy Collins went completely unheeded. Her eyes, behind the glasses, were trapped by his blue gaze.

Before she quite realized what was happening Max lifted the sombrero-type hat she was wearing with his free hand and set it on top of the wall and then, very deliberately, he slid the green scarf back from her forehead and that, too, joined the hat on the wall. When her champagne-gold hair cascaded about her cheek, she shook it back and glared up at him. Outrage made it impossible for her to think of a single thing to say.

She caught her breath when he turned her face by holding her chin between his thumb and fingers and then he removed her glasses. She received the impact of his scornful look as his eyes met hers before he allowed them to travel over her hair and face and come to rest on her mouth. "Miss Collins," he said lazily, "who do you think you're kidding?"

When she found her voice and, feeling slightly sick, she said, "I know you have a big name in the guniting world, Mr. Steele, but it just so happens that I'm not impressed." Her hair had begun to blow about her face and was becoming tangled, and she tried to brush it back with her fingers.

"Impressed or not impressed, you wanted to know something, didn't you? Something about what makes a Berg Pool tick, maybe?"

"I'm not concerned with Berg Pools," she said.

"Then what *are* you concerned with?" he asked.

Unable to reply, she stood, almost without breathing, feeling his closeness like a physical shock.

"Do you still want to know?" Max asked, not taking his hand from the wall behind her and, imprisoning her in this embarrassing embrace, he continued to study her with amused pleasure.

Her breathing actually stopped and suddenly she coughed, aware of the closeness of him and the thickness of the gunite- laden air.

His eyes dropped to her mouth again and she knew he was looking at the gold cap on her tooth. Continuing his lazy inspection of her, he said, "Mine was the result of a crack against a bicycle handlebar - and yours? It forms quite a bond between us, don't you think?"

She found her voice to say, "No, I don't. Nothing could form a bond between us."

Once again she tried, and failed, to get past him. She began to shake all over. "I've n-never slapped a man's face before - I have never had cause to - but right now, I would love to slap your insulting face!" she said in a whisper.

"No?" He played his part to the full, staring intently into her green eyes before he dropped his gaze back to her mouth. "I've never forced my kisses on a woman before," he went on callously, "but, unlike you, self-denial has never been one of my virtues."

In the excavation one man struggled to steady a nozzle while, directly behind him, another man struggled to help by holding on to the vibrating hose. The rest of the crew hurried around, pushing wheelbarrows, feeding the cement into the guniting rig and, while the compressor throbbed and trembled in the heat and while the guniting machine shook and shivered and hissed, Cyndy shivered beneath Max Steele's kiss, which was nothing but a calculated insult.

When he took his mouth away she stood staring up at him, staggered by his insult. The fact that she had *responded* to this insult struck her with devastating effect.

"Things get better all the time," he said softly. "You were very responsive."

She stood shock still for a moment, not knowing how to reply to what she knew was the truth, and then, suddenly, she could stand it no longer.

"Get out of my life!" she exclaimed and, lifting her hand, struck Max Steele a stinging blow across one tanned cheek.

She was aware that he had inclined his dark head in a formal but mocking way, before she started to run in the direction of the car park. If Max Steele was angry he hid it well.

As she fumbled with the door of the car she heard him call out, but, ignoring him, she slid on to the seat and tried to fit the key.

"Hold on!"

For a moment she thought he had come after her to apologize. Instead, he came up to the window and dropping her hat and scarf on to the back seat, said, "You've forgotten your camouflage."

She could have wept with anger and humiliation. "Max Steele," she found herself hissing like a gunite machine, "this is just one more - one more - score I hold against you!"

He went on, as if he had not heard her, "You're so like your late uncle."

"Am I?" Her reply came on a choked little breath. "Am I?"

"There is one difference, though."

"Really?"

"Yes - and that's that you're tantalizingly and totally - woman!" For a long moment he went on looking at her, as if they might never meet again, and then his eyes left her face and travelled over the bronze slacks and cream loose-knit top she was wearing.

"Cowboy!" Her green eyes were nothing short of fighting mad. "Why don't you try and get on the movies? You'd be better suited in front of a camera, where you could show off to your heart's content, than bluffing your way behind a guniting machine. You're wasted here!"

Her remark was treated with amusement. "I'll make a note of that. You've probably heard by now, along with all the other things, that I'm very ambitious."

"I have - and you can add my name to that. I'm also very ambitious, and that must come as a bitter blow to Max Steele." Her face was pale now.

"I'd already decided upon that, as a matter of fact. I don't think you're overstating the case. I'm stating facts, by the way, not paying compliments. You're a fraud, into the bargain." He laughed softly.

"Well, you should know," her retort amazed her. "You know what they say - it takes a fraud to know a fraud "

Cyndy tried to start the car and, when nothing happened, she had the feeling that she had overlooked to do something, but she couldn't think what it was. Her eyes moved up to the level of his. "Get out of my way," she said on an angry breath.

"I want to start this car, can't you see that?"

Stooping, he put his hand through the open window and turned the key. "Wouldn't it be simpler if you switched on?" he asked.

"You're upsetting me, don't you understand that?" She was feeling almost hysterical. "What is *behind* all this? "

He slipped his hand into his shirt pocket and brought out her glasses which he tossed carelessly on top of the scarf on the back seat.

"Think about it," he said softly.

When she did drive off she managed to do so with a slither of tyres on gravel, and a glow of satisfaction warmed her humiliation.

## CHAPTER III

THE small Johannesburg flat was hot and stuffy from being closed up while she had been away and Cyndy stood, not knowing where or when to start packing, while she compared the flat with the white houses in the purple-slashed mountains.

Far below, an African street musician played a Chopi piano while a brittle dry wind blew the gold-dust off the surface of surrounding mine-dumps.

Only now that she had seen everything for herself was she fully aware of the enormity of her inheritance. It had come too unexpectedly for her mind to grasp. There were matters to finalize, regarding her work with an advertising firm, several accounts to pay, bits and pieces she wanted to sell and bits and pieces she wanted to keep. All these matters had to be sorted out and decided upon. In her own way she had accumulated possessions and clothes and there was the problem of packing and arranging transport.

Friends and relatives had to be contacted. There was Athol. While there was nothing serious between herself and Athol he was, nevertheless, the man of the moment in her life, but she knew that she was not going to miss him. In fact, with his mean little ways about money he had begun to get on her nerves recently. There was, she thought, a vast difference between being cautious and sensible about money and being just plain mean.

For the next four days she ran about the flat on slim tanned legs^ while she sorted and packed and packed and sorted and answered her scarlet telephone and made numerous calls herself. Friends dropped in and, blinking against her weariness, Cyndy had to curb her impatience while, at the back of her mind, there was this urgency to deal with her affairs. She had set herself a time limit, after all.



The flat began to look bare and then, quite suddenly, it was bare. Yellow sunshine streamed through uncurtained windows and, far below, the pavements appeared veined and hot.

It was on a hot day that, long-legged in a yellow and white mini-dress, she finally left for the Berg, but the interior of the luxurious bus was cool. With her champagne-gold hair drawn back from her golden face she sat with closed eyes, exhausted after all that had happened to lead up to this moment. Beneath her usual tan, which was the result of week-end hours beside the Vaal River, she looked, and felt, pale. She felt shocked from fatigue and was experiencing an abandoned kind of hope about ever being able to run a swimming-pool business.

It seemed ironical, she thought, that she should be on her way to a complete new way of life where the only person she felt she knew - and then only slightly - was Ken Harris. She had, in fact, just said goodbye to a life she had built up for herself in Johannesburg where, at least, there had been an accumulation of friends and a small smattering of relatives.

Haven't you been alone enough? she asked herself, behind closed lids. You should have sold Blue Champagne Pools, sold the house, kept the golden Cortina, maybe ... Her heart skipped a beat as she thought of the Cortina awaiting her delight and she shuddered slightly. It was all too much to take in. Suddenly, right there in the bus, she wanted to weep for the man who had been her uncle Cliff - for the man she had not known.

Ken Harris had been in touch with her on the telephone and the arrangement was that she would leave the bus at the Kathlamba Hotel and he would meet her there.

She opened her green eyes. This was not the first time she had felt depressed, she thought, but put it down to reaction.

Ken Harris was at the hotel waiting. "How are you?" he asked, leading her to one side of the hotel steps. They stood next to the stone wall with the pink geraniums crawling over it.

"Fine." She blinked her lashes and smiled. There was a nervous edge to her voice. "A little tired, maybe. For a person who lived alone I seem to have collected a lot of stuff. I've been on the move for days." She took a shaky breath. "It's marvellous to be back, though/" she said. And, quite suddenly, it was.

"You look different," he said.

"Do I?" She felt it necessary not to meet his gaze. "I expect it's my hair. I drag it back like this sometimes."

Ken's look was admiring. "That's not exactly the way I would describe it. It doesn't look exactly dragged to me." She laughed softly and politely.

With the sun gleaming on her skin she stood by as he saw to her luggage which had been unloaded now. She was grateful to him in her moment of extreme tiredness. Turning to her, he asked, "Is this all?"

"Don't you believe it. There's more arriving later." She smiled and ran the tip of her tongue across her lips. "I'm going to be embarrassed when that lot arrives by motor transport - there's so much of it."

He held the door of his Fiat open for her and Cyndy got in, drawing long legs in after her.

Her thoughts flew to the long white house which she would be seeing again in almost a matter of minutes and she felt all nervous again.

"How are Judd and Norah Dixon?" she asked.

"Fine." Ken turned slightly to smile at her. "Norah has everything ready for your arrival."

"Oh, that's sweet," she murmured, and a small smile hovered about her lips. "It - it's wonderful to have somebody preparing something for me," she laughed lightly, but a little sadly. "I'm so used to preparing things for myself." There was a Tittle pause and then she added, "I'll have to get used to Norah."

It had been decided that Judd Dixon was to stay on with Blue Champagne Pools and everything was to continue in the same manner - with Norah acting as housekeeper. In fact, the only difference lay in the fact that Cliff Collins would no longer be there. Mr. Sebel, the solicitor, had suggested that Cyndy "feel her way" - allowing things to ride, and she had only been too thankful to adhere to this advice.

"Well," she slanted a look at Ken, "and how is the pool game? Still playing it cool?" She laughed and then bit her lip.

"Still playing it real cool," Ken replied cheerfully. "The pool you saw under construction is now completed. We're hoping to get the Kathlamba Hotel contract. Actually, they asked for a price and we put one in. They've having a larger, more up-to-date pool built - upper deck the lot!"

After a silence she asked, in a stiff little voice, "Will Max Steele be giving them a price?"

"Uh-huh. You'll have to get used to the idea that there's always Max Steele at the back of everything we do."

Expelling an impatient breath, she said, "Damn and blast him!" and, completely surprised, Ken turned to her and laughed outright. Smiling, Cyndy told him, "You have a bit of a fishwife on your hands."

"Anyway," Ken went on, "there happens to be another pool coming up. This one is for a chap who's just built himself a super mountain chalet."

"Good. Have we got this one?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. As a matter of fact we'll be starting to excavate any day now. This one should interest you. It's being built for a chap who happens to be very eccentric and he's stipulated that he wants martini seats built into the sides of the pool, underwater psychedelic lighting, underwater speakers and an upper and lower deck. He likes having sundowners in his pool and giving lush pool parties. He also likes listening to music under water. What's more important, he also has more money than sense."

"But that would appear to be to our advantage," Cyndy said, feeling highly satisfied at this piece of news. "That's very good, Ken."

Fine golden powder blew off the dust road and clung to the car.

"If he likes all these things he'll want poolside furniture and pool plants. I can see that I'll have to get moving," she added, her gaze taking in the mountains which appeared savagely beautiful beneath the harsh sun.

"By the way," Ken said, after a moment, "I've already moved into the rondavel in the garden."

A shaft of panic went through Cyndy. She had been hoping not to run into snags, and already this seemed like a snag for the simple reason that it was embarrassing. "Are you sure you're going to be comfortable?" she asked. "I mean, you've always been in the house, along with Judd and Norah."

"They, of course, have their own private entrance," Ken replied.

"Yes, I know." Her voice was tense.

"Anyway, my moving out will leave the house free for any guests you might want to have, from time to time," Ken said.

This remark made her feel slightly more at ease. She had not thought of it from that angle. After all, it was her house and she might well want to have people with her from time to time.

Long, low and white, the house waited for her. From behind spraying water the garden shrank from the hot sun. Miraculously, the flowers held their own, fighting off the assault of the heat.

Inside the house, however, there were no flowers, and it was obvious that this was not Norah Dixon's line. Cyndy was pleased to notice this because it was something she adored doing - arranging flowers - and now she was certain that she would be able to do so without hurting Norah's feelings. She had spent a lot of money on flowers in Johannesburg. It was a thrilling thought to know that whenever she wanted fresh flowers, she only had to go out in to the garden and pick them at random.

It had been plain from the start that Cliff Collins had been a man of extremely good taste.

All the rooms were sited for sun and outlook and, where the mountains rose in all directions, there were magnificent views from the huge windows. The overhang of the roof cut off, or allowed, sun where and when necessary and according to the time of the year.

The lounge was nothing short of exciting - a cool white shell of a room, with concentrated colour in the form of a handwoven off-white Portuguese rug which had a tremendous sunflower design splashed in the centre of it. The flower was in stimulating shades of orange, red, purple, mauve and brown, and this rug was spread over a pure wool off-white fitted carpet. Modular Italian furniture in white and mustard

pure wool was exactly what Cyndy would have chosen for herself. So was the attractive lamp with its white base and deep mauve shade.

The study was a book-lined area with built-in cupboards which had white louvred doors. Here again, colour was housed in a white shell. Colour in the form of the bright jackets of the books, the scarlet chair, with a brilliant peacock-blue cushion on it, the off-white rug, patterned at the edges in "swimming- pool" blue and a much darker blue. It was strange, she found herself thinking, how her thoughts revolved around pools - even to colours.

In Cyndy's bedroom Norah said, "I've shown you just about everything, I think. I've tried to think of everything. I don't know ... " she broke off, shrugging, "I never thought to ask, but somehow I thought you'd be happier in this room. It used to be a guest-room, but I took the liberty of turning your uncle Cliff's bedroom into a guest-room - not that he died in this house, but still it seemed nicer."

"That was very thoughtful of you, Norah," Cyndy replied. "Thank you. I'm just going to love this room."

"Another thing," Norah intended to get matters sorted out between them, "Judd and me always eat in our part of the house, which we look upon as our little flat. I used to serve your uncle and Ken in the dining-room and then when they'd finished, I used to dish our dinner up in our flat, this has sort of kept a home going for us, if you know what I mean, but I don't know how you're going to feel about eating with Ken on your own. I mean, a young girl alone, eating with a strange fellow. It doesn't seem right, somehow."

Cyndy, who was fairly "jet-set" in these matters, replied, "Whatever you *used* to do in the past suits me now. I don't mind eating with Ken. I'm used to people, you know ..." Helplessly, she shrugged and hoisted one slim shoulder. "What I'm trying to say, Norah, is that I'm used to eating with young men on my own."

"In that case," Norah smiled, obviously relieved, "I think we'll just carry on as we've always done, but if there's anything to worry you, please do come to me so that we can sort it out together. One thing I did insist on - so did Judd, for that matter - and that was moving Ken out into the rondavel. It wouldn't have been right, otherwise, and I'm sure you would be the first to agree?"

"Most certainly," Cyndy answered. So it had been Norah and Judd who had worked this particular snag out for her? She felt a rush of warmth towards them. "While I'm used to having the odd meal with young men, on my own," she smiled impudently, "I'm not used to sharing a house with them."

"That's exactly what I thought," Norah was expansive now. "You can always judge a person, you know. Well, that's that, then." She took a breath. "And I also happen to know Ken Harris," she said. "Not that he isn't a nice enough fellow - but I know him with the girls. In his own quiet way he's quite a lad, when he gets the chance, and I wasn't going to give him the chance, so far as you were concerned."

Smiling, Cyndy said, "Well, thank you. I'm glad everything is sorted out, Norah. It was something which was bothering me quite a lot, as it so happened." She crossed over to the windows and looked out at the mountains. "It's fantastic here," she murmured. "The mountains, the lawns, the pool... look at it there, sparkling like diamonds in the sun. At night I suppose it looks like a bowl of stars. And the flowers - they're magnificent. Who is responsible for the flowers, Norah?"

"Judd, mostly. He likes to potter around during the weekends. I like to see things growing, but never think to put any in the vases. Your uncle, he was the artistic one, but I suppose you can see from everything in the house. He liked huge bowls of flowers all over the place. Judd always says the more you pick them the more they grow. Your uncle chose all this new furniture and stuff himself - just recently, too. He quite fancied himself as an artist, as a matter of fact.

I suppose he was one, really, when you come to work it out. Did anyone show you his studio when you were here the last time ? "

Cyndy's senses quickened. "No." Thinking of an extra room for her poolside furniture and plants, she added, "I didn't know he had a studio."

"Ken must have forgotten to show you, when you were here before. Your uncle always referred to it as the pavilion, but then, as I said, he was very arty - even though he was so masculine and rough-and-ready. I suppose it does resemble a pavilion after all's said and done. Anyway, you settle in now and I'll rustle up a nice pot of tea and something to eat. Have a quick bath or a shower, if you like. All that dust! I don't know how we put up with the roads. Still, we can't have everything, that's my motto."

After Norah left the room Cyndy stood for several seconds, pressing her fingers to her cheekbones, which had started to ache, all of a sudden. She decided to take a shower and then relaxed beneath it, for much longer than she intended. She began to unwind slowly, and when she had changed into pale peach slacks and a floral top she wandered about her house, touching this and touching that, while her tea stood on the tray which Norah had placed on a small table near the windows.

Norah, Cyndy was discovering all the time, was one of those plump little women who was happiest in the kitchen where she prepared meals and baked. This would be almost a ritual with her. There was no kitchen in the Dixons' flat and so everything was prepared in the one and only kitchen. Cyndy wondered whether the older woman would be put out if she baked now and then or made one of her special fluffy desserts.

Ken Harris was walking across the lawn on his way to his rondavel and, sliding back the glass doors, Cyndy called, "Hi, Ken!"



He turned and she went out to him, the lawn pressing into her feet between the straps of her gold sandals. This alone, she found herself thinking, was a marvellous sensation. No more hot, stained pavements for her.

"Ken," she said, "do please feel free to use the lounge - well, the *house* - whenever you feel inclined. I mean, it's all here to be used. I'd hate to think of you being cooped up in the rondavel when there happens to be a perfectly good lounge to sit and read in, a study to write in, a kitchen to hustle up snacks in. What I'm trying to say is, don't mind me." This was the least she could do, she thought.

"Thanks." Ken gave her one of his slightly crooked smiles.

During dinner, which they had together, with Norah serving them, the conversation was all pool talk. Ken seemed just as anxious to talk about Blue Champagne Pools as she was herself.

It had been some day, she told herself later, as she walked in the scented garden.

On all sides, the mountains which were slashed with deep purple shadows stood out against the darkening violet sky which was veiled in places with crimson and burning gold. The swimming-pool was a gleaming dark blue shape set into the lawn.

When she heard Ken's step she turned. "Do you know," she said, "I forgot to have a look at the studio. Norah told me about it. She said my uncle called it his pavilion. Do you think I could turn it into a little shop for the plants and things? I'd love to fee it."

"I'll show you, in that case. There are a lot of canvases lying about. Some of them are complete, some aren't. You'll have to decide what to do about them."

They crossed the lawn and she saw that the pavilion was next to Ken's rondavel.

The inside of the pavilion came as a pleasant surprise. It was spacious with sliding doors of generous proportions and a separate entrance led to a small cloakroom which meant that watering the plants would be an easy matter. Immediately Cyndy could see the pavilion housing the furniture, which she intended having made to her own design, and the potted plants. What was more, the pavilion was linked to what had been her uncle's bedroom by means of a paved and covered pathway and there was also a compact patio on one side. This was, she thought, more space to cope with the larger type of potted plant.

"This is utterly fabulous," she said, showing her excitement. "I can picture the shop right here. This is where we'll be able to show people our range, small as it might be, of poolside furniture and potted plants. The way I've been figuring things out in my mind is that people who are wanting to have pools built for their chalets, farms or houses must come to see you and Judd here. Right?"

"Right." Ken gave her a smile. "Usually, anyway."

"Well then, the shop will be on hand. I noticed, in the study, all the plans and so on stacked on the shelves. Who is responsible for the plans, by the way? The plans I happen to have seen bore - his signature."

"Cliff did the plans, yes, but I also do them."

"I didn't delve too much," she said. A feeling of elation came over her. "I can hardly wait to get to work - and not just in the office, either. I'll do anything. You've got to believe that. I'll even *dig*. I want Blue Champagne Pools to go from strength to strength."

"Hear, hear," he said.

"And we must get that Kathlamba contract. How do we go about securing that one, Ken?" She shot him an impish look. "What strings do we pull? You see, I'm being a perfectly callous business-woman. I'm determined that Max Steele shan't get that contract. Not if I can help it, anyway."

"We'll just have to keep showing up at the hotel - just to remind them about Blue Champagne," Ken said. "It always pays to keep in with Byron and Kiko Page because, quite apart from anything else, they're great fun."

"Are they?" She was interested to hear about the Pages. "In what way?"

"In a way of hospitality. Speaking for myself, I've been on many an organized walk, and there's always a standing invitation to take in a movie there, providing I put something in the plate, of course. Then there's usually a dance, once a week - sometimes twice a week, depending on the season, and there again, provided I make my own arrangements about a girl, I'm welcome. So you see...?"

"You do have a - a regular girl, though, I'm sure?" Her voice was cautious.

"Not what you call regular. There is a girl in Newcastle, but," he shrugged, "I'm not serious about her. It's on the point of fizzling out."

"Oh, I see." Cyndy was nevertheless relieved to hear that there was a girl behind the scenes, at least. "Well," she added, "she is very welcome to come here. There's a spare room, as you know - two spare rooms, actually - now that you've moved out."

He did not seem particularly interested. "Thanks," he said. "We'll see."

"To get back to business," she said, and he laughed.

"You're quite a girl," he told her. "Max Steele will have to watch out, I can see that."

"Don't remind me about him. But to get back to us. The way I see it, the pool shouldn't just remain an excavated concrete-lined cavity filled with water."

"No? What should it be, then?" Ken's voice was mocking.

"It ought to be a decorative extension of a house, or a mountain chalet - guest farm, hotel - or whatever you like. It's here that I feel, anyway, that one should really let oneself go - at the poolside. In Johannesburg I noticed some Brazilian hammocks. I want to buy some of these. Picture these Brazilian hammocks, with gay cushions and fabulous chairs all in an area together."

"I'm trying to," he grinned.

Later, he saw her back to the house and then he went to his rondavel and she was left alone in her new home with its cool white walls and concentration of colour. It was the kind of interior that any *young* man, or woman, might have planned. This made Cyndy wonder whether her uncle had been thinking of her when refurnishing, because it was quite obvious that the entire house had been decorated quite recently. The rooms still bore the smell of new carpeting and furnishings. The pure wool upholstery of the modular Italian furniture still felt rough to the touch - hardly used.

Cyndy ran her fingers over everything, awed that this was her home. Then she went through to the kitchen which, although almost clinical, was nevertheless inviting with black lacquered split cane blinds, earthenware bowls, filled with fruit and luxuriantly overflowing pot-plants. On a wide white terrazzo counter, beneath which attractive stools were placed, there were two ornately carved silver candlesticks with fat white candles in them - which had been *used*,

what was more. She hated to see candles which had not even been lit. Obviously, Cliff Collins had a mind for detail. This kitchen was not a figment of Noarh's imagination, that was certain. Her uncle had even left his hallmark in the kitchen.

She poured herself a glass of milk, marvelling at the thick cream on the top of the bottle, and she found some home-made biscuits. Then she carried them on a tray to the study where, to reassure herself, she sat looking at pool plans and any literature she could find about pools. "Dreaming of a pool?" she read. "The pressures of daily living in such a fast growing society as ours makes the hours that one can devote to relaxation very valuable. The installation of a private swimming-pool is high on the list of desirables. The ideal swimming-pool should look as if it has always been there - not merely a carelessly added afterthought. Decks, surrounds and other features should be architecturally planned to blend with the garden and house, bringing an additional atmosphere."

After a while she took some books through to the lounge and settled herself on the luxurious sofa. When she felt her eyes beginning to droop she finally gave up and closed them and saw, in her mind, the mood of the mountains, a sunny pool, sculptured into its surround to become an integral part of a garden landscape. This was the kind of setting which artists, journalists and poets attempted to capture. She could almost feel the water, turned to glitter by the sun, dazzling her eyes, making brilliant patterns on her beautifully suntanned skin, because - she had made up her mind in advance about this - she was going to pamper herself with all the golden sun there was to offer. Although she was already tanned, she intended to add more gilt to her skin.

When she opened her eyes she could see that beyond the windows a copper moon was hanging over the mountains, casting an almost phosphorescent glow on their changing moods, and, used to being alone, she did not feel loneliness.

## CHAPTER IV

BEFORE Ken and Judd left for the pool site in the morning Cyndy said, "Ken, you simply must fill me in. Where do I start? What do I do?"

"What would you like to do?" He looked amused, she thought with some resentment.

"I want to work. I want to get started, in other words, I can't just sit around the house all day, can I?" She smiled to take the sting out of her words.

Ken thought for a moment and then he said, "Would you care to begin by driving into Lindeque to pay some accounts? You know the way, by now."

"Yes, I would. That sounds fine."

"As a matter of fact," he told her, "I'd looked out one or two accounts. Come through to the study and I'll show you what's what."

In the study, where the sun was streaming across the off- white carpet and highlighting the blue-and-white area rug and scarlet chair with the peacock-blue cushion, she asked, "Where do I get the money to pay them?" She felt a fool. "Do I go to the bank or something? Does there happen to be a bank in Lindeque?"

After he had explained matters to her he said, "Don't look so worried. You'll soon get into the swim of things." He gave her a smile. "By the way, these here will need your signature now."

Persistently, she wait back to the subject of poolside furniture. "Before you go, is there a wrought-iron place - you know, a - a workshop of some sort, where I could arrange to have some patio

furniture made to my own design? If not, I'll have to make a plan about going to a larger town, near Durban."

"There's Bill Gantry's place," Ken told her. "You can't miss it. It's in the main street, at the far end, going out of Lindeque. Go in and have a chat to him. You'll probably find that he can turn out the things you want."

After the two men had gone Cyndy had her breakfast at the kitchen counter with the ornate candlesticks on it. The kitchen was absolutely sun-drenched and Norah had pulled back the black lacquered slit-cane blinds which, although they pushed back the glare, did not hide the view of trees and the distant mountains which were very hazy.

"Will you be back to lunch?" Norah asked.

"I think so." Cyndy tapped her front teeth with a thumbnail. "I wonder, though? I want to find out about wrought-iron work and plants. There's a farm I noticed on the way here in the bus. They actually advertised plants at the gates. Is there a place I could have lunch at Lindeque?"

As she spoke a vision of Lindeque came to her mind. A big white church dominated the corner as one entered the small town and another white church dominated the corner as one left it. Trees grew on the grass verges. Only two short streets were macadamised. The rest of the streets were wide and dusty. Apart from a straggle of small shops and two garages there was little else, although she had noticed, with a view to future pools, that there were a number of attractive new houses on the outskirts of the town. There were also a number of old homesteads - the peculiarity of exterior design making them outstanding, if nothing else, although some of them were gracious. Further back were the farms, tucked away behind rolling lands and mountains.

"You could possibly eat at that little place next to the first garage in the main street," Norah said. "It depends what you want/though. If it's a hot pie and gravy - well, this place would serve your purpose. It's clean, I can say that much for it. Then there's another place and that one is next to the bakery - you can't miss the bakery - the smell alone, enough to make your mouth water. Then there's the hotel - the Berg View. You could get a full meal there,"

"There seems to be a fair choice. I'll lunch in Lindeque, then," Cyndy answered.

A little tense and unsure of herself, she drove the Cortina along the dusty, corrugated road, which was still blotted by early morning shadows. Her tension mounted as she attended to business matters with people she did not know and in connection with matters not familiar to her. Given time, however, she knew that she would be able to cope with the running of Blue Champagne Pools.

By the time she began to think about lunch the sun was hot. She had decided to eat at the hotel and to visit the wrought-iron workshop first. This entailed getting into the Cortina, which she had parked outside the shops in the main street, and driving to the far end of Lindeque.

There was no one in the shop, although the doors were open. Huge wrought-iron gates, which were locked, divided the shop from the workshop and Cyndy stood behind the gates, trying to attract attention. She could hear the clanging of metal, as it was being beaten, but it was too gloomy for her to be able to make out anything. Feeling slightly embarrassed, she had the sensation that she was being looked at, so she turned away and gave her attention to a display of garden tables and chairs. These were of a very nondescript design - not like the sketches she had brought along with her. A number of window guards were stacked against one wall and there was a hideous kind of stand which she surmised was for a goldfish



tank. Judging by the magnificent wrought-iron gates, however, she felt that her intricately designed patio chairs would present no problem to Bill Gantry.

She went to peer again through the black scrolls of the gates, into the gloom beyond where she could now make out the wrought-iron work which was in the process of being turned out - work of all description, leaning at various angles against the walls. Because she could hear male voices she called out, "Hello, there!"

The voices stopped, although the clanging continued. At the far end of the gloomy L-shaped hall a shape came into view. "Hello," Cyndy said. "I'm sorry, but there's nobody here in the shop and I'm rather anxious to speak to Mr. Gantry."

She froze when she saw that the vague shape was Max Steele.

"I can't let you in," he was saying. "It's locked, and besides, if you look on *your* side you'll see a notice which says Nobody to enter this Workshop. As a matter of fact, I happen to be trespassing."

"Have you any idea when Mr. Gantry will be back?" she asked stiffly.

"In a matter of minutes, I should imagine."

"I'll wait, in that case." She turned from the gates and her thoughts were a confused muddle. Apart from not desiring to see Max Steele, after what had taken place at the Escarpment Guest Farm, she did not want Max Steele to hear about her poolside furniture ideas.

With an indifference she did not feel she went to stand on the step at the entrance to the shop where the blaze of the sun, streaming in, caused her to narrow her eyes after the darkness of the workshop.

When Max Steele came through a door on the other side of the room, Cyndy bit her lip and remained in the entrance to the shop.

"Won't you take a seat?" Max's voice was casual.

"No, thank you." She wished she could control her breathing.

"I'll even dust one for you," he said, standing next to a desk which was littered with papers which had been pierced untidily on to long nails. He pulled out a chair.

"I said no, thank you. I don't want to sit down."

"Well, suit yourself." She knew that he was hoisting his chin and one corner of his mouth which could pass for a smile - if you went for that sort of thing.

"That is precisely what I intend doing." There was open hatred in the tone of her voice.

At that moment Bill Gantry came up the steps and she moved to one side to allow him into the shop, trying, as she did so, not to stare at the enormous size of him. "Ah-ha!" he said, removing a ridiculously small green felt hat from his head, "I'm keep all the customers waiting, eh? Too bad. Er, Max boy - about that steel reinforcing - now don't get mad.."

"I'm not getting mad," Max nodded in Cyndy's attention. "Attend to me later. My business can wait."

"So can mine wait," Cyndy cut in quickly. "In fact, I would prefer it that way. Do go ahead with Mr. Steele."

"Miss Collins has been waiting long enough, and I'm not in a hurry." Something in Max's voice signified that he was mocking her. A wave of temper washed over Cyndy. Looking at Bill Gantry, she said, "Mr. Steele was here first."

"Let me settle this," the huge man said. "Ladies first - that, surely, is the law and order of nature, after all's said and done. Now what can I do for you, miss ? "

"No, I don't think it's the law and order of nature at all. Not in a case like this. Business is business, after all's said and done - that's more appropriate. First come, first served. Mr. Steele was here first. There is, I think, a matter of reinforced steel to settle. I can wait. I'll wait on the doorstep." She glanced at Max and their eyes clung together - his amused, hers furious.

"Miss Collins," he said, "may I remind you, I happen to be a gentleman."

"That happens to be a matter of opinion," she retorted, and gave him her back. She opened her bag and took out the sketches, then looked up. "Mr. Gantry," her voice was low and very confidential. She cleared her throat. "I have here one or two drawings which I've done."

"Uh-huh," he said. "Drawings of what?"

Cyndy moistened her dry lips. "I've designed a chair and a circular table to go with the chair."

"One chair to go with one table?" Bill Gantry cut in. "No. There'll be several chairs, all the same, four, to be precise, to go with one table." She found that she wanted to lose her temper.

"Oh, I was going to say ..." Bill laughed. His chins laughed along with him. "Sounded a bit of an extravagance to me."

Cyndy swallowed and tried to smile. "Yes - well ..." She broke off and coughed a dry, nervous little cough. Harassed now, she said, "Will you have a look at my sketches? Tell me what you think of them and whether you can do an order for me."

There was silence in the dusty shop while Bill Gantry studied the sketches. Finally he said, "You have put a lot of work into these, eh?" Glancing up, he laughed. His laugh made her designs appear nonsensical.

"Well, judging by the gates there," she gesticulated with a hand which she knew to be shaking, "that should present no problem to you, should it?"

"No problem, no. But lots of scroll-work to keep old Bill Gantry tied up for a couple of weeks, if not more."

"The point is, Mr. Gantry, can you do them?"

He thought for a moment. "How many?"

"Twelve chairs and - er - let me see, three tables - to see how it goes to - to begin with."

"That's an awful lot of wrought-iron chairs and tables. You must have a big veranda? Or do you intend opening up your own shop? That would be a shot in the eye for Bill Gantry, hey?"

"Opening up a shop could be a good idea," Max said, "but dangerous,"

"Ah, I'm not that dangerous," Bill turned, laughing.

"That's not what I meant," Max said.

"All good ideas are dangerous," Cyndy cut in, "but in any case, what I intend doing with this furniture has nothing to do with you."

Suddenly she found herself thinking of her air-cooled office in Johannesburg, the big pale-grey desk on the burnt-orange shaggy

carpet, the one huge shaggy chrysanthemum on the desk --What was she doing here ?

"Mr. Gantry," she said quickly, "I'll come back another time, when you happen to be alone and we can discuss this matter in private." She shot a look of fury in Max's direction. She held out her hand for the drawings which were, after all, her own and, so far as she was concerned, Top Secret. "If you don't mind, I'll have my sketches."

"No, no, that's not necessary," said Bill Gantry. "Leave these papers with me and I'll look them over and give you a price. Are you on the phone? I'll tell you what.. " he rubbed stubby fingers over his chins, "I'll have everything ready for you when you come back. How's that?"

Before there was anything Cyndy could do about it Bill Gantry was holding out the sketches to Max. "A lot fancier than my things in the window over there, eh? But I tell you mine sell well, for all that. People round here don't go in for a lot of fiddle-faddle."

Max barely glanced at the drawings. He lifted those thick blunt lashes. "You want to watch out," he said, looking at Cyndy, "somebody might pinch your ideas."

"Ja, and that could happen, I suppose," Bill laughed.

"I can take care of myself - in most things, anyway." Cyndy reached for the drawings. "I have been caught unawares before, of course."

"You'd better do some thinking," Max's eyes and his voice continued to mock her, "you could be caught unawares again."

"Somehow I don't think so." She put the drawings into her bag and snapped the bag shut.

"This time we're talking at cross-purposes, as it so happens," said Max. For a moment their eyes met in brief conflict. Then Max said, "Miss Collins is now head of Blue Champagne Pools, Bill, in case you don't know."

"You know, I thought the name rang a bell. You mean Cliff's outfit? That so, eh?" Bill's eyes went over Cyndy.

"Now, there's a thing. Pleased to meet you, Miss Collins." He held out his hand and Cyndy put her own into it.

"I'll come back later," she said. "There are all sorts of things I'd like to discuss with you, and for this one needs time, and quite obviously you haven't all that much time right now, have you?"

"Ah, come on," Bill laughed. "You're making old Max here feel bad."

"Feeling bad never occurred to me," Max said easily.

"I didn't somehow think that Mr. Steele would feel bad." Cyndy's voice was hard. "I'll tell you what, Mr. Gantry, I'll go and have lunch and then I'll come back and see you. By that time you should be free, surely?"

Outside, the distant mountains were purple-slashed and magnificent. Even from this distance one was aware of their vastness.

The Berg View Hotel beckoned her with its black, half- timbered facade and she decided to make arrangements for lunch.

There were floral displays in the foyer - dry mountain grasses, Cape proteas and heather. Cyndy crossed the ruby- red carpet, which smelled of moth repellent, and at the reception desk she asked, "Could I have lunch here, please? Table for one."

"Certainly." The woman behind the desk smiled. "I'll arrange a table for you. Will you take a seat? The head waiter will call you. Would you like to sit here or in the adjoining lounge?"

"In the lounge, I think," Cyndy replied, thinking that it would be more private in there away from the foyer.

The lounge, with its floral sofas and chairs, was deserted, and directly she was seated, the bar steward came forward. She gave him a smile. "No, thank you. I'm having lunch presently."

When Max Steele and Bill Gantry walked into the lounge, a moment later, she felt a mixture of rage and helplessness.

She hoped that they would not notice her but, typical men, they both did.

"What? Sitting here ail alone?" Bill asked, breathing from the exertion of getting to the hotel. "We can't have that, eh Max ? What do you say ? "

"Please don't give it another thought," Cyndy said quickly, and not looking at Max. "I'm going in to lunch presently."

"We can't have a young lady - and a very beautiful young lady at that - lunching on her own," said Bill. "You must join us."

"I've already booked a table - for one." Cyndy's voice was taut. "Thank you all the same."

"That can soon be remedied, never fear," Bill told her. "Hold on, I'll be back in a moment. I'll soon fix that table for one, don't worry."

Frustrated, Cyndy watched Bill's massive shape take off in the direction of the foyer.

The bar steward approached the table again. "What will you have to drink?" Max glanced at Cyndy.

"Nothing, thank you."

Giving his attention to the steward Max said, "Nothing for the lady, and two Castle Lagers, please."

Cyndy watched him with a seething resentment. Short of making some sort of scene in the lounge there was nothing much she could do.

"The old build-up," Max explained.

"I don't get this." Her green eyes were hostile.

"Well, let me fill you in. Collins versus Steele." He looked at her with what might have been respect.

"You'd better do some thinking yourself," she told him, "The name Steele means nothing to me - not even *reinforced Steele*."

Bill Gantry and the beers arrived at the same time. "Where's Miss Collins' drink?" he asked, tossing his ridiculous hat on to the floor beside his chair.

"I'm not drinking." Her voice was frankly impatient now. "Nonsense, of course you're drinking. Come on, what's it to be?"

"Miss Collins doesn't want to drink," Max cut in, "unless Miss Collins has changed her mind." Glancing at Cyndy, he said, "Has she?"

"If she hasn't changed her mind," said Bill, snapping his fingers, "then Bill Gantry is going to change it for her. Steward, bring the lady a



nice shandy. A shandy will cool you off," he looked at Cyndy. "You seem to be hot and bothered."

"I feel hot and bothered!" Cyndy snapped. Of all the things to have happened to her, she thought bitterly.

"So," Bill almost grunted as he settled himself, "you're taking over Cliff's pool business, eh? Well, there's a thing."

"I've already taken over, Mr. Gantry." Cyndy's tone was elaborately precise, strictly for Max's benefit.

"What can a beautiful young girl like you possibly know about building pools?" Bill laughed, and because he was very cramped in the chair, his stomach laughed along with him. However, his laughter was not offensive. Embarrassed, Cyndy tried to keep her eyes away from his stomach. Suddenly she felt sorry for this huge man. She tried to be pleasant, for his sake.

"I'm interested in the market management side," she said. She gave Bill a smile. "That's my baby."

Her drink arrived and she was grateful for something to do with her hands. As she lifted the tall slender glass, frosting on the outside, she almost knew what was coming. It came.

"Aren't you aiming just a little high?" Max asked.

"No, I don't think so. I have a diploma. I happen to have done very well in advertising, as a matter of fact. Does that satisfy you?" She thought of her air-cool office again - the office which she had left to take up this work in a man's world - and she felt suddenly sick.

Her eyes took in Max's mocking smile. It was the kind of smile that-could play havoc with a woman's temper. For an unguarded moment she allowed her eyes to brood on his mouth, remembering....

"And now I'll tell you something," he was saying, "which just might interest you. Market management, and advertising, happen to be two of my babies." As he spoke Cyndy was aware of the satisfaction easing its way into his voice and of the concerned concentration on the part of Bill Gantry.

"Ah!" exclaimed Bill, "I can see I've started up a bit of ill-feeling here, eh? The Collins and the Steeles are back where they left off, is that it?"

"No, not at all," Max said, still in that mocking voice.

"This fellow Steele has irons in all the fires under the sun," said Bill. "The only thing that matters to him is that he coins in a lot of money - and fast, eh, Max?"

"That's stretching it a bit," Max answered. "Let's just say that I happen to be an adventurous type. I also like to be happy. I try to do the things which make me happy." Glancing at Cyndy, his eyes went to her mouth. "Bill, old boy, you have one big fault, and that is you go around making sharp estimates about people. Sometimes your estimates don't quite add up. I'm not really interested in money."

"Oh, no?" Cyndy remarked cuttingly.

When the meal, which proved to be nothing short of an ordeal, so far as Cyndy was concerned, was over Bill said cheerfully, "Well now, I'll meet you back at the shop, Miss Collins. How's that? Then we can get down to business. No, tell you what, let Max drive you back. He has to drive me back, anyway, seeing that he drove me here in the first place. You leave your car parked where it is and then Max will drive you back afterwards, when you and I have finished our affairs,"

"That does away with the whole object of speaking to you in private," said Cyndy, filled with despair now at ever being able to work with Bill Gantry.

"Nonsense," said Bill. "We have to go up that way, anyway."

Ready to call the whole thing off, she said, "I'll use my own car." She was finding it an effort to control her temper.

"No, you won't." Bill took her arm. "Come on. I know what I'm doing. Max won't get in the way of a little talk."

They went outside to Max's car and Bill Gantry, labouring now under the strain of his weight and an enormous lunch, said, "I'll climb into the back. You sit in front with Max."

"But there's more - more *leg* room in the front," Cyndy protested. "You'll be more comfortable there, Mr. Gantry."

"I'm too fat to sit in the front," Bill said flatly, and so with a helpless resentment Cyndy yielded herself to the company of the two men. As she sat next to Max on the way to the shop her grape-green eyes danced with temper and her usually attractive mouth was set in a tight line.

After they had entered the shop Bill said, "Hold it, I've forgotten something in the car. I'll be back in a moment. You go through to the workshop, Max, and see how things are progressing there."

When Bill had gone Max said, "Let me warn you - there could be a rogue about. Better think twice before you let Bill Gantry make that furniture for you."

"Allow me to manage my own affairs!" she snapped back.

Bill came lumbering into the shop. "Okay," he said, "now let's have a look at those sketches."

Some time later he asked, "Do they have to be upholstered?"

"Yes, they do. That's why I allowed for those grooves at the back, where the cushions will slide into them."

"Well, who the devil is going to upholster them?"

"I intend having cushions made to fit," Cyndy reasoned, trying to keep calm. "I'll have to *find* somebody - or try and do it myself."

"If they were mine," he said, "I'd scrap those stupid grooves and do without cushions at the back. Have them on the seats by all means."

"I want cushions at the back," she argued. "I want the chairs made to my design so that I can have foam cushions fitted. These will be covered by a material of my own choice." She rubbed a hand across her forehead. Max had not left the shop and was idly paging through a magazine which he had picked up from the Uttered desk. Cyndy shot him a wild look.

"But you'll hide all that intricate scrollwork that's going to cause me such a headache," Bill went on stubbornly. "If I made them for myself, I'd scrap the cushions, that's for sure."

"Yes, but they aren't for you, Mr. Gantry," she argued back, reasonably, she hoped. Suddenly she exploded. "This was to be a private discussion. You *did* agree to a private discussion, didn't you? Or was I under some kind of misapprehension?"

"You don't have to worry about Max," Bill assured her.

Max went on flicking through the magazine pages.

"You'll want to see a couple before I go ahead, if I understand women at all," said Bill. "Right?"

"No, that won't be necessary," Cyndy replied. "If you make them as I've drawn them that will be fine."

"Now, about delivery." Bill was businesslike, all of a sudden.

"I was thinking about that," she replied. "Shall I get Ken - Ken Harris, my - my - Ken Harris to pick them up in our small truck, or do you prefer to deliver yourself? Anything suits me."

"I'll deliver them. Don't you worry about delivery, Miss Collins. Just as soon as they're ready I'll have them sent out to Cliff's house for you."

"Would you mind telephoning first? You see, I'm not always going to be at home."

"In other words," Max spoke up, "Miss Collins intends spending most of her time at the pool sites. I've noticed that she makes a big issue of being on the site." He gave her a grin. "As a matter of fact, that's where we more or less met - at a pool site. Tell me," he went on, "had you thought of getting Bill to make some of those poolside trolleys on big fat tyres?"

"Had *you* ? " she asked.

"No," he laughed. "But I can rise to a joke on the odd occasion."

On the way back in Max's car she sat, saying nothing, feeling exhausted and furious. She stared at the purple and bronze mountains. The mountains around her home.

"What were we talking about?" Max asked suddenly.

"Were we talking?"

"You have a heady assortment of schemes up your pretty little sleeve, haven't you?" he asked, while her green eyes continued to blaze.

"Look," she turned to face him, "I'm quite aware of the fact that you've been doing your very best to make fun of me, but whatever I do is of no concern to you."

In a way, she found herself thinking, it was almost exciting having a rival like Max Steele. It would keep her on her toes - if nothing else. She would go on fighting where her uncle left off. That was all there was to it.

She could see her gold Cortina now, parked on the opposite side to the hotel. She drew a long, shaky, thankful breath. "The only thing that matters to you is that you smash everybody who gets in your way, isn't it?" she said, in a bitter little voice. "I can read you like a book."

"Can you?" He turned. "I don't think so."

"This is where you can drop me off," she said, her head already on the door-handle.

"Let me give you one piece of advice," he said. "Don't be too adventurous over poolside furniture, and all the trimmings to go with so-called 'leisure living.' This could be your downfall. It's another sideline altogether. Believe it or not, that's why I hung around at Bill Gantry's place - so that you wouldn't become too involved over this - or with him. Not right away, anyhow. Until you sort things out for yourself."

"Like you, I intend having more than one iron in the fire - more than one sideline," she told him. "Nothing you can say or do will put me off."

"Well, that's up to you. You'll be the one to have to learn to live with the death of Blue Champagne Pools."

"And you'd love that, wouldn't you?" Her voice was bitter.

## CHAPTER V

DRIVING back home Cyndy was able to think, with reasonable calm, about her visit to Lindeque and subsequent meeting up with Max Steele.

Every crevice in the Berg showed up, slashed with amethyst shadows and looking superb against the blue taffeta sky. She swung the car into the drive and, set in the lawn, the pool shimmered like blue champagne. Home, she thought, feeling a sudden new energy, a sudden new joy.

Before going into the house she stood, for a moment, gazing at the swimming-pool. The filter was causing rippling movements which tossed trapped colours and shadows from one end of the pool to the other. Then, drawing deep breaths of pure mountain air into her tensed-up lungs, she went up the shallow paved steps to the veranda. With its massive corner windows, the glass reaching from floor to ceiling, the lounge greeted her. Once again she thrilled to the sight of the off-white pure wool carpet, off-white and mustard upholstered modular Italian furniture and the hand-woven Portuguese rug which made such an exciting splash of colour, at the far end of the room. Beyond the glass - the garden, tall trees and, in the distance, those magnificent mountains of which she never tired.

What had she expected after her ordeal with Max Steele and Bill Gantry? Had she expected all these things to have flown? Crossing the room, she went to stand on the Portuguese rug and looked down at the colours woven in it - scarlet, wine and shaded purple in the form of a huge exotic flower. Her shoulders lifted as she drew a long breath and dropped as she let the breath out in a long sigh, releasing all the tension of the day.

Ken had arrived and she could see him walking, in his quick energetic manner, to his rondavel. Behind her, Norah said, "I've made tea."

She turned. "Thank you, Norah. I'm simply longing for a cup of tea. I didn't realise just how much until you mentioned it."

"Did you have a successful day?" Norah asked and, putting Max Steele from her mind, Cyndy replied, "Hugely successful. I had lunch at the Berg View Hotel, by the way. It really was very good. I'm glad you recommended it."

Ken asked her the same question during dinner. "Did you have a good day?"

"Well ... "

Her thoughts flew to the way in which Max's blue eyes kept crossing her own. Waiting until Norah, who was serving them, had gone back to the kitchen, she said, "I bumped into Max Steele." She made a face. "The very last person I wanted to see! He was at that wrought-iron place seeing about reinforced steel. Needless to say, he was all ears. He listened to everything I had to say and I couldn't shake him off. I don't want him to know what we're doing. In my state I came straight home without calling at that farm, on the way, to make enquiries about buying plants for my shop."

"Did you manage to pay all the accounts?" Ken asked.

"Yes, I did - but, Ken, what do you think about - him? Isn't he just too maddening for words?"

Noah came into the room carrying a tray with a lemon meringue tart on it. "Mmmmm!" Cyndy brought her eyes up to Norah. "One of my favourite desserts, Norah. You spoil us, doesn't she, Ken?" It did not enter her mind that it was *her* money now that was paying for all these things.



As in the case of all the rooms in the house there was a view from the dining-room. The pool, limpid now because the filter had been set to switch off from dusk to dawn, reflected the mountain sky.

"Forget about Max," said Ken. "How about coming to a dance at the Kathlamba tonight? They have a chap from the Fruit Barrow Discotheque there. Sometimes they do this - they have a disc jockey, complete with records, of course, from one of the top Durban discotheques."

Thinking about the drive along ribbons of dust and gravel she said, "But isn't it too far?"

"What's distance? We think nothing of distance in this part of the world." He gave her a smile and she found herself thinking how good-looking he was in his compact, tanned and fair-haired way.

"Will I have to change?" She glanced down at her candy-checked gingham dress. Her hair was taken back from her face in a demure chignon, spilling one or two delightful tendrils. "I had a bath and changed, when I got back from Lindeque, but what do they wear at this sort of thing? "

Ken's eyes flickered over her face and over the gingham dress. "You'll do very nicely. Anything goes - that's the scene on a week night."

Laughing a little, because she suddenly felt excited, Cyndy asked, "When do we leave?"

"As soon as we've finished dinner."

Norah came back into the room and set the tray, with the coffee things on it, down, and when she had gone Cyndy said in a hushed voice, "You know, I'll just never get used to this. I'm so used to doing things for myself. I'd much rather be waiting on myself - on us - right now."

She shrugged helplessly. "I'm completely at a loss as to how I should cope. I know this was how my uncle planned things - that Norah and Judd have their own little flat here and that Judd continues to work for Blue Champagne while Norah goes on in the same way, acting as housekeeper, but it seems all wrong to me. It almost seems like inheriting Judd and Norah along with everything else. It doesn't make sense, somehow."

"Don't you want them here ? " Ken asked.

"Of course I want them here." Her eyes went wide with - annoyance. "I'm very fond of them. It's just that I can't get used to the set-up."

"Well, let me put your mind at rest, once and for all. This arrangement suits the Dixons very well. In return for what Norah does they get free accommodation, and into the bargain, Judd knocks out a decent wage. Don't forget he retired from a big construction concern a few years back. They could just be living on Judd's pension. If you start showing Norah that you feel uncomfortable they'll end up feeling the same way."

She was silent for a moment, turning this over in her mind, and then she said, "Yes, I see now. I suppose I'll get used to it."

The horizon seemed to be closing in on them now as the mountains darkened against the sky. Melting ribbons of colour were completely melting away and the sky changing to a kind of luminous green. Between mountain peaks there was a huge star which seemed to be hanging on an invisible chain. It made Cyndy think of a lantern in a harem.

On the drive to the hotel she commented, "This can't be very good for the car, or the tyres - all these small stones, dust and corrugations."

"You'll get used to our dirt roads in time," Ken told her, just as a stone hit beneath the car somewhere. "See what I mean?"

She laughed. "Yes, I do. Tell me, what happens when it rains?"

"Oh, you get used to that as well. We get by, in other words."

"Do you ever stick in the mud ?"

"Sometimes. You learn how to cope with sticking in the mud just as you learn to cope with Norah and Judd and - Mad Steele."

"Oh - Mad Steele! Don't remind me of him," she sighed.

"I'm glad you don't like him." Ken's voice was soft. Cyndy found herself tensing.

As he parked his Fiat in the hotel gardens she said, "Just look at all those cars! The hotel appears to be completely booked up, which strikes me as odd, somehow."

"Why odd?" He switched off the engine.

"Well, odd because I always associate the Berg with snow on the peaks. I always think of it as a winter resort. During the summer and the heat there must be some terrific thunderstorms."

"We get the odd freak fall of snow in the summer. Don't forget, people come here to get away from the hustle and bustle, from humidity - from smog."

Thinking of Johannesburg, with its hot veined pavements and skyscrapers which still clung to the sun, even after the sun had gone, she said, -"Yes, I suppose so. I still can't believe I'm here for good - summer and winter."

It was exciting going up the steps which lead to the long veranda and she felt young and aware of her slim healthy body, somehow. Pink geraniums crawled down the stone wall at the side of the steps and as

one entered the foyer of the Kathlamba one was instantly aware of the converted carriage lamps, pictures and antique furniture on Persian rugs which had been scattered on the quarry-tiled floor. Cyndy found herself wondering how those beautiful rugs stood up to so many feet, tramping in and out of the hotel, month in and month out. It all seemed to reveal the generosity of Byron and Kiko Page who, quite obviously, were not just "out to grab" as the saying went.

Beyond the foyer one caught a glimpse, through glass doors, of both the main lounge and the dining-room, and here again one was aware of handsome lamps and floral decorations. Everything about the Kathlamba Hotel was an indication that the comfort of guests was of prime importance.

Kiko Page was behind the reception desk and tall, red- haired and beautifully spoken, she glanced up. "Hello there. Come to dance? I seem to know your face." She gave Cyndy a smile.

"I was here a short time ago," Cyndy said, before Ken made the introductions.

"Oh, yes, I remember now. I didn't know about the pool business then, of course. How exciting. And you mean to carry on? You don't intend to give it up?"

"No, I've fallen in love with everything. Business will go on, as usual. I'm very fortunate, actually, because everybody is staying on." Cyndy turned and gave Ken a special smile. "It's only through Ken and Judd that I'm able to say 'business as usual'."

The other girl present glanced up from her desk at the far end of the reception office and Cyndy knew that this was Avril Goddard. There seemed to be a watchfulness about her. This, of course, was natural. If Avril Goddard was interested in Max Steele then it went without saying that she was interested in pool business.

"Tell me," Kiko looked at Ken, "how does it feel to have such a glamorous boss, or shouldn't I ask?" She had a way of saying things which could not possibly cause embarrassment or resentment, Cyndy thought.

"I can just see myself telling you in front of her," Ken answered, grinning.

"Have you met your opposition yet?" Kiko asked, still in that same drawling voice.

"I have - yes - if you can call him that." Cyndy was aware that the dark-haired Avril was listening to their conversation and trying to listen to the person at the other end of the receiver, which she had just picked up, at the same time.

"Ah," Kiko turned, "here comes Lord Byron. Darling, where on earth have you been?" With lazy brown eyes she watched her husband as he came through the door at the end of the reception office. "Come and meet Cyndy Collins. Cyndy spent a short time with us recently. She's taking over - or rather, has taken over - Blue Champagne Pools."

"Good for you," Byron said easily. "What's friend Max going to think of this lot?" He laughed softly and looked at Ken: "Will the feud continue, do you think?"

"I'm hoping so," Ken grinned.

Throughout their good-natured teasing Cyndy was aware of Avril Goddard, who was obviously doing her best to catch everything that was being said while she carried on her telephone conversation.

A moment later Byron said, "By the way, Cyndy Collins, I'm going to put your name down for a walk to the Gorge, one of these days. I'll be

in touch with you and I don't intend to take no for an answer." He made his voice aggressive on purpose.

"I'm no walker," Cyndy laughed. "How far is the Gorge from here, by the way?"

"You'll be away most of the day," the tall and handsome Byron told her.

One of the heavy glass doors was shoved open and Max Steele walked into the foyer and, immediately, there was a small confused moment.

"I've just told this sweet young thing I'm going to put her name down for a walk to the Gorge one of these fine days," Byron told him. "People are too lazy nowadays."

"What about you?" Max asked, turning the tables. "Are you going?"

"What, me?" Byron laughed outright. "You must be kidding!"

"When did you last walk to the Gorge ? " Ken asked.

"Years ago," Kiko laughed. "It was years ago."

Byron's grin was sheepish. "You're exaggerating."

"No, I'm not exaggerating."

Behind the counter Avril Goddard replaced the receiver and, looking at Max, she mouthed the word, "Hello." Turning to look at Avril, Kiko said cheerfully, "Avril, one of these days we're going to pack you off to the Gorge. It's about time you did another walk, darling."

Tension was just beginning to ease its way *into* Cyndy when Ken took her by the arm. "Okay, let us know when the great day is to be."

"Does that mean you'll be walking too?" Kiko asked. "I didn't mention you because it will be a weekday and you're usually working."

"You'll have to count me out," Ken said, "but I'll see that Cyndy turns up." Smiling at Cyndy, he added, "I think we should go and find ourselves a table, what do you say? Before they involve you in any more endurance tests."

"Is it as bad as that?" she laughed, feeling Max's eyes on her.

When they were seated at a table for two Ken immediately signalled to the bar steward. A moment later, he said, "Did you sense the tension back there? Avril Goddard's ears are always flapping when it comes to pool talk and the mention of the name Steele."

"Yes, I did. I don't understand why the Pages don't just choose one pool builder and be finished with it. It's embarrassing to know we've given them a price for their new pool and that Max Steele has done the same thing."

When he asked her to dance she decided not to talk pool and did her best to fit in with the holiday mood. It was always so difficult for her to believe that this wasn't just some passing holiday for her.

Max and Avril Goddard had found a table and were sitting with people they obviously knew and Cyndy tried not to follow them with her eyes as they danced. Once Max's eyes crossed hers and, later, she noticed, with some satisfaction, that he was watchful as she and Ken sat laughing and talking across their small table.

Some time later Byron came towards them, and before he reached the table, he said, "Hey, come and have a drink, you two, in the pub. And that's an order!" Turning, he gave them a wave of his hand and a grin as he made his way back to the African Drum.

"That's one order I don't mind carrying out," Ken grinned.

"He's very bossy, isn't he?" Cyndy laughed.

"This inviting of people to the pub for a drink is a Byron and Kiko Page speciality," he told her, as he came round to her chair. "You'll find as you go on that they're more than just a trifle hospitable."

As usual the ladies' bar was full of people talking more than they were drinking, for this was a social place.

Without preliminaries Byron, who was behind the bar deftly dispensing drinks, said, "Come and join the elite."

Kiko, who had changed into black trousers, impeccably straight, and a pink tunic, was already there. "Come and meet a few Berg-ites, in other words," she called out, looking at Cyndy.

Max and Avril Goddard were already there and Cyndy was aware of them all the time Kiko was introducing her to people.

Behind the long curve of counter and bar stools, covered in leopardskin, the mountains - ancient and silent - were cut off by darkness, but everybody knew they were there. Somehow, Cyndy thought, you were always conscious of those silent mountains and a wave of goodwill settled over her. She was part of the Berg now. This was her stamping ground. These were her friends.

On one side of her Ken was talking to Kiko while, on the other side, Max sat listening to Avril who was talking to him in a low husky voice. Cyndy wondered how it was that she suddenly had Max Steele on the stool next to her own.

When Byron starting involving Avril in conversation Max asked, very softly, "Well, Miss Collins, how is the poolside furniture going? Heard from our friend Bill Gantry yet?"



Aware of the long length of him beside her and aware that, under the circumstances, there was nothing she could do about Max except to keep up some sort of pretence in front of people, she said, "It's too soon to have heard anything." Her voice was stiff as she intended it should be. Max knew, she thought with resentment, that short of causing embarrassment, there was nothing else she could do but to put on some kind of act.

"That remark sounded very cautious," he commented.

"It was meant to sound cautious. Anyway, Bill Gantry has other work to keep him occupied - yours, for instance. I refer, of course, to your reinforced steel."

There was something about a dimly lit ladies' bar that cast a completely different light on a man, she found herself thinking. Even Max Steele appeared quite fascinating.

When Byron said, in a loud voice, "Well, let's drink to Blue Champagne Pools - and to Cyndy Collins," she bit her lip and then murmured, "Thank you."

"And may the best man win." Byron's mocking eyes slipped along to Max who, lifting his glass, said, "You speak as though there's some kind of race to be won."

"Well," Avril drawled, "isn't there?"

Before she could stop herself Cyndy said, "Let's get the score straight. Blue Champagne Pools can stand up to any pool by another name."

There was a lot of good-natured laughter punctuated by "Hear, hear." While it went on, Cyndy let her anger cool off. She found she was shaking.

Eventually Byron's little party started to break up. Cyndy fumed all the way back in the car, but willed herself not to talk pools to Ken. On no account must Max Steele be considered as a threat to her. By constantly referring to him, she told herself, he would become just this.

The following morning, while Ken and Judd were at the new pool site, Cyndy sat on the red-cushioned chair in the book-lined study where the sun streamed across the carpet. For a long time she sat there in the sun, studying plans and specification notes, although from time to time her mind wandered away from the papers on the desk to admire the room. As usual, she was constantly aware of her environment.

She read, "Construction - gunite concrete reinforced. Surround - coping tiles, terrazzo. Glass mosaic, blue and white. Decking, slasto. Finish, marble plaster. Steps, three. Filter, underwater lights --" As she read she tried to picture the complete result - a sunny, sparkling pool.

Some time later she turned to accounts and correspondence and struggled to make sense out of everything she read.

Ken came home, without Judd, and had lunch with her, then afterwards she asked him to take her back to the pool site. While she felt a pool site was hardly a place for a woman she also felt that, in view of the circumstances, she should know what went on in the pool game. On the other hand, she did not want Ken Harris to feel that she was trying to assert her authority, in matters of which she had no knowledge, merely because she happened to have inherited Blue Champagne Pools.

"Ken," she said, in the small truck which he was using, "I hope you didn't mind taking me back with you? "

"Mind?" She knew that he was being evasive on purpose.

"Yes. I *am* interested, though. I'm thinking of ideas, all the time. Ideas which might help to build up the business."

There was a small pause before he added, "What kind of ideas?"

"Well, I was reading about mosaic this morning, and it triggered off an idea - is there any reason why we can't design a mural for Blue Champagne Pools? You know, something to go at the bottom of our pools. The way I see it is that we must make an ordinary pool look like a millionaire's pool."

"What kind of mural did you have in mind?" he asked, while she watched his sun-bronzed hands on the vibrating wheel. There were the usual gravel and small stone noises, as these spurted from beneath the tyres.

"Like a mermaid, for instance," she told him. "Not necessarily a mermaid, but something like that. Fishes, maybe or water lilies." Suddenly, she caught his arm. "I know, like a champagne goblet, for instance. Ken, this is it! Don't you see? That must be our hallmark on the bottom of all our pools - a great mosaic mural in the form of a huge champagne goblet."

"Huge ? But these things cost money," Ken pointed out.

"Yes, but you've got to spend money in order to make money. Right?"

"It's your money." He turned to grin at her.

"That's not the point." Her reply sounded on the huffy side.

Some moments later she asked, "Does he - you know -

Max Steele have anything like this - a mosaic mural at the bottom of a pool?"

"Not that I know of. I haven't really looked."

"Whatever Max Steele does," Cyndy went on, "we must do better. We must make it our business always to be one step ahead of him. A mosaic goblet makes a lot of sense to me. It's a wonderful advertisement. Don't forget, a lot of entertaining revolves around the poolside, so this champagne goblet thing will not only look super but it will be a form of advertising. People won't forget it, and they won't forget the name Blue Champagne Pools."

"We can think along those lines - certainly," Ken said cautiously.

"You said we'd started making our own coping tiles, didn't you?"

"In a small way - yes."

"Well, I was thinking ... couldn't we make our own mosaics?"

Ken laughed outright and she said quickly, "Well, I've got to learn, haven't I?" She sounded huffy again. "I don't know what we can do and what we can't do. That's for me to find out. Anyway, I've made a list of the plants I want to buy for the shop - agapanthus, hibiscus, cannas, pink mainly, ivy geraniums and those rubber leaf trees - to go in pots, of course, to keep them stunted and trimmed --"

There was a hot Berg wind blowing right across the pool site where the men were laying the slasto surround. Ken and Cyndy got out of the truck and as the wind caught at her hair she shook it back, impatient with herself for not having thought to tie it back. She didn't want to look all that feminine in a man's world;

As it was, Judd and the African men glanced up when they saw her.

Still unnerved by her inheritance, she said, "I've just come along to have a look. This is going to be a terrific pool, isn't it? I remember you said that this man has money."

Her grape-green eyes went to the pool seats which were built into the side of the pool, almost like shallow steps and she tried to visualise them as they would be when the pool had been marble-plastered and filled with sparkling water. "You mean they actually sit in there and drink Martinis?" she said. "In the water? Is that why they're called Martini seats?" She tried to hold her hair still. "Didn't you say there's going to be underwater lighting ? All different colours ? "

"The pool has been wired for underwater lighting," said Ken, tilting his wide straw hat to the back of his head and squinting against the sun. "I told you about the speakers, of course. This guy likes to listen to music under water. Some people have more money than they know what to do with."

"And that's all to our advantage," she laughed. She turned round to look at the mountain chalet - a wood and glass structure on a steeply sloping site. "I'm thrilled we got this pool. Tell me, have you been inside his chalet? It looks fantastic."

"I had to go there, with Judd, to sign up the contract for the pool," Ken told her.

"What's it like?" she asked, her thoughts busy on the chalet owned by Max Steele.

"Well, it's almost like living at tree-top level, the way he's designed it. Very big, very arty - to go with the man and the pool."

There was a small silence and then she said, "Is Max Steele's mountain chalet anything like this one?" Her voice had tightened without her realising it.

"I suppose so. I've never been inside. I was never invited." He shot her a knowing grin.

Cyndy looked around for a place to sit. "Don't let me hold you bad:," she said. "I forgot to ask - but is this pool to be heated? Imagine swimming in the bright sunshine when the mountain tops are covered in snow. That could happen. I suppose?"

"You have a wonderful imagination," Ken told her, "but surprisingly, no. It isn't going to be a heated pool. He forgot to come up with that one."

"I'm disappointed," she laughed, "but in any case, you should have suggested it, Ken. I'm surprised at you." She spoke the words lightly, so as not to offend him, but she meant what she said. "We could do that, couldn't we? We could build heated pools?"

"Yes, I guess so. If we had to."

She sat watching the men at work, her thoughts brooding on pool heating. Really, she thought excitedly, there was no end to it. No end to the kind of things they could do. One could go on and on building up Blue Champagne Pools. She must start to go to work on ideas for her brochure soon. "Leisure Living" - that was to be the theme behind everything.

The men looked hot, she thought. Most of the African men appeared to have brought along tea in flasks or bottles and food. Judd and Ken, however, had nothing in the line of refreshment. The sky looked white, bleached by heat.

During a short break she got up and went over to where Judd was sitting. "Judd," she said, "you didn't come home to lunch and you don't appear to have brought anything with you - either to drink or eat."

"Ach, I'm not bothered." Judd looked up from his place on a boulder. "I'll have something when I get home."

"Let me take the light truck and drive into Lindeque for some Cokes," she offered. "It's not far from here. Please - I'd love to."

"Nonsense," both men said together, and laughed.

"No, the way I see it, it's not nonsense at all. I'm going to buy you some Cokes. Besides, it will give me a chance to learn how to handle the truck. After all, I should know. A time could crop' up when I would have to use it, and it's not that big. Not like the other one. I can't see myself driving that."

"Okay." Ken sounded dubious, however. "Take it easy, though. We want it - and you, of course - back in one piece."

"We also want it - and you, of course," Jud's quiet voice was mocking, "back before four-thirty." He glanced at his watch. "That's when we happen to knock off and that's when we have to get these fellows back."

"I promise you I will," she answered cheerfully. "Ken, come and show me the gears."

As she drove very cautiously in the direction of Lindeque she felt a complete sense of freedom synonymous with solitude and vastness. She brought the truck to a shuddering stop outside the garage and adjoining tea-room, on the outskirts of Lindeque, and opening the door jumped lightly out of the truck. For a moment she stood stretching herself, aware of the fact that she must have been tense

behind the wheel. Her face was surrounded by a wild tangle of champagne-gold hair.

As she walked in the direction of the tea-room the sunlight seemed to be bouncing between her feet. The intense heat was enough to make the senses reel, she thought, lifting her eyes to look at the mountains which rimmed Lindeque.

It was then that she noticed Max Steele, who was having petrol put into his car, and she caught her breath when she saw him walk towards her. Instantly aware of the disorder of her hair, she caught it with both hands and scooped it back from her face, holding it behind her head while she stood waiting on Max to join her. "Well --" his blue eyes mocked her.

"That's a big bus for a small girl to be driving on her own."

"Hardly a small girl," she said coldly.

"Not so big either - long legs, of course." His eyes came back to her face.

"I'm not exactly useless." She went on holding her hair behind her head.

"I can well believe it," he said. "As I see things you're going to fulfil a definite need to Blue Champagne. You're beautiful yet you're doing important work, without actually having the required qualifications." He glanced at the truck. "You get around with style and distinction...."

"And I keep meeting up with a certain playboy," she said. "Why don't you finish the sentence ? "

"Tell me," he said, "what brings you to town?"



"Seeing that you happen to be so interested, I've come to buy Cokes."

"Let me buy you one."

"I said Cokes, not Coke. I'm here to buy Cokes for the men. They're at the pool site and this wind is riddled with heat. They're putting down slasto, so you can imagine how hot they must feel."

She released her hair which immediately began blowing about her face. She shook it back irritably, not wanting him to see her like this.

"Poor chaps," commented Max. "Coke is a bit of a comedown. Pity we can't hustle up some blue champagne for them. What it is to have a woman about the site, though!" He laughed, and a slow anger began to burn away inside her.

She decided to ignore him and began to walk away. "Let me help you," he said, beginning to walk with her.

"I can manage very well myself, thank you." It dawned upon her suddenly that she did not have a basket.

"Don't get on your high horse, Cyndy," he said, using her name with an ease which angered her even more. "You don't have anything to put them in."

"I can have them put into a cardboard carton."

"Well, I'll carry the cardboard carton to the truck for you. Tut, tut, a beautiful girl like you driving a truck!"

"I don't need help, I told you. You don't need to follow me around."

"In any case," he patted the pockets of his khaki slacks, "I have to buy cigarettes." His voice was very reasonable. Cyndy had never seen him with a cigarette in his hand. She hated him.

When they were in the shop she could not remember how many men-there were back at the site and stood, for a flustered moment, trying to work it out. How ridiculous, she thought; she did not even know how many men she employed.

"Eight," she said. "No, make it - make it - er - twelve, I think." -

"I think what it amounts to is that Miss Collins is not quite sure," Max said, and she turned her back on him.

It was when it was time to pay for the Cokes that she went hot and then cold before her mind went a complete blank. "I'm afraid," she said, in a small voice, "I've forgotten to bring my purse along with me. You'll have to take them all back. I'm sorry."

She felt a gust of rage against Ken and Judd for not checking up on whether she had money or not. Because she had been going to a pool site she had not thought it necessary to take a bag along with her.

Although she still had her back to Max Steele, she was aware that he was watching her with that dark intensely blue gaze of his which betrayed nothing and yet everything of what he was thinking.

The man behind the counter was about to try and work out a solution to this state of affairs when Max said, "Allow me."

Cyndy swung round. "It's not necessary for you to come into this."

"Look, do we have to argue about it?" he asked, and before she could do anything about it, he had paid for the Cokes.

"Now," he said, "let's get this lot to the truck for you so that you can be back on the job before four-thirty." He gave her a taunting look.

At the truck she stood seething, watching him as he put the cardboard carton into the back of the vehicle.

"I'll let you have the money back as soon as possible," she told him in a stiff voice.

"Forget it," he said easily. "I have."

Cyndy climbed into the truck, feeling a fool as she did so. When the truck did not start she swore very softly and Max threw back his head and laughed, so she swore again - louder this time.

"Don't get excited," he grinned. "Just take it easy. Remember to switch on this time."

"Get out of my life!" She gave him a glance which was full of the hatred she was feeling. "And don't hassle me, Mr.

Steele, like you hassled my uncle."

"Do you think it was all one-sided?" He was still smiling, but his eyes were hard. "All me trying to hassle Cliff? Didn't it perhaps occur to you that we were constantly hassling each other? But no, it wouldn't occur to you. Not while you have Ken Harris to give you his version of the story."

"Keep Ken Harris out of this!" she snapped.

"I should like to - very much," he answered softly. "I don't particularly want him around - and you can work that one out for yourself."

## CHAPTER VI

Two days later Cyndy said, "Ken, I have to take something to Max Steele. How do I find his chalet ? "

"You mean you want to go there?" There was a look of curiosity about his expression. "You want to take this - this - whatever-it-is to Max's chalet?"

"Yes. I guess that's the only way to return something."

"Is it anything I could see to for you?" She sensed hostility in him.

"No. I want to return this myself. It's nothing, really. Don't look so perturbed. He - you see, I had occasion to borrow something from him, that's all. So," she shrugged her shoulders, "I want to return it. So far as I was concerned it was an unfortunate happening, but I was glad of his help at the time."

"Well, you can't miss his place. You've seen the notice board to the Escarpment Guest Farm? Well, you take that road and, just before you get to the gates leading to the farm, you'll see another notice reading: Max Steele. Berg Pools. There's your turn-off."

"I wonder what would be the best time to try and find him at home?" she asked, hating what she had to do, but determined to do it.

"Towards late afternoon, most probably. You could phone first, if you wanted to," Ken said, and when he had finished speaking the room seemed full of silence, for no particular reason.

"I think I'll just turn up," she decided, after a moment. "I'll take a chance."

There was going to be a mysterious sunset, she thought towards the end of the day. As she dressed she watched the sky from the

windows. The mountains seemed to claw at the sky and the shadows, which were wedged in between the deep crevices, appeared almost purple.

Slipping a bracelet of brilliant massed beads on her wrist, she stood looking down at it. She had almost felt like returning the money wearing her old jeans, but, determined to put up a good front, she had dressed carefully. The way she looked she should have felt very glamorous, but in fact she felt very depressed.

By the time she reached Max's chalet the sky was being plumed with scarlet and pink cloud. She parked the car and got out, then stood looking at the chalet, which was built on sturdy and pure lines. Stone pylons seemed a part of the environment. The site was secluded, so there was glass on every side of the chalet, which created a feeling of space and freedom. If Max had been responsible for the design and the landscaping he had respected the beauty and the dramatic ruggedness of the setting, she thought.

While she was walking in the direction of the chalet Max came out to the kind of deck which clung to the side of the building. Looking down at her, he called out, "Hello there. Am I seeing things?"

Cyndy tilted her head to look at him. "If I'm a thing, then yes, you are."

She waited until he came out of the chalet. "You get around on your own, don't you?" He glanced at the golden Cortina. "What, no truck this time?"

Ignoring the taunt, she said, "Getting around on my own is nothing new to me. I've nearly always been on my own. It's just a case of me - alone - in a different setting, that's all." She made a tiny sound like the clearing of her throat. "I've brought your money," she said abruptly.

"Money?" For a moment he looked puzzled, but she knew him well enough to realise that this was an act.

"Yes, your money. For the Cokes."

"You could have said the Cokes were on the house," he said.

"I don't see why they should have been on the house." She opened her bag. "That," she said, "is the correct amount, I think."

Giving her one of his half-smiles, he took the money from her and slipped it into his olive-green shirt pocket. She noticed that his cravat was burgundy.

"Correct?" she asked.

Without having counted it he said, "Quite correct."

As she turned to leave he said, "Come in and let me get you a drink. There's a bit of a party going on back there."

"Party?" Her green eyes widened as she looked in the direction of the chalet. For a moment she doubted him and then she became aware of music and the muted tones of people talking. And yet... her car stood by itself in the drive.

"Down there," Max was saying, sensing her thoughts about this, "there's a small parking bay. However, leave your car here in the meantime."

She was tempted to ask, "What's the occasion of the party? What are you celebrating - anything special?"

After a moment he said, "It's my birthday."

Her lashes flickered several times as, for a moment, she felt a sense of panic. She wondered whether she should congratulate him, but in view of everything, she said, "I see."

When he took her arm she stiffened. "And so," Max said, "I think a drink is indicated."

"I don't think... ." Cyndy started to say, and then, because her curiosity got the better of her, she allowed him to lead her in the direction of the chalet. They went through a door at ground level, and up a stone staircase which came out to the deck. "What do you call this?" she asked. "A veranda - or a deck?"

"It was given the name of deck on the blueprint. It extends around three sides of the chalet," he told her.

The voice noises and music were louder now and Cyndy felt hesitant about going into the chalet. To pass the time she stood and gazed out at the dusk which was slipping over everything now, softening the outline of the mountains which were beginning to look like great humps of charcoal against an amber-pink sky.

"I suppose," she said, "you sit here and gaze at the stars at nights as they hang out there over the Berg like huge brassy lanterns." She turned to look at him.

"Uh-huh. Often. And all by myself, too. At least you didn't have to sit and admire the sunrises and sunsets on your own."

"What do you mean by that ?" Angrily she blinked at him.

"Well, there's Ken Harris to share your life with."

"Yes, and there also happens to be Judd Dixon and Norah Dixon." After a moment she asked, "Have you ever been there -to the house-my place?"

"Yes. Quite a pad you have there." He gave her a grin.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a pad," she said. "Would that have been before - or after?"

"Before or after - what?" he asked.

"Before the ill-feeling which existed between my uncle and yourself."

"Let's get this straight, once and for all. Any ill-feeling was strictly on the part of your uncle."

"That's not what you said the other day."

"What did I say?"

"You said, if I remember correctly, 'do you think it was all one-sided? Didn't it, perhaps, occur to you that we were trying - er - each to hassle the other?' Something like that, anyway."

"Sssh, let's not talk about the dead." Max's voice was teasing again.

"Let me fix you a drink instead."

There was a slight lift-up in conversation, as they entered the vast living-room which was all glass, stonework and wood, while people looked up in mild curiosity, and then the murmur began afain - growing in volume.

Avril Goddard was standing, drink in hand, talking to a group of people and, when she saw Max, she left the party and made her way, through clusters of people standing talking, towards him. Her dark eyes went to Cyndy and then back to Max's face. "Where did you get to?" she asked. "One moment you were there and the next you were gone. That was very rude of you, darling." She slanted her eyes in Cyndy's direction. "I - er - didn't expect the opposition to be present. Still, I suppose it was very sporting of her to turn up, wasn't it?"



Cyndy had the sudden feeling that Max had overlooked to tell her something and then Avril said, "Because, of course, Max is celebrating the Kathlamba Hotel pool contract."

"Max is celebrating his birthday," Max said quietly, and did not bat an eyelid.

While he went to fetch the drink Avril said, "If you came, hoping to find Max alone, it must have been a disappointment."

"I came on business - personal business," Cyndy explained in a small, cold voice.

"Well, it won't be easy to talk business, personal or otherwise, in this racket, will it?"

"I've already done that - and, to put your mind at rest, quite frankly I'm in a hurry to get back before it gets dark," said Cyndy.

Avril's eyes went in the direction of the glass panels, which separated the room from the deck. "In that case, I guess you'll have to leave soon, won't you? Once the sun starts going it doesn't take all that long, and the sun's gone."

At that point in the conversation Max came back, carrying a small round tray with three drinks upon it and a plate of savouries.

"I've brought you a fresh drink," he said, looking at Avril. "Let me do a change over for you."

"Thank you," she said. "You always think of everything, darling."

He handed Cyndy a drink and passed the plate of savouries to the two girls.

Avril settled on one elegant slim hip, hunching it up, almost, like a person hunches one shoulder. "You know, Max," she said, speaking as if Cyndy was out of sight, "the more I see of your chalet, the more I think Jeremy Gunhill never designed a more successful one. It's almost like living in a pavilion, because it conveys that marvellous feeling of space and freedom, as well as harmony with the environment." She tilted her head back. "You've told me this dozens of times, I know, but how high is this ceiling?"

When he had told her she said, "And all that wood up there - all those wooden braces, and things -- You know, I always think it resembles a huge umbrella - like the spokes of a huge umbrella."

"Your friends are trying to catch your attention," Max said, and Avril, sounding frankly irritated, said, "Excuse me - I'll be back, darling."

Max turned to Cyndy. "Bring your drink with you - *darling*," his eyes were mocking. "You're going on a tour. I'm going to show you around. You can judge Jeremy Gunhill's successful work for yourself."

Before she could make any attempt at refusing he took her lightly by the elbow and began to steer her through small groups of people, stopping now and then to make a reply to some remark or question put to him.

When they were clear Cyndy said, "I don't want to stay too long. It's getting dark. As Avril pointed out a moment ago, it doesn't take long to get dark after the sun has gone - and the sun has gone. I'm not all that used to these roads in the Berg."

"Don't worry about that. We'll make a plan. You know," he gave her a long, lazy look, "getting back to chalets - as chalets go, this one is rather large. I could even raise a family here, if I wanted to, which I just might, one of these fine days. I don't suppose you had time to

notice, but the chalet is on two levels. There were rooms leading off the staircase."

"I had noticed," she replied, and took a sip of her drink, to get away from his eyes. "I happen to be very observant, but in any case, one couldn't help noticing."

Now it was her turn to tilt her head back to look at the beamed, floating ceiling. There was a kind of gallery upstairs, and, like the deck outside, it clung to the walls inside. A whole lot of doors led off the gallery.

Following her look, Max said, "There are two bedrooms and two bathrooms up there, and a studio - or study, as you will. The views down here are beautiful, but from up there they're nothing sort of spectacular. I want to show you the view. Right from the beginning, I had this thing in mind about a conversation pit in front of a tremendous stone fireplace. The sofas which enclose the area were specially designed to fit into those bookshelves. As you can see, the bookshelves face outwards so that the books can be seen from all parts of the room, creating colour. Actually, and I don't want to boast," his smile was mocking again, "with a little help from Jeremy Gunhill, that is, I consider this room as one of my decorating triumphs."

"It's very attractive," she murmured.

"See how the dining table and chairs are placed against that tremendous stonework pylon," Max went on. "On the other side of this architectural feature there are views, through unbroken expanses of glass, as you can see, of the garden, and beyond, the Berg."

Through the glass, the mountains were magnified by solitude and the last glowing colour of the sky.

"Come, you must see the view from up top there. I also want to show you the rest of the chalet," said Max.

"Tell me," she asked, "did Bill Gantry design this curved, free-standing black iron staircase?"

"This little effort happens to be strictly copyright," he told her, "and for that very reason, our mutual friend Bill Gantry had nothing to do with it."

When they reached the gallery they stood looking down at the golden-yellow upholstered sofas in the conversation area. People cluttered up the off-white, yellow, brown and blade rugs which were placed about the room.

The views from this part of the chalet were nothing short of spectacular. Max had not exaggerated. They were just in time to gaze upon the beauty of the mountains before darkness came down. Cyndy felt a shaft of panic, but, out of a woman's sheer curiosity, she forgot about the fading light and allowed Max to show her the other rooms where, glass in hand, she began an inspection of each one, exclaiming over their decor.

When it was over and they were going towards the staircase, which spiralled downwards, she turned. "By the way, there was no need to lie to me about your birthday."

"Believe it or not, this happens to be my birthday. One pool here or there means very little to me. I don't celebrate each pool before I build it."

"I can almost hear the satisfaction moving in on you," she said, in a hard little voice. "Is that why you always look so wildly happy when you're talking about pools? Obviously, one pool here or there means *very much* to you. Anyway, the thing which matters most to me, at this particular moment, is that I make it back home. I should hate to

lose my way. I'm not all that familiar with the roads, and although it's not quite dark it will be, in a matter of minutes."

They went downstairs and somebody caught Max by the sleeve of his shirt. "Hey, Max, come and settle an argument for us!"

Cyndy took this opportunity of finding a place for her glass before she went in the direction of the immense sliding doors. Her Cortina was not where she had parked it and she stood for a moment feeling confused and foolish. Her eyes, bewildered and sparked with temper, went in the direction of the parking bay, which was on another level to the drive.

Apparently Max Steele had arranged for somebody to move her car from the drive to the parking area. Perhaps Max Steele himself had moved it himself during the interval when he had left her to mix drinks and hunt for a plate of something to eat.

The Cortina had not only been moved but it was entirely blocked in by a light truck with the words "Berg Pools" written on it. The entire set-up looked very cut and dried to her, and her breathing was becoming difficult as her temper began to get the better of her.

When she got back inside the chalet there was no sign of Max. There was no sign, either, of Avril Goddard.

"I'm looking for Max," she said to someone. "Have you seen him about?"

"Max has just left."

"Left?" Her eyes went wide.

"Yeah, to take Avril back to the hotel, you know. She has to be back on reception duty. I just saw the tail-lights of his car disappear, a moment ago. You must have just missed them."

"I'm completely hemmed in in the parking bay," she told this bearded stranger. "I'm --"

"Look," he told her, "Max will be back - isn't that so, Sally? By the way, this is Sally - she's here, on holiday, staying at the Kathlamba - from Johannesburg."

Trying to keep patient, Cyndy smiled at the couple. "I'm from Johannesburg too, as a matter of fact."

"Oh? When do you go back?" the girl, Sally, asked.

"I'm not I've - I've moved here. I have a house." Cyndy began to move off. "Really, I must just see about my car." She lifted a hand, trying to keep her attitude easy and friendly.

"Max told us to wait," Sally called out. "He won't be long."

Furious with Max, hating him, Cyndy chose a corner on one of the golden-yellow sofas. Short of pushing the truck out of the way herself there appeared to be little that she could do about it. While she had been fool enough to leave the keys in the Cortina the owner of Berg Pools had, very cunningly, removed the keys and pocketed them after he had moved her car.

Somebody brought her a drink, so she accepted it, smiling.

People began to tire of waiting for Max to come back. They began to leave, their tail lights studding the darkness as they sped down the drive. That meant, she reasoned, that she might be able to get her Cortina out of the parking area - but then a picture of the bay came into her mind. Her car had an ornamental, ranch-type wall directly in front of it and a truck calmly marked "Berg Pools" immediately behind it. In other words, she was completely blocked in. If every car in the area drove off it would still make no difference. She would still be cut off.

Through the glass she could see several huge stars shining. Veils of grey, almost colourless mist clung to the black mountain peaks and spilled down into valleys. Suddenly it was dark. Her frustration gave way to cold anger.

By the time Max arrived bade, practically all the guests had departed. This was what he had, no doubt, reasoned on. Where all these people had come from she could not begin to work out.

From her place on the golden-yellow sofa she watched him as he came towards her with his usual long, lazy stride and wearing his usual mocking smile, which did nothing to improve her temper.

However, he was interrupted by people who had stayed on to say goodbye and then, quite suddenly and quite unexpectedly, they were alone in the vast room, which was full of silence now, a silence which insinuated itself into the senses.

Deciding to play it cool (that was a good slogan for a pool, she thought), she remained seated. "I appear to be blocked in," she said, "by a light truck, but heavy enough for all that, to cause a complete obstacle - as no doubt it was intended that it should."

Max went to a side table and poured himself a drink. Moodily she watched him. He raised his glass. Silently he toasted her.

"There's a lot to be said for light trucks," he said from across the room which was a litter now of glasses, plates and half-eaten and uneaten food, bottles and ashtrays, mountain-high wife cigarette butts and ash.

She managed to hold her glance steady. "Did you do this so that I could clean up this mess for you?"

Her remark caused him to laugh and she could have slapped his handsome tanned face.

"It's no laughing matter." She stood up, her grape-green eyes glittering. "I told you I wanted to get back before, dark. Now look what you've done to me!" Her nerves were screaming with frustration.

"I didn't want you driving back on your own," he told her, as he watched her, between sips, over the rim of his glass.

"Really? Why didn't you want me driving back on my own? What concern is it of yours?" She waited, then said, "You haven't answered my question."

"I think it answers your question very well."

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"I am going to drive you back," he said softly, "in my car. It's as simple as that."

"I see. You have this all worked out, haven't you? There's this cold, uncaring streak in you which I've noticed before."

"I happen to care very much," he said, but dismissing his remark, she went on, "I'm beginning to know by now that every move on your part is plotted and calculated - in advance."

"And here we have something in common," he agreed. "I only hope my plotting doesn't slip up like yours did. I refer, of course, to the Escarpment Guest Farm. The day you came to spy. Do you remember that particular day?"

"Yes, I do. It happens to be a memory I could well do without, as it so happens." Her eyes were green and glittering. "You don't have to remind me of that day."



"That's the fate of being beautiful," he drawled. "Cyndy Collins, the beautiful spy."

"Perhaps I'm overlooking something," she said, "but, taking into consideration that you drive me home, am I expected to get somebody to drive me bad: here tomorrow - to your chalet, that is, to collect my car?"

"I'll have it delivered to your house in the morning."

"Is that so?" She gave him a long furious look. "Well, I don't particularly care for people I don't know driving my car."

"And quite frankly, I don't blame you." His tone was very reasonable. "I'd be the same. That's why I intend driving your car back. You know me."

For several seconds Cyndy stood staring at him, loathing him. She felt herself begin to shake.

Finally she held out her hand. "The keys to my Cortina were left in it. They were not there when I went to the car May I have them, please?"

"If you must have them - by all means." She watched him as he removed the keys from his pocket. He tossed them lightly in her direction. She caught them, but the ring, with its heavy gem-stone on a silver chain, stung her fingers and she dropped the keys. She made no attempt to pick them up and then watched, breathing quickly and angrily, as Max stooped his dark head and picked them from the rug. He slipped the keys into his pocket.

"Before we go," he said, as though nothing had happened, "I'm going to pour us a drink - and by the way, there's still a stack of food in the kitchen. Stay and have a bite with me. I hardly eat at my own parties, and if I do, I'm not aware of it. I happen to be starving right now and,"

he glanced at his watch, "in any case, you've probably missed your dinner."

"I have missed my dinner. You saw to that, didn't you?"

He grinned. She saw the little gold cap on his front tooth. "Sometimes, just sometimes, something comes along that we can both agree on."

She watched him pouring fresh drinks. He brought her one and, because she was shaking, she accepted it. "Make yourself at home while I get somebody in the kitchen to make some coffee and put something to eat out on a tray before this room comes under the vacuum cleaner. You won't know it tomorrow." He gesticulated with his drink. "I'll drink mine in the kitchen?"

While he was away she began an inspection of the room, glass in hand. She found herself gathering glasses and plates together. Scooping food into paper serviettes, she began looking for a place to dump it and then, disconcerted, she discovered that he was back in the room.

She regarded him, as he carried the tray towards the conversation area, with interest - a woman's interest. She decided to talk about pools in an attempt to draw him out and to reveal to her his secrets with regard to the pool game.

"I noticed your pool - in the garden," she said. "Your - Berg Pool." She drew the words out sarcastically.

"A-ha!" He turned. "So that's why you gave in suddenly, so that we could get around to pool talk? Women really are very sly, you know, especially honey-blondes."

"It has been referred to, by my hairdresser in Johannesburg, as champagne-gold, if you must go into detail," she said.

"I'm glad you mentioned this because, as it so happens, I do have a mind for detail. For instance, your eyes always remind me of a lizard I have in the garden. In the sun it shines like an emerald-green necklace."

Cyndy dismissed that. "We don't have to talk pool if it would embarrass you," she said, getting back to pools.

"Now why should it embarrass me?" He passed her a plate. "These are good," he said. "I can personally recommend them. I had three back there, in the kitchen."

She sat down, taking her time. "From what I've gathered, around these parts, you were always out to - to outsmart my uncle, who, from what I've also heard, happened to be a very charming man."

"And that's why you're out to try and outsmart me?"

"I wasn't talking about me," she snapped. "I wasn't talking about something that's about to happen but about something which has already happened." Impatiently, she tried to make herself clear. "I'm talking - past tense!"

"Let me fill you in," he said. "When two people work in the same area for any length of time, as in the case of Cliff Collins and myself, they usually get to know each other's faults pretty well, especially when they happen to be in the same game. Cliff had his faults, make no mistake about that."

"And you, of course, have none?"

"On the strength of a few weeks in the area," he replied, "you're hardly in a position to judge. However, to get back to the point... which is, you saw my pool in the garden - my Berg Pool."

Hoping to find out more about Berg Pools, she said, "I suppose you use it as a show pool?"

She saw his smile. "It's always there - to show - but this isn't Johannesburg, where competition is at its peak."

"You underestimate a lot of things, don't you?" she said, very softly.

"Not at all. I merely see things as they are."

"On the face of things," in the light from several large lamps which he had turned on, her skin and hair looked golden, "you don't have to worry, do you? I mean - all those outside interests. With you, with the great Max Steele, pool building is just a mere sideline. It's common knowledge, after all."

"I won't mince words," he said. "There's no money in pool building in the Berg, and you're going to get hurt if you go on thinking otherwise. Remember, also, that the more you outlay, the more you stand to lose in the end. You don't want to get involved with people like Bill Gantry, while I happen to be on the subject of getting hurt. Apart from exposing yourself to frustration there's nothing to be gained by sidelines in the form of so-called 'leisure living' - not in this part of the world, anyway. The practice of estimating profits in advance, because of these wild schemes of yours, because I know all about them, can suffer almost a technical knock-out. Don't try to distort facts - if you do, you're likely to nose-dive. This 'leisure living' marketing plan of yours can turn out to be nothing but a failure - in any marketing sense."

For several moments Cyndy sat, saying nothing. She felt shattered.

"Is - is that why you kept me here - to tell me all this?" she asked. "Well, for your information, I have a good business head on my shoulders."

"You can add my name to that list. It's also common knowledge, Cyndy, that Ken Harris was sitting on the fence, like a vulture - window-shopping - waiting for Cliff to nose-dive. He had already made up his mind to buy Cliff out, before you came on the scene. How he intends to handle you is anyone's guess."

"Well, you'll just have to wait and see how he handles me, won't you?" The shaking had started again. She took a sip of her drink and the glass rattled against her teeth.

"I was merely trying to get across to you that, if you try to fly too high, you could land yourself with a lot of problems," he said.

"Well, everybody has problems. I have one, right now, as a matter of fact." Pointedly, she glanced in the direction of the blackened windows. "You, I suppose, don't experience problems?" She brought her eyes back to his face again. "Sure I have problems." Suddenly, the thought of his problems gave her pleasure. "But," he went on, "I'm better equipped to ride them."

'Don't bet on that but, what's more important, how am I getting home?" She set her glass down with a loud click and then, wanting to keep her hands occupied, she picked it up again. "Are you going to move that truck out of my way, or do I have to waft?"

In a curt, dictatorial voice he said, "You're a stranger here. You shouldn't be travelling around on bad roads on your own just before, or after, sunset. You might hit a boulder, and then where would you be? "

"Oh," she said carelessly, "I'd make a plan."

It would have been a relief, after all that tension, to sit back in his car and relax as he drove her home, leaving her Cortina behind. It had been useless arguing with Max. Instead, her nerves felt jangled.

The sky was a black bowl of assorted glittering diamonds. The mountains appeared starlight-tinged. "I suppose," her voice was tight, "you feel this is your round?"

"I'll leave the last round to you," he said. "I'll leave you the last word. But don't bother to go on with this - I'm beginning to know it by heart."

Her house looked very beautiful, she thought, as it waited there on her, its rooms, all sited for sun during the daytime, spilling out orange light. To one side the pool - Blue Champagne - glittered like sequined velvet beneath the stars. Max drove right up to the shallow steps of the veranda and then switched off. The silence was sudden and seemed to be waiting on something.

Breaking it, Cyndy asked, "What is the position about my car?"

"The position still stands. I'll return it in the morning."

"Personally?"

"Personally."

"And, just as a matter of interest, how do you intend getting back to your chalet after you've driven my car here? Am I to be trusted to drive you back in daylight hours?"

"I'll trust you to drive me to the Kathlamba - and from there I'll find my own way back."

"How lovely for Avril Goddard, because she, no doubt, will drive you back?"

"Where does Avril Goddard come into this?"

"Oh --" In the darkness, she shrugged. "It's common knowledge."

"And so now we think we have it all in a nutshell ?"

She opened the door and stepped out lightly on to the dew- drenched lawn. Already she was considering what she would wear when he returned her car in the morning.

"I won't ask you in," she said, through the open window of the car.

Lifting a hand, Max drawled, "You're *so* like your uncle." Then he started the car, and she stood back and watched it as it disappeared back down the drive.

During the long night she tried not to think of Max Steele - to fight him off - but she couldn't. He kept forcing his way into her mind, and when she did finally sleep it was to dream of him, and there was a white ornamental wall at the back of the dream.

## CHAPTER VII

WHEN Max drove up to the house in the morning, Cyndy had just finished breakfast. Somehow she had not expected him this early, although Ken and Judd had already left for work.

Her hair hung loosely to the shoulders of the parakeet-pink shirt she was wearing with well cut black slacks. The pink shirt emphasized the colour of her green eyes.

"You look like a cat - with those green eyes," he remarked, getting out of her Cortina.

"I thought it was a lizard?" she said, and he grinned.

"Well," he turned to look at the gold Cortina, "here it is - delivered all in one piece." He half closed his blue eyes against the slanting morning sun.

"Norah has just made coffee. Would you like a cup?" She knew she had relaxed with him.

His eyes mocked her. "You aren't inviting me in, by any chance, are you?"

"Well, yes, if you want to." She felt herself go to pieces.

"Now I *know* you were just talking," he said, "but in any case, I've had coffee, thank you."

"Well, in that case, I'll tell Norah I'm leaving."

When she came out of the house again Max was standing on the slasto surround of the pool gazing down at the still water.



"The motor hasn't come on yet," she said quickly, coming up to him. "It changes the whole pool when it does, of course. It suddenly looks alive and sparkling. The filter only comes on about ten. It's set for that time, you know. When it does - well,, as I've just said, the whole pool is transformed. It reminds me of a blue bowl filled with stars, glittering and moving about in the sun. At night, if we leave the filter on, it looks like a black bowl of stars."

"You don't have to bother with sales talk - not to me, anyway." he said, giving her a slow smile, but able to destroy her with his sarcasm. He tossed the keys to her and she caught them and then, on a sudden impulse, tossed them back. Somehow she could not bring herself to drive with him sitting next to her, watching every movement.

"Will you drive?" she asked, "seeing that you drove here, anyway."

In the car she told him, "Last night I dreamed of you. There was a white 'ornamental wall involved." She realised that she had relaxed with him again and she knew, almost immediately, that he was coolly and amusedly aware of this.

He turned to look at her, driving with casual attention, and yet she knew that he would be able to deal with unexpected potholes or boulders. The dust floated up and then rode along the early morning sunbeams. "That must have bothered you quite a lot," he answered. "You'd better not make it a habit"

"I don't intend to." She found that she was getting used to matching his mockery with mockery of her own.

There was something vital about him, she found herself thinking. It gave the impression of steely violence, like his name - Steele. The name suited him. Max Steele had the kind of personality that could bring out the wildcat in a girl - or maybe the kitten, depending on the girl.

"Take my advice," he was saying, "go along and see Bill Gantry about your poolside furniture."

"How come you're so interested, all of a sudden?" she asked. "I thought you were warning me against Bill Gantry?"

"I am warning you. Somebody might just steal your ideas."

"I'm not worried, but I'll go into Lindeque when I get the urge. I don't worry that easily," said Cyndy, who was spending more time than she imagined possible worrying lately. "I'm beginning to wonder who I can begin to trust around here."

"What you're trying to tell me is that you've been warned against Max Steele, is that it?" he said, and she laughed lightly.

The smell of early mountain mist, lifting now, leaves and dew-damped earth pervaded the car. A brightly plumed bird with dusty wings flew in front of the bonnet. Max slackened speed. Cyndy sat back, revelling in the unfolding vistas, excitement growing as she studied the harsh, jagged outlines of the mountains, the sun-kissed slopes. Clouds were swirling around some of the peaks, but they were not threatening clouds. The sun bounced off the wide windscreen and she narrowed her eyes.

Max kept his speed easy now as they drove between the sturdy stone pillars which formed the entrance to the Kathlamba Hotel grounds. The road climbed fairly steeply. Cyndy found herself on the look-out for the horses which always seemed to be grazing in this particular area.

"I'm terrified of horses," she confessed. "I'm always tempted to go riding, but I can never pluck up enough courage. I've been told that horses, like dogs, can sense when a person is nervous and that because of this they play up."

"Well, there are a number of quiet horses for hire at the hotel. You could always start off on one of them, until you lose your nervousness. Speak to Avril about it - she arranges the rides."

"I know she does. I stayed at the hotel before I actually moved to the Berg. I was here to sort things out in connection with - with my - inheritance." Her voice was suddenly stiff at the mention of Avril's name.

They continued in silence for a while and, just when the silence was beginning to get on her nerves, he said, "Aren't you afraid of the disorder your inheritance might bring into your life?"

"Disorder? I'm adoring everything about it. I've always been business-minded at heart. At the same time, however, I love peace. That's why I love the Berg."

"Well, let's hope you get it." He destroyed her again by a flick of the tongue.

"I don't intend to let the things which upset my uncle upset me." She was getting worked up again. It was so easy to get worked up over him, she thought, impatient with herself.

The hotel came into sight. Already the African women were seated near the car park, the sun striking down on the basket-ware, beadwork, primitive carvings and pottery which they had set out, market-style, before them.

"Who built the old pool at the hotel?" Cyndy asked.

"I have no idea," Max answered. "Possibly the people who were here before Byron and Kiko took over. Whoever it was slipped up on the site."

"Oh? Why?" .

"It happens to be in a cold spot - even on a hot day. Quite apart from that, however, the pool has long past served its purpose. It's in a bad way now ... certainly not a very good advert for the Kathlamba. It's not a bowl of stars, in other, words. I'm particularly interested in changing all this. The new pool must be a stunner."

"Once again you have to mock me, don't you? Is it a crime to liken my pool to a bowl of stars? When you're not being downright sarcastic there's this constant barrage of mockery. Things are so hard to - to - separate in a critical mind like yours." As she spoke she gave him an assessing sideways glance.

"I'm only sarcastic or mocking when I'm depressed," he told her. "Right now, I'm depressed."

He parked next to the entrance of the hotel. "I'll park your car here and then you can drive straight out without knocking anything down. The drive is anything but complicated, being circular."

"I'm trying to work out why you're depressed," she said. "You have no reason to be - what with the Kathlamba Hotel pool contract just having been dropped into your lap."

"Sometimes, when I get to thinking about it, it goes sour on me."

"I find that hard to believe." She lifted her shoulders. "Is this the arrangement, then? That I just leave you here to find your own way back to your chalet? "

"You don't need to leave me."

"What does that mean?"

"It means come and have coffee with me."

For some unknown reason she had been feeling reluctant to slip over to the driver's seat and drive straight back to the house, so his remark sent a shaft of excitement through her. "Thank you. Will the car be all right here, though? It says 'no parking in front of entrance'."

"This is almost my second home. I can get away with all sorts of things now, but in any case, I'll move it from the entrance."

Thinking of Avril Goddard which involved his visiting the hotel at every possible moment she said, "Yes, I suppose it *is* almost your second home. No doubt, under the circumstances, you get away with a lot."

"Are you jumping to conclusions again?" He shot her an amused glance.

They had their coffee on the veranda. There had been no sign of Avril, and because there were people on the veranda who knew Max, they were not alone. The thought that she was disappointed because of this struck Cyndy with devastating effect.

Max walked with her to the car. "Are you sure you have a lift back to your chalet?" she asked. "I could always drive *you* back home now." She laughed.

"Thanks, but I'm meeting someone," he told her, and Cyndy wondered at the depression she felt. Instead of going back to the house she found herself driving in the direction of Linde- que. On an impulse, she decided to pay Bill Gantry a visit.

Bill was standing at the open doorway to his shop,, and when she pulled up outside, he waddled down to the pavement to meet her. "I was going to phone you. I've just about got the things ready for you," he told her.

"Oh, good. I must have known something," she replied, eager to grasp at a reason as to why she should have felt so restless after leaving Max Steele at the Kathlamba Hotel. "How did they turn out? "

Bill scratched his chin. "Well, at first, I must admit, I thought you were crazy -- all that intricate scrollwork. top and bottom, but now that I've more or less finished them I'll go so far as to say that they look very nice. So do the tables. Come, and I'll show you."

He led the way through to the door in his office and then through another door into the tremendous and gloomy workshop at the back of the shop.

The work came right up to her expectations and there was a look of secret excitement about her as she began visualising the colourful cushions on the chairs and the obscure glass tops on the tables.

"Is there a place here where I can have the glass tops cut? I meant to ask you the other day, but somehow I forgot. I'll have to be thinking about glass tops now."

It was finally arranged that Bill would see to that part for her. Apparently there was a glass cutting works in the small town of Lindeque.

"As soon as I have everything ready I'll phone you and have the furniture delivered to you," Bill said.

Thrilled about everything, she drove home beneath a high hot sun.

The next two weeks she spent converting her uncle's studio into what was to be her garden furniture and plant shop, doing most of the work herself owing to the fact that Ken and Judd were completely involved with a pool. Working in old faded jeans, her hair tied back, she enjoyed herself completely.

Finally the studio was ready to receive her first batch of poolside furniture. Her "leisure living" marketing plan was beginning to take shape. Who her customers were going to be was another matter.

"Norah," she said, after a long spell of arranging and rearranging plants, "I feel I must have a break from all this. I think I'll go walking. It's time I had some exercise - you know, breathing exercise," she laughed.

"Well, you've worked hard enough," Norah replied. "You certainly deserve a break. You've been at it non-stop for the past two weeks."

"I'll think I'll take the car," Cyndy went on, "and drive out in the direction of the Kathlamba, and when I find a suitable spot, I'll park the car and get out and walk. I'm not even going to change." She glanced at her faded jeans and pink shirt. "I'm going to go just as I am."

"You always look lovely," Norah said warmly. "But do be careful. We don't want you getting lost or climbing too high and having a fall. It's quite easy to have an accident in the Berg, even if you don't exactly go mountaineering."

"I'll be careful, don't worry, and when I come back I intend to have a gorgeous bath and relax. Even the word *relax* sounds marvellous. Anyway, I'm thankful that I've managed to get everything sorted out. When Bill Gantry delivers the furniture there'll be no panic as to where it has to go. I'm glad I managed to sort out a few plants, too. Later on, of course, I'll buy some from that farm. It was very good of Judd to strike all those cuttings for me and to dig up and sort out suitable plants for potting, especially as he and Ken are so busy. One of these days I must begin to think about material for the cushions to the chairs. If I thought it would pay me, I'd even take a trip to Johannesburg for this."

After a pause, Norah said, "I see you have it all planned. I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing in mentioning this, but Judd is worried that you might be taking on too much - you know, financially. In recent months they even had to take on work as far away as Newcastle in order to keep going."

"I didn't know this." Cyndy widened her eyes. "Isn't the business *paying*, Norah? I mean to say, does Judd think we're - on the way out? Ken doesn't seem unduly worried."

"No, Blue Champagne is not on the way out, Cyndy. It's just that Judd sees things as they are. Ken's a nice enough little fellow," but ... well, I don't want to say too much. I just thought I'd tip you off about too much spending." Norah laughed, but it was a forced laugh. "You don't want to go bankrupt."

"No, you can say that again," Cyndy smiled, thinking that perhaps Judd and Norah weren't very venturesome.

Soon after driving past the gateposts of the Kathlamba Cyndy eased the Cortina over the bumps and, after climbing the hill for a short distance, she turned the car on to the tufts of grass. Bouncing over it, she parked beneath a tree and got out and stretched luxuriously, tilting her face to the sun and breathing deeply. On all sides the horizon was hemmed by the mountains with their deep purple shadows but here, where she was, the mountains were low and moulded but steep enough nevertheless to give her the exercise she craved.

When she reached the top she sank down breathlessly and lay in the tall, dry grass. It was so still that the stillness seemed to thunder against her ears. Gazing up to the sky, she felt a new rush of thanksgiving. "I don't know why he did it," she whispered, "but thank you."



For a while, she lay thinking about Cliff Collins, and then she sat up, hugging her knees and gazing at the mountains, which looked vast and manless ... silent blue and purple distances. Down below, near the road, two horses were grazing, and near to the tree where the car was parked there were two horses grazing on their own. Obviously the animals belonged to the hotel. Perhaps they were on pension, she thought, smiling to herself. Retired horses. Retired from carting hotel guests about. A car engine droned, disturbing the peace, and she saw the dust from it before she saw the car and then she watched as it continued on its way in the direction of the hotel. Otherwise, everything was peaceful.

Eventually she stood up and dusted the grass from her jeans. She shook back her hair. She was ready to go back now - to her house. It never ceased to amaze her. Then she would have a lazy, scented bath and by that time it would be time for tea, which she would carry out to the poolside on her favourite baked-enamel brick-red tray.

Going down the mountain was far easier and, in no time, she was beside the car which was hot from the sun. There was the smell of baking leather upholstery. The horses were only a few steps away, their sensitive noses bent to the grass, and on an impulse she walked softly towards the one nearest the car. The animal lifted its head and she stopped, her heart beats faltering to a stop before they raced on again.

Why, she asked herself, had she this fear of horses? It was so stupid. Nearly everybody she knew thought nothing of reaching out a hand and patting a horse's soft nose or nuzzle, or whatever it was that horses had. She knew so little about horses for the simple reason that she had always feared them.

The horse continued to nibble. She could hear the sound of the grass being bitten off. When the animal raised its head its eyes looked as

though they had been dipped in honey. "Hello," Cyndy whispered. "You gorgeous thing!"

At the back of her mind there was the thought that horses were unpredictable when it came to kicking, so, careful not to lay herself open to a sudden assault, she kept to one side and then slowly stretched out a hand and placed her fingers lightly on the horse's nose. Her confidence grew and she went closer, marvelling at the long eyelashes.

It never struck her that the horse could be acting so that, when he moved his head impatiently and caught her forearm between yellow teeth she was absolutely unprepared for it. Her fainting mind was aware that she had not cried out but had drawn a deep shocked breath. The bite was over before she could even move, and then, with a dancing step, the horse made off, leaving her standing there looking stupidly at a bruise which was already forming on her arm.

By the time Max Steele came on the scene her face was pale and shocked. One moment she had been alone and the next, a car coming from the hotel had stopped and Max was coming towards her, the grass making dry rustling noises as he brushed through it. ^

"I thought I recognized the car," he said, then, noticing that something was amiss with her, "What is it? Has something happened?"

Suddenly Cyndy felt like crying and put the fingers of both hands over her lips and nodded. Very quietly, very gently he asked, "Cyndy, what is it?"

"I've been bitten by a horse," she whispered, her face ashen now.

"Where?"

She gave him her arm which looked bruised and angry. The tiny blonde hairs on her skin shone in the sun.

Thinking of those yellow teeth, she said, "I'm afraid of - rabies!"

"The skin isn't broken. The way I see it," he told her, "you have nothing to worry about."

Her face was strangled with apprehension. "Yes, I know the skin isn't broken, but there was saliva on my arm. What about saliva? I've heard that the skin doesn't *have* to be broken to get rabies - it's just the saliva --" She broke off, then went on, "He - he - absolutely hoodwinked me into thinking he was friendly. His whole appearance was one of friendliness, otherwise I should never have approached him. His eyes - even his eyes - looked as if they had just been dipped in honey, and then - he - bit me, just like that."

"It's only a bruise," said Max, stroking her arm.

"I think you're deliberately misunderstanding me." She lifted her voice. "I'm afraid of rabies, I tell you. I'm probably going to die."

Max's hands closed on her shoulders and she knew that he must feel her trembling.

"No, you're not going to die. To put your mind at rest about this we'll drive into Lindeque and see a doctor. Leave your car where it is, under the tree, and we'll sort that one out later."

In his car Cyndy took a long quivering breath. "I'll never trust a damned horse again!"

"That was kind of silly, wasn't it? To trust him in the first place?"

"I don't intend to make it a habit, believe me. I'll never touch a horse again."

"Nonsense. You'll get over this shock. I'll teach you to ride one day."

"Never! I'll never ride."

He drove fast, she noticed, the wheel vibrating beneath his tanned hands. "I was just coming back from the pool site at the Kathlamba," he told her.

Suddenly pools meant nothing to her. All she wanted to do was *live* ... not compete against Max Steele and Berg Pools. His attempt at indifference to her predicament was not going to work, she thought. Those teeth. That saliva. One needed only the touch of that spittle alone. Max could not fool her.

"Recently," he was saying, "I saw a kid at the hotel who'd been nipped on the face by a temperamental horse."

"And what happened ?" she asked tensely.

"I saw him a couple of days after the bite, and apart from a discoloured face, because of some red mixture which had been applied to the bite, he was fine."

Not believing a word he said, Cyndy studied her arm. Her face was white and set.

They travelled in brooding, nagging silence. Max glanced at his watch. "I happen to know the doctor," he said. "I also happen to know he'll be in his rooms right now. He has a baby clinic once a week, at this time. I know, because I was caught myself once. I got something in my eye and had to wait my turn, along with the babies."

She made no attempt to laugh, not even out of politeness. "Well, I hope I don't have to wait. Let's face it - if I don't get treatment soon I'll get rabies."

"You haven't been bitten by a rabid horse, for God's sake." He was impatient with her now.

"How do you know?"

"For a sQ-called smart girl you talk like a fool," he told her. "Those horses back there belong to the hotel."

"So what? I can't see what difference it makes who they belong to. That's hardly the point, is it?"

The waiting room greeted them with its baby noises and howls. At the door Max ordered, "Go in and sit down. I'll go round to the back and try to catch the doctor's eye. I'll explain what's happened."

Several young mothers looked up as Cyndy entered the room and she was immediately conscious of her jeans and her tangled-up hair, so, lifting her arm, she said, "I've just been bitten by a horse."

"Oh, that's not so nice," a middle-aged woman, who was apparently there with her daughter and a newly acquired grandchild, said. "One always thinks of rabies. I know I would."

After a shocked silence on the part of everyone Cyndy found the strength to say, "That's why I'm here. I think that way too. I'm here with all the other babies." She tried to smile. "Aren't they sweet?"

The silver-haired doctor opened the interleading door and the conversation which had so tactlessly and instantly sprung to life quickly faded. The room was thick with tension.

"Come through and I'll have a look at your arm," the doctor said, standing to one side, so that Cyndy could pass him. He led the way to a sun-dappled room which resembled an American kitchen.

Max was there and immediately Cyndy's eyes flew to him. Her eyes were very green and looked troubled. They held the suggestion of tears. "Take it easy," said Max.

A baby screamed with rage all the time the doctor was attending to her arm, assuring and reassuring her that she had absolutely nothing to worry about. "All you'll have to show will be a fading bruise for the next few days," he said. "The skin isn't broken, but nevertheless, I'm going to give you something. Come in and see me tomorrow, or the next day."

"Do you think I'll be all right?" she asked, in a taut voice.

"You can set your mind at rest - there's nothing to worry about."

"Well, I just hope you're right," she murmured, and dropped her high tense shoulders.

Outside, it was beginning to get cool.

Lost in misery, Cyndy muttered, "I'm sorry - I guess I went to pieces, Max."

"You were very good, actually." He took her hand and then kissed her wrist.

"No, I wasn't. I was a coward and I know it. It wasn't the actual bite but what could be behind the bite that shattered me. I still won't rest until at least ten days have elapsed, no matter what the doctor had to say on the subject."

"I'll take you home now," said Max.

"What about my car?" she asked.

"We'll make a plan," he smiled.

"We always seem to be making plans about cars - about *my* car," she sighed. "You drive me home - I drive you home --"

Depressed, she bit her lip, then added, "It doesn't make an awful lot of sense."

"It makes a *lot* of sense." He helped her into the car and then got in himself. "Now, just take it easy and relax," he told her. 'Don't worry about your car. I'll see you get it bade."

At the steps to the veranda he gave her a steady look. "Go and take a bath and then go straight to bed. You've had a shock."

"Would you like to come in?" she asked. "Have something to drink - after all you've been through with me, and all the other babies."

"I won't come in. I'd prefer it if you did as I told you. Judd's wife will be there to help you, of course?"

"Yes." For some unknown reason she said, "I told you. Norah and Judd Dixon *live* in this house - not just me and - me - I mean, not just Ken Harris. Actually, Ken Harris lives in a rondavel - in the garden."

"Okay," he said, "I believe you. I'll keep in touch. If you need - anything - just let me know. I'm on the phone."

"Thank you."

Cyndy stood there, in a conflict of emotions. Why should she feel like crying?

Was it just because he had been kind to her for once?

## CHAPTER VIII

SHE wondered why she felt disappointed when Ken and Judd took it into their own hands and drove out, to where her car was parked, and brought it back. After Ken had parked it Judd had got out of Ken's Fiat and phoned Max Steele to tell him that they had, between them, collected the Cortina.

Max phoned the following day to find out how she was. "I'm being spoilt and I'm being kept in bed," she said. "Norah won't hear of my getting up."

"Then I won't come and see you," he answered. Afterwards, she lay, for a long time, wondering why.

Tense and unhappy, she lived through the next ten days - watching her health for every possible symptom and then, on the eleventh day, when she pronounced herself out of danger the cloud of apprehension she had been carrying about lifted and disappeared.

That morning she drove into Lindeque. Lightheartedly, she gambled on a completely unknown furnishing fabric which she just knew was going to be a success so far as cushions for her furniture was concerned. Her mind moved ahead to the things she planned to do with the rest of the day at Lindeque. In view of the fact that she had merely signed a slip of paper, which Bill Gantry's driver had handed to her, on the day the furniture had been delivered, she decided to pay him a visit to show her appreciation.

What she saw in Bill Gantry's small shop window caused her to catch her breath. There, behind the grubby glass, were four chairs and a table to her own design.

When she stopped trembling she went up the steps into the shop. From behind the heavy hand-wrought iron gates there came the hollow sound of clanging. "Mr. Gantry," Cyndy called, "are you in?"



"Hello," he wheezed, through the grille-work. "I'll be with you in just a moment. Hold on. I have to keep this gate locked - too many scoundrels about for my liking."

While he was gone she looked at the chairs and table. There was no getting away from it - they had been made to her design.

"Hello," Bill said again, as he came into the shop. "What can I do for a beautiful young lady? How did you like your furniture, by the way? I did a nice job, hey?"

"A very nice job. I like them very much." With an undertone of coolness she went on, "I was wondering - so many things seem to have been happening to me, lately, but - er - did we have some kind of misunderstanding?" She turned to look at the furniture in the window. "You see, I don't remember having ordered more. I wanted to see how the others sold first, before I became too much involved. You know how it is?" She smiled now, wanting to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Oh, those!" he laughed, shrugging plump, sloping shoulders. "No, no," there was an edge to his voice, "there hasn't been a misunderstanding. I just thought I'd have one or two made for myself and stick them in the window. If they sold, they sold, and if they didn't, they didn't. Well, they sold. A chappie who's a farmer bought the lot. Would you believe it? So I had some more made and stuck them in the window there."

"You've been very busy." Her voice was sarcastic.

"Ja, well --" he shrugged again, his head on one side, almost coyly, "that's old Bill Gentry for you."

After a moment she said, "Those chairs happen to be to my personal design - so does the table. How do you work that one out, Mr Gentry?"

Bill whistled on a low speculative note. "What is there to work out? All I did was to make a couple of extra chairs and tables and stick them in the window. There's no harm in that, surely? Most of these wrought-iron things look the same, anyway."

"I don't think so. A lot of work went into the design. I spent a lot of time over designing them. As you yourself remarked, I particularly went to town with the scrollwork."

He laughed. "Lady, you can say that again! But there's nothing so unusual about it, when you come to boil it all down. All those twirls and what-have-you are all the same. Actually, you know, it's not so different from the kind of stuff I make myself."

"Your work revolves mostly around gates and things," she said. "I did notice, though, that you had a couple of veranda chairs in here a while back, but they were absolutely straightforward - nothing like these."

"Ja, ja, that's right. Those are the sort of chairs that up until now have sold very easily in these parts. But seeing that I was making yours I got the fellers back there to do a couple extra as a kind of feeler, if you know what I mean, and put them in the window. They sold right away, like I told you. Almost the same day. After all," his voice was joking, "they aren't copyright, are they? You didn't have them patented, did you?"

"No, but don't you see? This means a lot to me. Please don't do that again. I'll have to buy those in the window now, just to safeguard my own design. I'd hate you to go turning out more and selling them. It would completely put a spoke in my wheel, as the saying goes."

"Ja, but what about *my* wheel?" He laughed again and then sobered. "These are already sold, as a matter of fact. I'm going to deliver them tomorrow. Max Steele was in here and, as soon as he saw them, he bought up the lot."

"Max Steel?" She widened her green eyes, concentrating. "*Max Steele* bought them?"

"Yes, old Max bought them. Didn't argue."

"What did he buy them for?" she asked.

"I don't have the answer to that one. I can only guess," Bill replied.

"Well, I'm sorry, he can't have them - they're mine."

"Can't he? He's already paid for them. What do you mean they're yours? What difference can it possibly make what design they are?"

"It makes a big difference. You copied my design. That was hardly fair, was it?"

"It wasn't a case of copying. It's just that I said to the chaps back in there 'Make one or two while you're turning them out.' I often do that, as a matter of fact. The same applies to garden gates, window guards ... anything. You name it, I copy it - I mean, I turn more out. It keeps the ball rolling. You've got to keep it rolling when you're in business. You should know that." His voice was accusing.

"Max Steele apparently knows it. He knew I was having those chairs and tables made for what purpose. What right had he to go and buy them?"

"He had all the right in the world. Once a thing is in my window anybody can buy them, just so long as they pay for them. That goes without saying. That's what I call sense."

"I'm furious about this." Recognizing the uselessness of the argument, she said, "I was going to have other furniture made here, but I've changed my mind."

Bill took his lower lip between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed it out of shape. When he released it he said, "I had no idea there'd be such an uproar over a few darned chairs and tables. Lady, this is my business. Making chairs, tables, fences, burglar guards and any old thing you like happens to be my business. I can turn out what I like. There's no law against it. I could see a picture in a magazine tomorrow and copy it, if I wanted to. Nobody could stop me."

"Don't keep calling me lady!" she snapped. "Somehow I trusted you. I didn't expect you to do this to me. I might have expected it of - of Max Steele, but not you. After all, you knew what the chairs were for, right from the start."

"You have your uncle's temper, all right," Bill groaned.

The sunlight slid along the badly tiled floor. It highlighted the chairs and table, which Bill had spray-painted white.

Cyndy stared at than for a long moment and then, turning, she walked out of the shop. Suddenly she wanted to hurt Max Steele more than she had ever wanted to hurt anyone in her life.

Remembering how kind he had been to her, she looked down at her arm. Then she lifted her head and gazed at the mountains in the distance. At the top of the mountains it would be peaceful. She wondered how much peace she was going to find with Max Steele always as her rival. There was going to be no more peace - no more sun-soaked days for her. At the back of every day there was going to be Berg Pools.

Her thoughts flew to Johannesburg, with its skyline of skyscrapers and yellow-crustured mine-dumps, and for the first time since leaving it she began to ask herself whether she had done a wise thing in giving up everything to come and carry on a business about which she knew absolutely nothing. A feeling of panic began to rise up inside her.

After some more desultory shopping she drove home and could think of nothing but Max and the fact that she was going to be in for a hard time over him - just in the same way as her uncle had been plagued by Berg Pools and the man who built them. When she got home she parked the car and went straight to the shop, where she stood brooding and staring at the furniture which had been made in Bill Gantry's workshop. It was obvious that she would have to do more thinking - more planning and a whole lot more scheming.

Later she went to sit by the sun-scattered pool. She began to toy with the idea of selling the house and moving her business to Johannesburg. Where would one start? The idea seemed completely out of her scope and her mind fiddled around with some of the small but flourishing Natal towns which were fairly near to the Drakensberg resorts. Perhaps she could continue to conduct the business from the Berg - without going so far as to sell, but build pools in other areas.

That was it! Cyndy began to feel excited. She would build the business up. Her mind took flight. There was no end to it - nothing was impossible to her. She saw pools set in huge expanses of green lawn, pools carved out of rock, pools lapping languidly into cocktail lounges with coloured, underwater lighting. Ken would do the plans, with suggestions from her. The whole concept of a pool would be designed to blend with the garden and would not in any way interfere with the landscaping. Lower decks would be reached by steps descending from upper decks, breaking what could be merely dreary expanses of walls. Set in mosaic tiles walls could house a whole number of adjustable inlet valves and fountains could be arranged without even interfering with swimming space. Blue Champagne Pools would be different.

In the afternoon she drove to the farm which she had noticed on the outskirts of Lindeque, and spent most of the afternoon looking at plants. There was something soothing about making a choice of

these. When she left the farm it was with the arrangement that Ken would pick up the flowering shrubs and plants which she had bought in the light truck.

During dinner she said, "Ken, I know you're tired, but don't be cautious with me, just be candid - could Max Steele smash Blue Champagne?"

"I daresay we could smash him, if we tried hard enough." His smile revealed that he was taking her question lightly. "Why, what happened?"

She told him about Bill Gantry having had several chairs and tables made to her design and about Max having bought the ones which she had seen in the window.

"They're probably for his own poolside at his chalet," Ken replied. "Max would do anything to rile a Collins. Patio furniture is the last thing he'd be interested in."

"Well, I just don't see it that way." She sat back in her chair and blinked several times. "The way I see it is that Max Steele isn't to be trusted."

"Let's forget about Max," said Ken. "I'm tired of hearing about Max. The Berg is our oyster."

"He's completely destroyed my mood," Cyndy went on.

"Well, don't let him destroy it."

That night, for the first time, she was aware of the moonlight and the loneliness. The tops of the trees caught the shine, turning the foliage to silver and the pool to a bowl of stars.

On the day Ken brought the plants from the farm she recaptured some of her confidence. She watched him as, with an easy strength, he lifted them from the truck and carried them round the side of the house to her shop.

"Look at the colours!" she said excitedly. "A sort of flame- pink. I'm so thrilled they're actually flowering. Imagine them next to a sapphire-blue swimming-pool - superb. By the way, I had a poster put up in the tea-room, this side of Lindeque, and another inside the bakery. Let me show you some other posters I did, Ken. They're in the study. I've been busy on them for days."

Suddenly she was unnerved at the way in which Ken was looking at her. "By the way," she began to lead the way out of the shop, "have you heard from - er - what's her name ? "

"Have I heard from who?" She knew that he was being purposely evasive.

"You know - you told me you had a - a girl - the one in Newcastle. What did you say her name was ?"

"I didn't," he said.

They were inside the study now and she was aware of tension. "I wanted to tell you," she gave him a smile, "that she's welcome to come here whenever she likes, so you can be together. The odd weekend and so on. She'd be very welcome."

"Thank you." He said it in an abrupt kind of way which left her feeling uneasy. "I don't think it will be necessary to put her up - it's not serious. In fact, I don't think it will ever be necessary to put anyone up ... not so far as I'm concerned, that is."

"I see. Well..." she smiled again, "the offer still stands."

She showed him the posters she had done.

"They're certainly very colourful," he agreed, and then there was another silence - more tension in the air. At the back of her mind there were warning signals.

After he had left the study Cyndy stood gazing out of the window and then she pushed slightly trembling fingers through her hair. The thought that Ken Harris might be falling in love with her filled her with confusion.

Kiko Page surprised her by phoning the next day.

"Cyndy," she said breezily, "I want you and Ken to come to our buffet supper on Sunday evening."

"Thank you. That sounds fun. I'll speak to Ken about it, but I'm sure it will be all right."

"I'm not going to take no for an answer," Kiko told her, laughing. "You were supposed to come ages ago - I just don't know where time gets to. And of course, we have all these upheavals on our side."

Cyndy did not like to ask what the upheavals were about, although Kiko spoke as though she should know.

When Ken and Judd came home to lunch, it being one of the rare occasions when they left the pool site in the middle of the day, Cyndy told Ken about Kiko's invitation. "You don't have to say yes, if you'd rather not go. I could always drive there by myself, I'm an old Berg-ite now."

"Why shouldn't I want to go?" There was a kind of puzzled impatience in his voice.



"I was thinking of - well, if you *do* have a girl, it could cause - ill feeling. It's only natural."

"There isn't a girl involved. There was nothing serious between us. I thought I made that clear. She was just a girl I knew."

"Was?" Cyndy gave him a small tight smile. "Why the past tense?"

"Because that's what it is - past tense." Both were aware of the constraint.

"I keep wishing I could be more useful," she said, changing the subject,

"You are useful," he told her. "You've taken over the books and the ordering and the haggling that goes along with the ordering and having goods delivered and the signing for it. You do the wages, you're organizing a shop - a show pool. I could go on and on"

"Talking about wages," she said, "is it all right if I bring the wages out to the pool site this afternoon? It will save you coming back here for them."

"Fine - if you'd like that."

"I would, very much."

After lunch she did the wages and when she had finished she sat back and eyed the brown packets which she had named and numbered, with satisfaction. Then she carried the cash- box and the ledgers to the safe and put them away. She changed into a black bikini, which went very well with her gold colouring, and lost no time in diving into the pool.

Sunshine sliced over her as she finally emerged from the water which was sparkling and making water noises through being so perfectly

filtered. Reaching for her scarlet and pink towel, she spread it out on the slasto and lay down to sunbathe for about fifteen minutes until it was time to change and collect the pay envelopes and drive out to the pool site.

Max Steele had lodged himself in some inner recess of her mind. It was incredible how time had flown, she thought, since that day at Bill Gantry's when she had discovered the furniture which had been made to her design in the window. The furniture which Max had bought.

Cyndy had not seen Max since the day she had been bitten, although he had phoned three times to find out how she was. She found herself trying to visualise that handsome tanned face, but she couldn't, and she felt impatient with herself.

Later she drove out to the site in the Cortina. The mountains looked calm. She wondered whether Byron had forgotten that he had invited her to go on an organized walk to the Gorge. Then she thought of the buffet supper, to which she had been invited, and wondered whether Max would be there.

The site was at a farm and Ken came forward to meet her.

"Did you remember the pay-packets?" he asked teasingly.

Cyndy noticed how his eyes rested on her mouth, and took her eyes away from him. "Of course I remembered. The pool is coming on, isn't it? I adore the old farmhouse. Tell me, do we have a pool immediately after this one? It just struck me, I haven't seen you busy on a plan. I've been so busy with other things that I haven't noticed what's going on." She gave him an almost frightened look. It was strange, she thought, but she couldn't even remember Blue Champagne having quoted a price recently.

"No," Ken answered. "We don't have a pool immediately after this one."

In the background of their conversation the Africans were chanting as they worked.

Cyndy's heart stood still. "You mean we - we've run out of pools?"

"For the moment, yes. It goes that way. Something else will crop up. It always does."

She thought of Max, with his huge guniting concern tucked away in the background somewhere. Max, who did not need to build pools in the Berg area like she did. She began to seethe. The Kathlamba contract, just to name one, would have meant so much to Blue Champagne.

"What do we do, then?" Her voice was taut, but she took a long calming breath and smiled. "So, Ken, what do we do?"

"Well, we get on with making our coping tiles and experimenting with our pre-cast walling." Suddenly he gave her a big grin. "No, actually, we do have something."

"What?" She sounded as she felt - vastly relieved. After all, she hadn't been brooding over figures for nothing the last two weeks. - Sometimes when she studied the books she was staggered at the amount of money which seemed to have been paid out over the last two years - long before her time. She found herself wondering where it all came from and how Blue Champagne went on making more.

"We have a pool repair job to do, after this pool."

"One of our pools, do you mean?" She sounded depressed, and he laughed as she asked, "Did something go wrong with one of the pools which we built?"

"No. This is one of those 'do-it-yourself' efforts. The whole pool has to be emptied. Then apart from all that, this fanner is going to town on

his pool. He has great ideas. He's having psychedelic designs painted on the bottom of the pool. This job is, in other words, not only a repair job but a complete pool revamp. It will keep us busy for a time."

"Who's going to do the painting on the bottom?" she asked.

"Me," he grinned.

"You?"

"Yes. I've done one before. You can help, if you like. Your posters do you credit."

"I'd do anything," she told him earnestly. "I mean that. I'd even dig, as I told you once before," she laughed.

"Let me drive you back in the car after the men have been paid," said Ken.

Uneasy again, she queried, "But what about Judd? Won't he mind?"

"Why should he? It makes no difference to him whether I happen to be in the truck or not."

"Well, all right." She tried to keep her voice lightly indifferent.

On the way back her green eyes ranged over the mountains, which she had grown to love. Berg and sky were mistily fused along the horizon. She tried to shut her mind to the fact that Ken's attitude towards her was subtly changing.

## CHAPTER IX

As she dressed for the buffet supper at the Kathlamba Hotel Cyndy's thoughts brooded on Max Steele. Taking into consideration his interest in Avril Goddard, she surmised that Max would be present at the buffet.

There was something about the vast, haunting mountains that she did not like. It made her think of bad weather. Before leaving for the hotel in Ken's car, she asked, "What do you think of the weather? "

They were in the lounge and, moodily, she watched Ken as he went to the corner of great windows. "It might storm," he answered. "Not now - later, possibly."

"That's exactly what I've been thinking. What do you think we should do? Should we phone Kiko and call the buffet off? I'm thinking of the condition of the road, should there be rain. It must get terribly muddy. I should hate to stick."

"We'll manage," he said. "It's not as bad as that. Byron has a grader on, up at their end. I saw it today - when I happened to be up that way, as a matter of fact. From time to time they have the road done up."

"Would you like to use the Cortina?" she asked. As she spoke the words a great surge of excitement leapt through her. It was still like a dream - some wild, wonderful dream - and suddenly she felt very lovely and very successful standing there in the wonderful room.

"Tell me," she said, "was this house redecorated very recently? Everything looks so new. It even smells new."

Ken's brown eyes flickered around the room. "Yes. Cliff was always arty, as you've heard, no doubt. In any case, I guess you can see that for yourself. Oddly enough, he was also as hard as nails underneath.

Underneath *that*, again, he was as soft as butter. He had a building business in Newcastle, as you know."

"I know so little, actually," she murmured "Was that wheal you met the girl?"

"If you must keep going back to her - well, yes, it was." He sounded impatient. "But that's another story. That girl means nothing to me. However, as I was saying, Cliff had this business in Newcastle and then he got a bee in his bonnet that he was going to pack it up and move to the Berg. I think his health had begun to Worry him even then."

"Was Judd with him as well - in Newcastle ? "

"Yes. We began to build pools here in the Berg. Cliff had this house built. He asked Judd and Norah to stay on. It always worked very well."

"But what I can't understand is, what did he know about building pools if he was a building contractor?"

"There was another fellow with us - Jan Bartman. Jan knew all there was about pools. He used to work for Hollyreef Pools, in Johannesburg, and then he came to work for Cliff."

"What happened to Jan Bartman?"

"Well, eventually he - pulled out."

"Where to?" Somehow she knew the answer in advance.

"Need you ask? He pulled out mid went to work for Max Steele."

"I see." Something had begun to boil inside her. "I take it that Max Steele must have enticed Jan Bartman away?"

"Well, Cliff had his views on the subject, of course."

"And you - what were your own views ?"

"I had my own views."

After a moment she said, "Why do you think my uncle had this house redecorated when everything must have really been rather lovely the way it was?"

There was a small silence and then Ken said, "I think he must have had you in the back of his mind. In fact, I know that you were at the back of everything he did - in the end. I think his doctor pretty well prepared him for what was going to happen."

Her green eyes were tragic. "You knew, of course," she said, "that he lost his bride in an avalanche? Mr. Sebel told me all about it and then, later, my relatives spoke about it when they heard of my inheritance. From what I got to find out Cliff Collins had almost disappeared into the blue. Nobody ever heard much from him."

She began searching the room with her eyes for her bag. "I guess it's almost time to leave for the hotel," she said.

As she walked to the chair, where she had tossed the bag, she said, "I can never get used to all this. In my wildest dreams I never imagined anything like this would happen to me. Why *me*?"

"I'm glad it happened to you." His voice was soft. "I'd rather it had happened to you than to anybody else, Cyndy." His tension communicated itself to her and she dropped her lashes, not wanting to look at him.

As they were driving in the direction of the hotel sheet lightning was playing amongst the mountain peaks in the clouds which had taken

the place of the mist. The beauty of the display prompted Cyndy to say, "It looks wonderful - out there, at a distance."

The Kathlamba welcomed them with its lights.

Flowers were arranged in great beaten copper jugs. African waiters, wearing white jackets and scarlet cummerbunds, threaded about with timeless patience.

Avril Goddard was behind the desk, but she did not look up as Ken and Cyndy entered the foyer. Ken led the way to the dim, expensive-looking ladies' bar, which was fairly empty. There was a kind of tension in the air, leading up to an electric storm.

Beyond the bar terrace there was a view of the mountains which seemed to be clinging together for support against the possible onslaught of the storm.

Thinking of the storm, Cyndy asked, "What do they do after the buffet supper? Dance?"

"There's usually a movie. Your pet aversion usually works the projector as a favour. Otherwise, Mike the barman works it while Byron takes over here at the African Drum."

"Oh," she tried to keep her voice normal, "so that's the set-up?" The tension, which had gradually built up and then relaxed, under the suavity of cocktails, suddenly stepped up again at the mention of Max's name.

The soft lighting gave life to Cyndy's golden skin, as she sipped her drink. Her thoughts were busy on Max Steele, measuring the harm that he must have done her uncle by enticing Jan Bartman from Blue Champagne Pools.



Ken placed his fingers over her hand, which was resting on the counter and, confused, she did not like to appear churlish by taking her hand away. Underneath his fingers, however, her own were redness.

Naturally, she thought bitterly, Max Steele would choose this particular moment to come through to the bar. Avril Goddard was with him. Out of the corner of her eye she watched Max guide Avril a careful two stools away.

"You look suddenly unnerved," Ken commenced. There was a pause. "Often I find myself wondering whether you've grown to care for Max."

Expelling a short impatient breath, Cyndy said, "If anything, we have resumed hostilities." On purpose, she moved her shoulder closer to Ken, although she knew this was not being fair to him. She wanted Max to see her like this. When the right time arose she intended to look right through Max -to snub him.

There was a rumble of thunder and she turned restlessly on her stool, swivelling it around so that she could look through the glass doors leading out to the terrace. There was fierce lightning between mountains and sky. "It's definitely going to storm madly," she said, slanting a look at Ken. "Don't you think we ought to go back home? We could have something to eat there. I'm pretty good at rustling up a quick meal - something I miss, as a matter of fact." She laughed lightly, not wanting him to think that she was working at being alone with him.

He swivelled round on his stool. "This will pass over by the time we've eaten and watched a film. Relax."

Two stools away Avril Goddard, effortlessly stunning, laughed huskily, and Cyndy turned back to the counter again. Leaning

forward slightly, she made a pretence of looking into Ken's face, whereas in fact she was studying Avril through the corner of her eye. The other girl's cheekbones were somewhat high and angled and she was wearing a caftan made from coarse bronze material. Cyndy felt the way she always hated to feel, and that was - jealous. She was jealous of Avril Goddard and found herself wishing that she had worn something else besides her loose-knit yellow trouser suit which, although very light, could be snug if the weather changed. Kicking one slim-trouser leg lightly against the kick-rail, she made a big thing of smiling at Ken just as Max turned his head in their direction.

Maybe, she was thinking, she should have worn her favourite black trouser suit, the jacket of which was lined with emerald green, to match her eyes. The outside of the jacket was emblazoned with an Oriental serpent, richly outlined with gold embroidery and filled in with glittering coloured beads. Certainly it would not have been out of place.

Soon after they had heard the muted chimes they slid from their stools and began to make their way to the dining-room, but Max and Avril remained seated, sipping at their drinks and talking in low, confidential tones. Max looked up and Cyndy looked right through him and was rewarded by a questioning look of baffled and angry surprise.

After serving themselves at the long tables guests carried their plates to tables. Without being really conscious of the fact, Cyndy's dyes constantly brooded in the direction of the French doors, at the far end of the room as she looked for Max and Avril. Then she caught her breath as they walked in. Before she could look away Max gave her a quick hard look.

Suddenly Ken laughed with candid delight. "I find that very funny," he said.

"I am pleased to see that you are not unduly upset about it." There was an edge to Cyndy's voice.

The food was excellent, but she could not relax and enjoy it. Some time later they went back to the buffet tables and were served by Byron and Kiko, who ladled out generous helpings of trifle and thick fluffy farm cream. It was a deliciously personal touch, somehow. The Pages certainly knew how to make their guests feel good.

Back at the table and ignited by pre-dinner drinks, food and good wine, Cyndy said recklessly, "I love this wine, Ken."

"Well," he gave her a smile, "a Riesling is a thoroughbred -so you should."

"You know," she took another sip of the wine, "underneath everything Max Steele is just a scheming devil."

"What do you mean - underneath everything?" Ken's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Underneath all that charm - you know." She lifted her candle-flame lit eyes from her bowl of trifle. "Anyway," she shrugged, "I don't want to talk about him."

"Wouldn't that be destroying the routine?" She was aware of the sarcasm in his voice. "Somehow his name keeps cropping up in every conversation we ever have."

"It's the things he does," she replied stiffly. "It makes it a temptation to go on talking about him. I feel I just want to - want to --"

"Go on. What to - what?"

"Not talk about him." She lifted one shoulder.

"That would be a relief," Ken answered.

Once, when Max caught her eye again, he gave her a long private look. It was a look which seemed to indicate that, while he was baffled about her behaviour towards him, he was not particularly upset about it and intended to play it her way. "Next time you get bitten by a horse," his eyes seemed to say, "I'll make sure I'm not in on the scene."

By the time the film show started the storm broke with a frightening violence. One of the lounges, which was also used for dancing on certain nights, had been quickly converted into a place for showing films and Max took his place at the back of the audience where he was to work the projector which was situated right next to the huge sunfiltered-curtained windows. Lighting cut through the almost transparent material and stabbed at the room.

The film was exciting and very fitting to the occasion with shooting and the noise which goes along with it. Cyndy's mind focused on the storm and on Max, who sat so dangerously near to the windows. Once she turned her head so that she could get a glimpse of him just as his face was suddenly lit by lightning. There was a hint of ruthlessness about him as, unconcerned, he dedicated himself to the task of entertaining the guests. Cyndy's nerves were taut with the promise of tea at interval.

Ken, on the other hand, appeared to be doing his best to touch her, whenever the occasion presented itself, and, reaching for her fingers he said, "Relax - there's nothing to worry about."

"I'm not worried," she whispered, listening to the rain as it drummed down outside. She felt herself freezing because of the hint of intimacy in Ken's attitude towards her.

Flickering and forked bands of light broke the blackness of the big room while, at one end, the waiters, who had been looking at the film, began to edge towards the glass doors. On the other side, the tea things were being set out, by more waiters, on a long table.

When the lights finally went up Cyndy let out a long breath. "Whew!" she exclaimed, "what a storm! My nerves feel shattered."

As they stood next to the table, waiting for their tea to be poured, she was aware of Avril, standing next to Max. Tall and long-legged Max always made his presence felt by women and, resentfully, she watched him ... flinching, from time to time, as the hotel reverberated with thunder.

Once, when she was doing her best to show Ken attention, Max's eyes insisted that she look at him and she sensed the hostility which seemed to be growing as he puzzled over her attitude towards him. Outside, a mounting wind carried the sound of rain and leaves blowing about in the rain. Cyndy felt the stirring of fresh fear when she thought about the drive home.

On the way back to watch the film show Avril spotted them. "Hello," she said, "*enjoying* yourselves?" She did not wait for an answer.

There was a volume of talk as the guests began surging to find their seats for the second half of the show. Cyndy found that she was trembling when she got back to her seat. It was not something which had been included in her make-up - this cold-bloodedly having snubbed somebody as she had just , snubbed Max.

"Nice work," commented Ken. "You're even better at this game than your uncle was."

"I don't want to talk about it," she said, and sat still trembling, with the memory of Max's blue eyes. They had promised trouble.

When the film came to an end she said, "That was some show - what with all the shooting and the storm. I don't know when I was last so tense."

Glancing at his watch, Ken said, "We have time for one drink before the pub closes and then we'll be on our way. The storm has just about blown itself out."

"There's still the question of the road," she reminded him.

"Let me cope with the road," he grinned at her. A couple of weeks ago she would have warmed to that smile, but now she treated it with caution.

The bar was busy, but not full. Byron was behind the counter helping Mike to dispense drinks. In between the rituals of measuring tots he said, in his usual careless way, "Looks like you two are going to have to spend the night here. The road down to the gates is washed up - mud right up to your elbows."

"You must be joking, surely?" Cyndy's face was strained.

"I'm not joking," Byron answered as he turned away to attend to someone. It was strange, she thought, but she had had a feeling - a sort of premonition - about this happening. She glanced down at her yellow trouser suit which, if the worst came to the worst, would be suitable to wear in the morning. That was one consolation, she told herself.

Byron turned to them again. He was in one of his mocking moods. "You'll just have to sleep in your skin, Cyndy, unless Kiko comes to the rescue."

"We'll get by," said Ken. "I've had to cope with muddy roads before tonight."

Byron made an impatient gesture. "I'm telling you, man, the road is out. I had a grader on the thing and that just put the final touches to it. I'll get a gang on to it in the morning - by noon tomorrow you should be on your way - if you're lucky," he laughed.

"Okay, we'll just have to take pot luck, in that case," Ken shrugged, "unless Kiko comes up with something for Cyndy to wear."

Kiko, as it so happened, came to light with a thigh-high pink nightie and a slightly shorter negligee. "You're in luck," she told Cyndy. "We have one single room left, so you won't have to share. Ken, unfortunately, will have to go in with somebody - but then he's done this before, on the odd occasion, and so he shouldn't mind. I'm putting him in with a lone bachelor, so that shouldn't be any problem."

"You're terribly kind," Cyndy murmured. "I think I'd better phone Norah. They'll worry, most probably, if we don't turn up tonight after this shocking storm."

The smell of rain was everywhere and, outside, the garden sagged in the darkness under the weight of the storm. There was no sign of Max and Avril, and Cyndy felt suddenly depressed. "She was alone in the reception office while she phoned Norah and then, when she had finished, she had to cross a long veranda, which was open on one side, in order to get to her room. When she saw Ken she felt her muscles go tight.

"Well," he came towards her, his fair hair shining in the light which fell from wall-type copper lanterns running the full length of the veranda, "are you all sorted out - you don't have to sleep in your skin?" He looked at her in a way which was frankly disturbing.

"No, everything has been taken care of. Kiko has come up with a thigh-high pink nightie, face cream and tissues." Immediately she regretted the careless words.

"I'd love to see you in a thigh-high pink nightie," he said softly.

"I've also phoned Norah," she cut in quickly, "to explain about not going home."

"By the way, you're number thirty-nine. I'm in forty-two quite close, but not close enough, though I guess you know that, Cyndy?"

"You're close, enough." She gave him a firm, but friendly glance. "I've been thinking about the new pool and wondering how it has stood up to this violent storm. I hope nothing has happened to it - no caving in."

He treated her remark with amusement. "As usual, your thoughts are on the pool game. Tell me, don't you ever think of anything else - of enjoying yourself?"

"Weren't you worried when you heard that storm?" She chose to ignore his remarks. "It simply poured. The rain could have done terrific damage to a pool under construction. Even I know that. Look what it did to Byron's road, for instance."

"Byron did that to the road himself." There was an awkward silence and then he said, "You look wonderful in this light - in that yellow thing. Yellow suits you - but then so does every other colour I've seen you wearing."

This was something she had been expecting.

"Thank you. I can't think why I should be looking - *wonderful*. I'm shrieking for a bath and bed, so I'll say goodnight, Ken." She placed her hand on the door-handle. It was very quiet in this part of the hotel. Everybody seemed to have gone straight to bed after the film show. There was just the sound of water dripping from the leaves."So soon?" he asked. "Cyndy, I know that this could get me kicked out of



Blue Champagne, but I can't get you out of my mind, do you know that?"

"It *could* get you - kicked out," she laughed lightly, trying to make fun of his remark. "I mean, it's kind of silly, isn't it?"

"Not silly. You may as well know the lot - I'm crazy about you."

In the distance, lightning illuminated the rim of the ancient, brooding Drakensberg range.

"My one interest right now, Ken, happens to be my business. I don't treat my inheritance lightly."

"I'm not asking you to treat it lightly. I'd take care of it for you. You shouldn't be burdened with everything."

"I don't feel burdened. As I've just said, it's my one interest in life, right now."

"And-Max Steele?"

"Well, yes, I happen to be very interested in Max - but not in the way you think." Her lashes flickered.

It was always the way, she thought bitterly, after it was all over. One minute a girl could be handling something like this quite capably and the next she could find herself in a man's arms and never quite know how it happened.

While Ken kissed her she felt a rush of hopeless, muddled affection for him - because she *liked* him. But she was furious with him, and when he released her she said, "Ken, I'm furious about this, really I am. If we're going to work together this sort of thing could spell disaster. We might well end up having to put an end to carrying on together."

"I don't see why," he said, and at that particular moment, aware of a movement at the far end of the veranda, she looked up and saw Max coming towards them. He was obviously going to spend the night at the Kathlamba and on his way to his room, and as he passed them he said, looking at Cyndy, "A stormy start to your *partnership*, isn't it?"

"And you're always in on the scene, aren't you?" she retorted. "You have this knack of always showing up - dead on time."

With a quick movement she opened the door to her room and closed it without even saying goodnight to Ken.

Although she felt desperately tired she knew that it was going to be a long time before she slept. Later she sat up in bed, wearing Kiko's thigh-length pink nightie, with her knees pulled up to her chin, thinking about Max - loathing him.

## CHAPTER X

SOON after the maid brought her morning coffee Cyndy got up.

It was absolutely unbelievable, but on the highest peaks of the mountains there was snow. Apart from the glittering raindrops, flattened leaves and petals on the lawns there was little evidence of the storm of the night before. The sharp drop in temperature had been noticeable through the night, though, and a chill had come into the air and Cyndy was thankful of her light but snug trouser suit.

She found herself wondering how Max Steele's pool had stood up to the rain and half hoped that something awful would have happened - even at the risk of inconvenience to Byron and Kiko. Because it was early, she decided to take a walk in the garden and see for herself. The mountain air was stimulating and the sun's golden fingers filtered down on the snowcapped peaks and they surrendered themselves to its touch. Cyndy picked her way with care, in her bronze evening sandals.

The pool looked serene, trapping the sun diamonds. It wasn't even particularly dirty, although there were leaves at the bottom and a layer of fine sand here and there, as a result of the storm. Max's Berg Pool gave little indication that there had been a storm - not even a pool of water to show that there was an accidental irregularity in the wide slasto apron.

As she turned, she looked right into Max's handsome face and hoped she had not shown the panic that had washed over her at the sight of him. "Dead on time again," she said, and waited for him to join her.

"I saw you," he said, "and decided to join you. What is it you want to know this time?"

"I may be wrong, but I don't think there's a law against taking a walk in the hotel grounds." She was having to defend herself again and this made her furious.

"I for one utterly approve of walking," he told her. "I'm just not sure that I approve of where you ended up. For all I know, you might well be stealing more ideas."

Here was her chance. He had given her an opening right away. "Just in the same way you and Bill Gantry between you stole mine?" She tried to steady her voice and her breathing.

"I can understand the Bill Gantry part of it - but why am I involved?"

"Oh, come!" Her voice had risen. "You don't have to try and string me along. I know all about the furniture you bought from him - the furniture which was made to my design." She moistened her lips and took a shaky breath. "I want to make this perfectly clear, Mr. Max Steele, that if you intend selling those chairs and that table, or intend having more made, I'll - I'll consult my lawyer!"

His blue eyes held hers with sudden intensity. "So that's the way you see things ? That's what you think of me ? "

"You're a fraud," she told him.

"Well," he shrugged, "it takes a fraud to recognise a fraud."

"I'm no fraud. I'd like to know what that remark is supposed to mean."

"It means simply this - you know nothing about running a pool business. That makes you a fraud. Another thing - while I happen to admire a fighter I despise a fool."

"And I'm a fool?"

'Yes. I've already tried to warn you that there's no money in pool building here in the Berg. There just isn't enough scope. Do you really think you can make it, Cyndy? Ask yourself these questions - is it going to be to your advantage to go on with poolside furniture, plants, planters to put the plants into, fancy trolleys on thick rubbery tyres, portable cabanas and what have you? Can't you see you're heading for a nosedive? You aren't outsmarting me. Hasn't Ken Harris taken the trouble to put you wise on a few things, or is this his way of making sure he'll be in a position to buy you out at a niceeasy figure, to suit his pocket?"

"How did you find out about all these things ?" she asked.

"I made it my business to find out."

"To get back to my chairs and the table to go with them. You bought them from Bill Gantry because I happened to have put the idea into your head, let's face it. You intend to have them copied."

There was a pause. "My very precious Cyndy, you'd better do some thinking as to why I bought them - but you can have them back, if you like."

Confused by anger, she burst out, "I once told you to get out of my life. I wish you would do this and - stay out!"

"I wondered about the change in you." He spoke in a soft, almost reproachful voice.

"Well, now you know."

He gave her an amazed angry look.

"I'll tell you something else," she went on. "I've never disliked anybody as much as I dislike you."

"So now I have it in a nutshell?"

"Yes." She was ashamed to discover that she was shaking - worse still, that she wanted to cry.

An icy blast was coming off the mountain tops, aggravating her trembling in the bright but feeble sun.

"People like you," she went on, when she had control of herself, "people like you are always out to smash somebody. Everything you do or say is weighed by profit and loss, advantage and disadvantage. Oh, I can see how you got where you are - how you got your so-called great name." She knew it was a stupid thing to have said, but at least she was back on ground she knew - she was quarrelling with him.

"Where have I got?" he asked.

"You don't have to build pools here in the Drakensberg mountains - you, with your huge guniting concern tucked away somewhere, whereas building pools happens to be my life, just as it was to my uncle. Building pools is a pleasant little sideline to you - something to keep you amused while you hang around the Kathlamba so that you can be near Avril Goddard while she makes up her mind about marrying you. While you live in your fancy mountain chalet, giving parties at which you seldom if ever eat, you make sure that you have the monopoly in these parts."

"And who should have the monopoly - *you*?" Their eyes met and held in conflict. "You and Ken Harris? Look, why don't you try giving your own estimating on what's supposed to be 'common knowledge' in these parts a chance? You might gain very much if you stopped listening to a lot of trashy gossip about me and my guniting concern - and Avril Goddard. You might also learn something to your advantage about your furniture, which just happens to be at my chalet

where it happens to be doing far less damage than it would be in Bill Gantry's shop window."

"Yes, I'm sure," she said sarcastically.

As always, she found herself marvelling at the colour of Max's eyes, and the colour made her dislike him more. No eyes with that deep shade of blue should belong to a man like Max Steele.

"Well, Cyndy," he drew her name out on a long breath, "I guess if you want to be 'poolside happy' that's your affair."

"Yes, I guess it is - and if you're quite through insulting me, I'd like to go and have my breakfast."

"If you can find anybody stopping you, I'll call a policeman," he said, and his voice sounded bitter.

"Snipe away!" she said wildly. "Keep on with this merciless barrage - tormenting me with your sarcasm!"

Brushing past him, she ran in the direction of the hotel, her bronze sandals squelching on the spongy, rain-moist lawn.

When she was in the foyer Kiko said, from behind the long counter, "Hi there. Have you had breakfast, Cyndy?"

"No. I've just been for a little walk - admiring the snow. It's fabulous."

"It's a wonderful morning," Kiko answered. "Everybody is thrilled to bits about the snow, of course." She laughed. "It will soon melt, though, so there's going to be a lot of disappointment. I'll show you where to sit. By the way, where's Ken?"

"I don't know. Still sleeping, most probably. After all, it's still early." Cyndy kept trying to dredge up smiles.

Moodily she watched Kiko as she left the reception desk. She disappeared through a door at the far end for a moment, then joined Cyndy in the foyer. In her usual carefree style she said, "Look, darling, just go straight through to the dining- room and right up to the end, where the sideboards are."

"Talking about the sideboards," Cyndy said, "I adore all those mountain grasses you have in those great pottery containers, Kiko. I've never seen the likes of it."

"They certainly are eye-catchers," Kiko answered. "I've told them to put you at the last table in the row, Cyndy - the one next to the windows on the left."

"Have you any idea when the road will be passable?" Cyndy asked.

"Byron has a gang on it, right at this moment. This has only happened because we were busy having it done up at the time of the storm. If it had only stormed tonight, instead of last night, this would never have happened, but there you are. ... Give it a couple of hours, I should say, then you can be on your way, I've told them to put the three of you at one table, by the way. Okay?"

Wondering who "the three" were, apart from herself, Cyndy made her way to the dining-room, where the sun streamed in at the windows with their heavy yellow sun-filter curtains.

Johannes, the head waiter, came forward in his royal-blue trousers and white jacket, buttoned up to the neck. Cyndy ordered grapefruit juice and sat back, her eyes flickering around the massive room. The holidaymakers appeared to be keyed up because of the snow which had momentarily changed their summer holiday into a fascinating winter one. Logs blazed in the huge stone fireplaces with their copper cowl.



There was no sign of Ken. When Max came up to the table she was busy with her bacon, sausage and scrambled eggs. Looking down at her, he said, "We seem to be stuck with each other. I'm sorry. This is embarrassing, but it wasn't my idea, I can assure you."

Cyndy made no reply. What was the use? She was not in a position to cause a scene.

While she drank her coffee she tried not to be aware of Max and allowed her gaze to travel beyond the windows where the leaves were beautifully ruffled, stirring in the chilled air, which was like champagne. On the other side of the windows a yellow rambling rose gave off a heavy perfume. It should have all been so exhilarating.

"You're quite a girl," Max said suddenly. "Determined to find out everything the hard way."

With deliberate calmness she stood up. "Excuse me," she said, for the benefit of people around them.

He half rose. "Certainly."

"You really depress me," she whispered, for his ears alone.

"Oh, you'll get over it." He gave her an easy, mocking smile.

It had been a morning of errors on her part, she thought. Why did she have to go and look at the pool? By doing this she had played right into Max's hands.

As she went through the French doors she met Ken. His fair hair was still damp from the shower. "I've been looking for you," he said. "Where did you get to? Were you admiring the snow?"

"Yes." Her voice was abrupt. "I was, actually."

"Last night," Ken's voice and grin were sheepish, "after I left you - or rather, after you closed your door in my face - I went wild. I met a fellow I knew and we had a party in his room. Actually, my head isn't very partial to this unseasonal snow-laced mountain breeze."

"In other words," childishly, she took her spite out on him, "you became just a little drunk? It must have been some party."

"It went on too long, that's all."

"You'd better go and have your breakfast, if you can face eating," she said. "You have company, by the way. Max Steele is at the table. I take it the other place was set for Avril."

"Oh well," Ken rubbed a hand across his chin, "I've long since learned to combine the bad with the good. I'm looking forward to when we get back and I can have a shave."

"You look fine. Talking about combining the bad with the good! You must teach me how it's done. I still have a lot to learn, apparently."

"How was the breakfast?" Ken asked. "The party wasn't that hectic that I can't do justice to my breakfast."

"Fine. There were some marvellous hot scones. They just about melted in the mouth."

By late afternoon the road was ready for use. A grader had piled mud on either side, but there was still a lot of work to do and Ken had to devote all his attention to driving. His movements were quick and restless and Cyndy had the feeling that he had a headache, as a result of the party the night before.

Assessing him with a long candid gaze, she observed, "You look as though you're suffering from a hangover."

"I'm still trying to work out how I got that way," he laughed. "I'll never know whether it was my own choice or whether I was talked into drinking too much, but having a blow-out must have been at the back of my mind, I suppose."

The way in which he said this made her feel that *she* had been at the back of him having a blow-out.

"Do you know what I've been brooding about?" she asked.

"No-what?"

"Our pool under construction. I've been wondering whether last night's storm could have caused any damage to it. Remember, you and Judd said that there were water problems on that site. Didn't you say there was an underground stream running right across the centre of the ground?"

"Actually, my thoughts have been running along the same lines."

"How far are you with this pool?" She was frankly agitated now.

"It's all ready for guniting."

Because by this time she knew a little about pool building she put her fingers to her lips. "Oh, no...! That could mean trouble, couldn't it? In a storm like that one?"

"It's no use looking on the black side. We'll just have to wait and see," he told her..

When they got back to the house Norah told them that Judd was at the site and, glancing at his watch, Ken said, "Shaving will have to wait. I'll drive out and see what's happened."

"Take me with you," begged Cyndy. "Please, Ken."

"Well, okay - but can we get going? "

"Of course, but let me get into some old jeans. I won't keep you, I promise. It might be muddy."

Ken's laugh was short. "Might?"

At the pool site, they picked their way through mud and pools of water.

"It strikes me," Ken was saying, "that I didn't get traditionally drunk for nothing last night, taking it all round."

At the far end Judd and the Africans were busy working. The pool, which was under construction and ready for guniting, was honeycombed with steel, and even to Cyndy's inexperienced eyes, the damage caused by rain and washaways was enormous.

"The steelwork looks quite ruined," she said, "and just look at all that water! It's simply pouring in. The excavation over there seems to have caved in such a lot - in fact, sand is still falling into it."

In his present mood Judd regarded them morosely. "Well," he nodded his head in the direction of the damage, "this is going to set us back a packet."

Something felt as though it was going to die, inside Cyndy, and then it slowly started. "It - it's not going to finish us off ' - financially, is it? I mean, we should be able to cope ?"

"One always has to allow for setbacks in this game," Judd told her.

Thinking of the beautiful house, the new and beautiful furniture, the golden Cortina, Cyndy said, "I just hope it's not going to involve a huge amount. Some of the figures I've been going through lately worry me."

That night she dreamed incoherently and frighteningly. When she awoke the chill had left the air and the heat was increasing steadily, melting the snow, even where the sun could not get at it.

She was filled with an angry disappointment that she had slept too late to go with Ken and Judd to the site. While she knew there was absolutely nothing she could do she wanted, nevertheless, to be there.

While she knew that she could drive out there herself she was reluctant to make a fool of herself in front of busy and harassed workmen.

After breakfast, which she had on the veranda, she went into the study and got out the books and worked on them for about an hour, impatient for Judd and Ken to get back with some news. When lunch was over she went to the shop and worked there, moving this and that and watering plants with huge exotic flowers. She even dusted the leaves.

The air was smelling of cooling mountains and woodsmoke by the time the men arrived back and she ran out to meet them. "How did things go?" she asked.

"So-so," Ken replied. He looked tired and unshaven and a little withdrawn. He must be worried, she thought. She had never seen him look unshaven apart from the morning at the hotel when there had been an excuse for it owing to the fact that he had been without a razor.

"It'll come right," he said. "It takes time, that's all."

"And money," she said tightly.

"And money."

"Well," she shrugged with a cheerfulness she did not feel, "we'll just have to keep on making more, won't we?"

Days drifted by. There was the news of the promise of three more pools. Cyndy found herself singing again.

In Lindeque, she found a woman who was a wizard at making cushions and cushion-covers. Material had to be hunted for - and bought. Once she went with Judd and Norah to Durban, and while Judd was attending to business, she and Norah had chosen some material which would make a big impact beside the blue water of a pool. The material, in exciting shades of ivory, cream, chrome yellow, tangerine, peach shades and iris, was nothing short of sensational, Cyndy thought.

Often she swam in the pool and would relax for long golden moments in the sun. She became visibly more golden and lovely with each day. She talked Norah into allowing her to cook and to try her hand at baking. She arranged flowers and found herself wishing that there was somebody to admire them and toyed with the idea of entertaining. She thought about Max, but heard nothing about him.

Several times Ken drove up to the house with people who were either having a pool built or contemplating having one built. They came to look at the pool in the garden which was considered now as their "show" pool. There were several orders for poolside furniture and plants.

There were a number of gaily patterned sun-umbrellas in the shop. These were the result of a scoop buy on Cyndy's part when she had

driven all the way to Ladysmith to buy them. She had used the light truck, in order to bring her scoop back, but the fact that she had experienced the greatest embarrassing moments of her life parking the truck was a secret she intended to carry to her grave.

Another setback seemed to be looming up. There was talk, now, between Ken and Judd, about the guniting machine, which appeared to be giving trouble. Listening to them, Cyndy felt her restlessness mount.

"Let me try to understand this," she said, one evening. "Does this mean that our guniting machine is on its last legs?"

Judd's half smile showed what he was thinking. "Well, it's been giving trouble for some time now."

She tried to be intelligent about this. "Something is wearing out, I take it? What I'm driving at is this - do we need new parts or a new machine ? This is the big question."

"We'll let you know, all in good time," Judd grinned. "Let me and Ken do the worrying."

"Yes, but what's wrong with the wretched thing?" She made no effort to curb her impatience.

"You wouldn't know, even if I told you - so why worry?"

"But I am worried." Her thoughts went to Max who had no worries of this nature - Max with his huge guniting concern tucked away in the background, "We simply must make more money - that's all it amounts to," she said.

"What did you have in mind?" Judd's soft voice was mocking.

At this stage the telephone rang, and while she went to answer it, Judd left the study. Ken, however, remained standing making a show of leafing through some papers.

"Cyndy," Kiko said over the phone, "do you remember, a long time ago, we spoke about a walk to the Gorge?"

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. It was soon after I arrived here."

"Don't remind me of the fact," Kiko laughed. "I should have been in touch with you ages ago. We've done countless walks since then. Or should I say, we've organized countless walks since then. I just haven't got round to getting in touch with you. You'll have to forgive me. There's this big deal coming off and the days are simply not long enough."

Cyndy wondered what the big deal was, but although Kiko spoke as though she should know, she did not like to ask. "I quite understand," she said. "We're always so busy this end, as well."<sup>1</sup>

"How's the pool business going?" Kiko asked.

"Oh, fine, thank you."

"Good. Now to get back to the walk. There's going to be one on Thursday. Will you come?"

"Oh --" Cyndy's thoughts flew to Avril Goddard. If Avril was going then the chances were that Max would be going too. "I'd love to," she found herself saying. "Will there be anybody I know on the walk?"

"Yes. Avril is going this time. She hasn't been for ages and ages. We haven't the time here, as you can imagine, to join in with guests, but now and then we take time off to join in."



"I'll know Avril; then." Cyndy's voice had flattened out and, realising this, she laughed lightly.

"That's why I thought about getting in touch with you, as a matter of fact. It would be nice if you knew someone, of course."

It was too late to back out and Cyndy found herself murmuring, "Thank you, I'd love to come."

"I'd just like to clue you up," Kiko went on. "The Gorge is quite a walk. A party sets off soon after breakfast, along with two African guides, and they have a picnic lunch when they reach the Gorge. Soon after lunch they pack up and arrive at the hotel round about sundowner time. That makes it a full day, you might say. But that time, everyone is craving for a hot bath, a delicious drink and then dinner. So what I'd like to suggest is this. You come and spend the night here and enjoy the whole routine from beginning to end. Drive here in the morning, and then stay the night. Come prepared, in other words. It would be absolutely flat for you if you went through all that - because it's quite a stiff walk - and then just hopped in your car and drove yourself home. You'll find that by the end of the walk the people with whom you've been walking will have a whole lot in common with you. It's the surest way to get people to know each other and to mix - send them all on a walk."

"It sounds marvellous," Cyndy murmured again. "Thank you."

"Oh - I nearly forgot, but Max will probably be going too. I've tried to talk him into it. At first he said no - but I think I've got him to agree. Come about eight-thirty, and don't forget to wear comfortable shoes and clothes. What is also important, bring a change of clothing and your sleeping things. Bring something extra glamorous to slip into when you join everybody in the African Drum for a drink."

When she had replaced the receiver Cyndy looked at Ken. "Well, that's me organized to go on a walk to the Gorge on Thursday."

"Walk?" He laughed. "It's no walk. It's an endurance test. Take my advice and carry a packet of those corn and bunion pads with you."

Laughing, she said, "But I don't have any bunions or corns."

"No, but you could well have them around about midday on Thursday."

As she prepared for bed she automatically set aside time to think about Max and Avril Goddard. She also thought about what she would take to wear in the evening. Whatever she decided upon, it would have to be something glamorous to make her feel good and give her all the confidence she needed.

## CHAPTER XI

THE day before the walk to the Gorge, Cyndy drove into Lindeque and bought a pair of walking shoes. Although she possessed a pair of flat-heeled shoes she felt that they were shabby. To be on the safe side, she also bought a packet of bunion and corn pads. There could be something in what Ken said - by midday she might well be suffering from blistered or chafed feet.

At precisely eight-thirty in the morning she brought the Cortina to a halt in the parking area at the Kathlamba Hotel. All the guests who were going on the walk had gathered on the veranda.

It was Avril who arranged for Cyndy to be shown to her room. She looked stunning in a dark brown linen slack suit and suitable walking shoes. The fact that Avril was wearing a dark colour made Cyndy aware, suddenly, that she should have done likewise. As it was she was wearing yellow slacks and a white top.

Avril's dark eyes flickered over the yellow pants and white top. "Did you bring a jersey, by the way?" she asked. "One never knows - it could blow up cold."

"I have brought a jersey," Cyndy answered. "As you say, the weather could always change."

"We'll be leaving in about ten minutes." Avril stretched out for a key and, handing it to a page, she said, "Show Miss Collins to number thirteen, Joseph," and Cyndy, who was not usually superstitious, suddenly felt a tightening of her muscles. "Everybody meets on the veranda, as you probably noticed." Avril looked at Cyndy again, and although she was pleasant enough, she did not seem over-pleased.

Kiko and Byron saw their guests off. In his usual carefree way Byron grinned, "We'll be thinking of you poor devils."

The African guides appeared with three haversacks, which contained food enough for the fourteen people who were going on the walk, and there was some fun as to who was going to help carry them. The guides, who were in command of at least one long walk a week, showed their fitness.

Max arrived at the last moment and Avril said, "I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind."

"I never change my mind," he answered.

In her role of receptionist Avril said, "Before we go let's go over everybody's names. We want everybody to be very matey." Her remark sparked off an immediate burst of goodwill and, to Cyndy's relief, this meant that everybody was at once friendly. Already there was the threat of gathering heat and everybody was equipped with some kind of sun-hat - some of them on the frankly comical side.

For a while both guides led the way, but as the party advanced into the mountains, and as the path narrowed, one guide went ahead while the other took up the rear, thus ensuring that the party was not in danger of breaking up.

Behind a certain hard mockery in Max's blue eyes there had been no other recognition that Cyndy was in the party.

Where her new walking shoes began to show signs of tightness Cyndy told herself that this couldn't be. The shoes were the correct size. Perhaps she should have allowed for swelling of the feet? Keeping to the back of the line, she tried not to think of her feet and joined in the lighthearted, somewhat breathless conversation around her, but the whole time she was chiefly conscious of them as the shoes began to close in. The fact that she was wearing socks did not help, but she knew that she dared not remove them.

Feeling her edginess mount, she took a deep breath of the pure mountain air which even the growing heat could not destroy. Max was way ahead, with his long easy stride, Avril some distance behind and looking just a little sulky. Judging by all the bantering which was going on, Cyndy thought broodingly, the only feet beginning to give trouble were her own. Where had she gone wrong? Should she have worn the shoes she knew? Better the shoes one knew than the shoes one didn't know.

This walking was to go on - and on. She knew that and suffered with every step. On and on - until lunch time, when they would arrive at the Gorge and have a picnic lunch. After a short rest there was the long walk back to the hotel.

Once Max looked back, waiting for the party to catch up. He gave Cyndy what appeared to her way of thinking a long contemptuous glance. For the first time since meeting him, she realised that she was attracted to his looks.

He surprised her some time later, when he allowed the others, including Avril, to pass him. "What's up?" he asked abruptly.

Feeling his strength - and envying it - she said, "Nothing. Why do you ask?" She shifted her straw handbag from one hand to the other. One sleeve of the yellow jersey she had brought along trailed from the bag and she almost held her breath as Max stooped down and put the sleeve in the open top which had no clasp to it.

"This, by the way, happens to be dragging in the dust. You seem to be lagging. What's the matter? What's worrying you?"

"I wasn't aware that I was lagging," her voice was stiff. "I thought I was adjusting my pace all right. I didn't think I was causing a nuisance."

"Nobody said you were a nuisance. However, I stand rebuked."

He began to walk on, ignoring her once more, and she started to follow, last in the line now, except for the guide behind her. She felt a grudging admiration for Avril, who was swinging along in front.

As the day grew hotter the mauve mountains seemed to tremble under the weight of the heat. They continued to keep to paths, following the well-known route to the Gorge. It would have been better walking on a cold, misty day, Cyndy found herself thinking, even if one missed seeing the view. The scenery grew progressively more beautiful, as they followed the paths which clung to the sides of the mountains towering above them. They had walked through several deliciously cool forests where the trees travelled halfway up, as far as they could see, anyway. Then the trees continued to drop down, on the other side of the path, so that they were looking at the tops of them. Often there was the sound of gushing water and, once, three mountain buck scattered away before them and were soon lost in the trees.

Somebody suggested a rest and Cyndy felt a small glow of satisfaction which warmed her own humiliation. When, after the short break, she stood up she noticed with dismay that she had a dark smudge across the legs of her yellow pants. The actual stain was of little importance, but it was the last thing she wanted to happen in front of Avril and Max. Most of the other women and girls present were wearing dark, and even unattractive, slacks. Avril made matters worse by saying, in a loud voice, "Oh, look at your slacks! We should have warned you to forget about trying to appear glamorous and to wear something suitable."

From now on, the guide in front walked on ahead, disappearing from sight in order that he might have the kettle boiling by the time the others caught up to him at the Gorge.

When Cyndy slipped, a short while later, her feet trapped in their tight shoes, she felt a stab of pain in her ankle. Of all the things to happen to her! It was bad enough having to walk in tight shoes, let alone have

twisted her ankle. Fortunately, it was not a serious twist. In fact, nobody, except Max, seemed to have noticed.

The pain was there, bothering her, slowing her down. It was unfair, she thought. Here she was - she glanced around the party - fitter than most people, no doubt, and yet she was fast beginning to let everybody down and all because of a new pair of shoes.

Once she caught Max staring at her as if he did not understand her case. For a moment, she imagined that she could detect sympathy and understanding in his look, but she knew that Max was anything but sympathetic and understanding, so far as *she* was concerned.

In some places it was almost gloomy where mountains, boulders and rocks seemed to close in on them. "How far now?" somebody asked, panting and, laughing, the guide said, "Not far. Now, now the Gorge."

"You said that ages ago," Cyndy teased, trying to join in the fun to disguise the fact that she was practically at the end of her tether. Her mind screamed for a rest, a place to expose her feet to the cool air or, better still, a place to dip them in cold mountain water. She thought of the kettle, boiling now, most probably, and craved for tea.

Walking continued. Her mind was almost a blank now. There was just the pain in her feet. Boulders of all sizes clung to a vast dry river bed. More boulders and mountains, with rock crags, towered above. Trees and scrub clung everywhere. They were in the Gorge and it was a scene of amazing beauty.

"We're not there yet," said Max, as everybody slackened pace. "We still have to keep going."

There was a gasp of disappointment all round. All the despair Cyndy felt at this remark showed in her green eyes as she stared back at him. "Where do we go from here?" she asked, in a small, almost faint

voice. "We are in the Gorge, surely?" She glanced at the sides of the mountains, hemming them in.

"We're at the beginning - we must continue if we're to appreciate the full beauty. Come on, cheer up, the kettle's boiling up there somewhere. It's not far now."

It was a trial for anyone's feet - let alone for somebody with sore feet. Feet which, by the feel of things, must be swollen to twice their size.

"This is nothing short of an achievement," a male voice said. "You can't just call it a walk." He laughed, "I'm about all in!"

Suddenly Cyndy felt better. It was, she thought, an achievement - to be followed by tea, sandwiches, fruit and then the walk back to the hotel. She felt sure that after a rest, with her shoes off, she would be able to cope. There was the promise of a hot bath, a change of clothing, drinks in the discreetly lit cocktail bar.

The Gorge was cast into shadow. Max looked up and so did the guide. "Let's get the last lap over," he said - and so began what was nothing less than a hideous nightmare for Cyndy. Her feet throbbed and smarted and she knew, without even looking, that she had blisters. It was agony to put any weight on her ankle.

Finally they reached the point where they were to stop for lunch. Max came over to where Cyndy sat slumped on a flat rock.

"Why weren't you frank with me ? " he asked.

Lifting her eyes to his, she said, "What do you mean - why wasn't I frank with you?"

"You have sore feet, and you've twisted your ankle into the bargain."

"Not really. I just gave it a turn, so to speak."



"What kind of answer is that? " he snapped.

"Well, what is it you want me to say? What difference does it make whether my feet are sore or whether I've twisted my ankle? I still have to get back, don't I?"

Ignoring her sarcasm, he said, with controlled impatience, "I accept that, but perhaps there's something I can do to relieve the position? Let me give you a couple of dressings for your feet. I brought some along."

"So did I, thank you." Silently, she gave thanks to Ken. She did not feel such a fool now.

"Well, put them on, in that case."

"I intend to - presently," she replied.

"Don't waste time," he told her. "One can't be sure in here, but I think the weather is changing."

Directly she had eaten she meant to dip her feet in the water which lay in a big pool in the fantastic tunnel of sheer rock.

There were signs of lazy surprise when the African guides started packing up. "Time to go." they said. "Weather is not so good."

With the fear of mountain accidents at the back of their minds, everybody began to prepare for the walk back. Often, the most harmless walk could turn into something disastrous in the Berg. One did not necessarily have to be a climber with ropes to meet trouble. A change in the weather could bring about all sorts of complications.

Cyndy went behind a tall rock and began to put on her shoes, which she had taken off while she was eating. There was not going to be time to bathe them or to look out pads and apply them, because it was

quite apparent by this time that the weather was undergoing a rapid change.

She looked up quickly when Max came to stand beside her. Looking down, he said, "Cyndy, if you have any problems now is the time to speak up - before we get going. Let me have a look at your feet."

"No."

"I've formed a good many impressions about you, on this walk," he went on, "and one of them is that you're suffering."

The racing shadows cast a forbidding light across the boulders and the Gorge became a sinister place, somehow - a place to get away from.

"Is it going to storm?" she asked, the thought of that endless walk filling her with despair. Even while she was speaking there was a growl of mountain thunder. "I'll be all right," she told Max quickly. "Just let me put my shoes on in peace."

His eyes did not leave her face. "Make it snappy, then."

"I'll be with you in a moment." She abandoned all hope of having time to dress her blistered feet.

For a while her shoes seemed to behave themselves, although her ankle caused her to limp slightly. She was amazed at the way in which she was able to keep up a brisk pace. In a way, she was almost enjoying herself.

Instead of the stifling heat, now, there was a sudden chill in the air. There was also a keyed-up anxiety about the weather, as thunder continued to growl around the mountain peaks.

An element of danger, after all, is always a stimulating thing.

When the shoes began to hurt again Cyndy was aware of a great surge of hopeless depression. There was so far to go and the weather was becoming more and more threatening every moment. For a brief second she closed her eyes in misery. It was out of the question to try and walk in her bare feet - the path was far too rough and unpredictable. Walking clumsily, she tripped again, wrenching her ankle a second time that day. This time the pain jumped half-way up her leg and she caught her breath.

"It's nothing," she gasped. "Don't stop. Please go on, everyone."

"Oh, no," said Avril. "What's your case, Cyndy?"

"I'll be fine, in a moment. I just twisted my ankle slightly." She felt like fainting, but started to walk, trying her best not to limp in front of Avril.

"Look," Max said, "this girl is in trouble. I'm going to ask somebody to take this haversack from me and I'm going to take it easy with Cyndy while you people go on."

"But why you?" Aral's eyes were hard as she looked at Max.

"Because I happen to know this walk like the back of my hand, that's why." There was impatience in Max's voice.

"It just doesn't make sense," Avril argued.

"It makes all the sense in the world, and I don't want to waste more time arguing about it," he said firmly.

"You should have worn suitable clothes." Avril looked at Cyndy with naked hostility in her dark eyes.

"I have walking shoes - just like everyone else," Cyndy's voice was angry. "I have a hat, a scarf, a jersey, sun-glasses, just like everyone

else. Besides, I don't know what all the fuss is about. I'm ready to keep up."

"Yes, it looks like it," Avril snapped.

"Don't keep on as if people had no feelings at all." Max looked at Avril.

"Thank you. That's a nice remark - talking about *feelings*!" Avril's eyes were blazing.

"There doesn't seem to be any reasoning with you," Max was saying. "Cut it out, Avril."

Cyndy closed her eyes and tried to think of nothing at all for a moment. Her tawny face was pale.

"Cyndy." It was Max's voice and she opened her eyes.

"Yes?"

"From now on, you're going to set your own good pace. We're going to let everybody go on ahead."

To argue with him would have created more tension, so she shrugged her shoulders and stood by, helplessly, while he gave the haversack to one of the other men in the party. (In case he had to end up carrying her, she thought bitterly.)

For a while they could see the party ahead of them before a turn in the path cut them off. "I wish you hadn't done this. I -1 could have managed - somehow," she said.

"Some time ago," said Max, "I said that while I admire a fighter I also despise a fool. At the moment, you're behaving like a fool. Now, let's

stop for a moment while I have a look at your feet. Talking about fools - I was a fool, back there, not to have insisted."

"If you give me five minutes, I'll put some pads on the areas which have become blistered and chafed," she replied. "Unfortunately, instead of wearing old shoes I bought new walking shoes."

"I'll apply the pads," he told her. "How is your ankle, by the way?"

"Oh," she shrugged and tried to smile, "it has its twinges. I'm so sorry about all this. I feel so ashamed. I've gone and ruined everything."

"It's not a catastrophe. You're not the first person to have ended up with sore blistered feet and a twisted ankle and you certainly won't be the last. In the Berg anything can happen. Now, sit over there and let me help you."

Her sigh was one of helpless despair. She did not want him examining, or touching, her feet. His blue eyes looked directly at her. "Cyndy," his voice was soft, "don't hassle me. I'm trying to help you."

So she yielded herself to him, watching him as he applied dressings to her ruined feet. His movements were quick and efficient. She enjoyed watching him, against her will.

"You'll be all right," he grinned.

"I'm all right *now*." She gave him a smile. It was always a surprise when *he* smiled, she thought. His smile softened the seriousness in his face.

They walked through another of the little forests, which clung to the side of the mountain. Layer upon layer of fallen leaves silenced their steps. The light was gloomy and threatening and the thunder seemed to be increasing. It was directly overhead. Cyndy found herself tensing, waiting for the lightning to commence.

When they were through the trees they saw that the savage, gnawed-by-wind mountain peaks were obliterated by cloud. In order to reach the Gorge they had first climbed steadily and then the path had flattened out before it dropped, winding its way down into the cleft between the thickly-vegetated and rocky mountains. This meant, therefore, that she and Max were climbing now, on their way out of the Gorge, and the going was difficult.

Cyndy's hair cascaded about her face and impatiently she shook it back. Occasionally she found herself thinking champagne-gold hair could prove to be a hindrance, for the simple reason that it was so conspicuous. Her scarf and little cloth sun-hat were both in her bag. The whole walk had ended in a disaster for her.

In front of her Max led the way. She felt his strength. A flash of lightning split dark clouds, knotted and heavy with unfallen rain, and this was immediately followed by thunder and another vivid flash.

"We must keep on," Max said, over his shoulder. "It's no use stopping. It serves no purpose."

"I know," she murmured.

The chill in the air had sharpened and she developed goose-flesh. Max stopped. "Put your jersey on," he told her, "but no matter how we look at it, we're in for a soaking."

"I know," she said again, and took a breath.

He waited while she took the yellow jersey from her bag and struggled into it. Her thoughts were mainly on the storm now. It made the soreness of her feet a little easier to bear, somehow.

At first it was a "dry" storm, and that was alarming. She tried not to flinch as the lightning flashed about them. The thunder was ear-splitting. Panic fluttered inside her but she kept on, automatically

placing one foot in front of the other. She found herself wondering how far the other walkers had got.

When hail attacked them it was in a place where the path was completely unprotected. It would be, she thought, while, fine and treacherous, the hail stung their faces.

Suddenly Cyndy began to laugh, shaking back her hair, which was a tangled mass, and taking deep breaths of air while the sharp icy stones thrashed her face. She even tilted her face, making it easier for the hail.

Max stopped walking and gave her a smile. "I'm glad you see the funny side," he said, while she went on laughing until the tears ran down her cheeks. She doubled over, finally, and gasped, "I - I can't help it. This is priceless!"

Immediately the hail stopped rain came racing across the crags, soaking their clothes within a matter of seconds, and, shivering, she continued to laugh as they walked. She felt almost hysterical.

The paths were wet from drifting rain. "Be careful you don't slip," Max called out.

They continued stepping it out and then, suddenly, Max stopped walking and waited on her to catch him up. Her green eyes climbed to the level of his. The smell of rain was everywhere. Unexpectedly, he reached out a hand and pushed her rain-glittered hair back from her face. Lightning struck at the rocks, missing them. It made her feel it was a miracle that she and Max had not been struck. "Once again to the rescue," she said softly, "aren't you?"

"Am I? That sounds like half-way to a reconciliation," he answered, while above them the clouds, like veined marble, were rent apart.

As suddenly as the storm had started it began to pass over and there was only the wind, driving the rain, before them, dripping water, timid bird calls, the rustling of leaves and scents of soil and rain. What was left of the day was left in greyness. Mist wreathed and eddied between the cliffs in the direction of the top of the Gorge, which was well behind them now. To one side, there was an awesome drop and the valley below was shrouded in squalls of rain.

They halted and listened to the baboons barking, but they could not see them. They stood in companionable silence, listening to the barking and to the thunder as it growled its way around the high peaks, and Cyndy savoured the moment before Max would spoil it with one of his sarcastic remarks and before they moved on again and her feet were put to punishment.

"I think I'm going to walk bare-footed now," she said.

"The stones are too sharp," he told her. "Come on, stick it out."

As they settled down to a slow but steady pace, she began to feel cold and cramped and acutely aware of her nagging feet and painful ankle.

Sensing this, Max helped her, wherever the path permitted. "It's nearly over," he told her.

"I'm longing for a bath," she said. "I keep thinking of all that hot, scented, foaming water. I'd - I'd never have been such a failure if it hadn't been for these wretched shoes."

Once, as he held her hand, while she clambered down a steep slope, she said, "I'm usually so strong. I'm actually very tough. I - wish you'd believe this." She fell against him and he steadied her.

"You don't have to prove anything." His voice was short and Cyndy didn't know him again.



Staring up at him, with a mixture of bewilderment and anger, she said, "A person could know you for years and years and *never* know you." She took her hand away and moved from him. "Let's face it, I know what you're thinking and I know what I'm thinking."

"What are you thinking?"

"We could never be friends," she whispered, "you and I."

"No?" She took a breath when he placed both hands on her arms and shook her slightly. "And what's stopping us?" he asked.

Aware of dangerous emotions stirring in her, she shook herself free. "Don't," she said shortly. "Take your hands off me!"

"In a way, you should be complimented," he said sarcastically. "Cliff Collins would be proud of you - carrying on where he left off."

When he gripped her shoulders again she knew that he was going to kiss her. "Don't you think this subject has been exhausted?" he asked, before he kissed her.

She was aware of his lean body against her and, as he kissed her, she tried to keep the interest out of her lips, but against her will she felt them responding to him. She couldn't help it.

Finally he released her, but he kept on looking down at her face. Their eyes clung together and she was aware of the expression in his own - amused and hard. She was furious with herself. "D-damn you!" she snapped. "Damn you, Max!"

"Hadn't you better get around to doing some thinking instead of damning me?" he asked softly.

"Hadn't *you*?" she flung at him, and then stood waiting on him to begin walking.

Once she nearly fell and, tortured beyond words now, she stopped and took off her shoes. Then she threw the shoes into the river which they had just crossed by means of huge stepping stones.

Max threw back his head and laughed, and because she was at the end of her endurance, she shouted, "Go on, laugh! I should have done this a long time ago, way back there. I don't like to be made a fool of and that's exactly what's happened today. I should never have worn new shoes. I should never have worn yellow and white. I should never have allowed my hair to blow all over my face. I should never have consented to stay behind with you."

"How could you have possibly known?" he asked. "You've never walked to the Gorge before."

"I should have made it my business to know. I should never have come, quite frankly."

"I'm very glad you did come. I wouldn't have missed this for anything," he said.

The water gleamed like pewter in the grey light and her olive-green shoes made a small dash of colour beneath it. She stood looking down at them and she could feel the thickness of the mist and rain-laden air - and the tightness in her throat. By the time they reached the hotel every part of her felt ragged. She ached for a bath and to rest before having a drink to pick her up. Surprisingly, she knew that she was hungry, starving, ravenous.

She had made it! Suddenly the nightmare had ended and she even felt a sense of achievement.

When she got to her room she stood and looked at herself in the full-length mirror and did not know whether to laugh or to cry. Then she did neither - because, right then, the phone rang.

"Cyndy!" said Kiko. "You've had everybody frantic with worry, darling, but congratulations on making it. We thought we'd have to send a helicopter out for you."

The second time the telephone rang was when she had just gone through to the bathroom. With a little sigh she came back into the bedroom to answer it. This time it was Ken. "Hello," he said. "How was the walk?"

She made a face. "Fine," she said. "We've just got back, actually."

There was a slight pause. "So late?"

"Well, a little while ago."

"Was - Max Steele there?" he asked, sounding as if he had given this more than usual thought.

"Yes, he was. What can I do for you?" Suddenly she felt impatient with Ken for phoning.

"I thought I'd let you know that the gunniting machine has finally packed up."

"Oh, no!" she whispered, dismayed. "What are we going to do?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," he told her. After he had rung off she asked herself why he could not have kept this news back until tomorrow. It almost seemed as if Ken was bent on spoiling her evening at the Kathlamba Hotel. Thinking about the way he looked at her, from time to time, and found excuses to touch her this seemed quite possible. Perhaps he was jealous? The idea filled her with discomfort.

She had longed for a bath and now that the moment was actually here she lay in the scented water, and although her body was soothed, her mind was active, brooding on what Ken had just told her.

She was resting on her bed, before dressing, when the phone rang a third time.

"I'll give you ten minutes," Max's voice said, "and I'll meet you in the African Drum for a well-deserved drink."

Thoughts of the guniting machine crowded in on her. She might well have to lower her pride and ask Max to help out, so she said, "That will be *wonderful!*"

She could visualise the mocking blue eyes behind thick, blunt lashes - the gold-capped tooth, like her own. At least we have that in common, she thought, smiling.

## CHAPTER XII

SHE dressed quickly and used up the remaining plasters in the box on her feet and, because she could get away with it, she wore her black velvet bedroom slippers with the sparkling buckles with her black slack suit lined with emerald green. The softness of the slippers was sheer heaven.

The African Drum was practically full and, as she stood at the entrance, her green eyes scanned the small, dimly lit space for Max. Sensing her gaze, he looked up and then came to meet her, with the same free stride she had come to associate with the day on which he had strode up to her and removed her hat, scarf and sunglasses at the pool under construction at the Escarpment Guest Farm. Seeing Max alone like this, she thought, one was apt to forget about Avril.

"You look great," he said, smiling. "No one would ever say that you haven't yet recovered."

"You completely underestimate me," she told him. "I've quite recovered."

Taking her hand, he said, "What are you going to drink?"

When they were seated she said, "I'm going to drink a Baby- cham." She had made up her mind on the spur of the moment. This would get Max on the subject of pools.

"Fair enough. Babycham coming up."

Later, she watched him as he sat in his habitual fashion - holding his glass with the finger tips of one hand and turning the glass this way and that. His eyes mocked her.

"Tell me," he said, finally, "what's the Babycham in aid of? Are you celebrating?"

"Hardly,' she replied.

"Why - hardly ? " He went on looking at her.

"Well - hardly, because our guniting machine appears to have packed up. Ken phoned this evening."

"Couldn't he have held the information over until tomorrow?" he asked. "Anyway, what's the matter with it?"

"It's -er- it's...."

"Go on ... I'm interested." He gave her an engaging grin, but Cyndy knew what he was about.

Trying not to flare into sudden anger, she said, "There's dirt in the air valves, or something."

"Well, why doesn't Harris clean it?" Max's voice was softly tantalizing.

"It keeps clogging up - the valves, I mean. Judd and Ken ..."

"You don't have to put Judd first, just because you happen to be talking to me," he interrupted. "Why don't you just say Ken and Judd?"

Ignoring him, she said, "Judd and Ken have had a lot of trouble with our machine. This time the dirt seems to have caused the ..." she groped for a word, "meter to burn out, or something."

"Or something." He looked up at her from his glass. "Well, in that case, Ken - or Judd - should strip it."

"Ken says it's *finished*." She was beginning to get impatient now.

Max's tanned fingers were around the rim of his glass again. "Fortunately, you'll be in a position to buy a new machine -

what with all your sidelines --" He broke off and looked down at the glass again and Cyndy had the feeling that he was trying to hide the mirth in his eyes. "Concrete walls," Max was saying, "your own coping tiles, all that poolside furniture for leisure living, your plants and the exotic plant urns to go with them." He looked up. "You should have no financial problems."

"It's big money to outlay, at the moment," she said. "I'm hoping to be able to *hire* a machine." There, it was out!

"Ah!" She watched him take a swallow of his drink. "Well, I'll admit you can't very well do without a guniting machine - unless you *pour*, of course." His eyes moved to give her a sideways glance. As she grasped at a possible solution to their problem, her green eyes widened. "Pour? *Pour*; you mean?"

She felt maddened when he laughed outright.

"Uh-huh, Cyndy - *pour*." There was a small pause and then he went on, "You know, hiring gunite equipment is expensive, so you could always pour, but pouring, as you well know," he was openly mocking her and she knew it, "has its distinct drawbacks."

"I - er - I don't see why." She lowered her lashes and took a sip of her Babycham. It was a tiny sip, and when she had finished, she pressed her lips together and lifted her lashes, waiting. Suddenly, to ease the tension she was feeling, she smiled and said, "One day we're going to build a pool with champagne seats built all round it - you know, where people can sit in the water and sip champagne - not just Martinis. The pool will be for one of our very wealthy clients."

"Well, here's luck." He raised his glass.

"Thank you." She took a little breath. She wondered where Avril was and then forgot about Avril. "What was it you were saying, a moment ago ? "

"Was I saying something?" Her eyes rested on his chin which he was bunching up, film-star style.

"About - pouring."

"Oh, yes. Well, as *you* know yourself, a full crew of professionals has to work pretty fast to stay ahead of such a large quantity of concrete. Am I right?"

"W-when you - you pour, you mean?" She wondered whether Ken knew about pouring and she wanted to make sure about it.

"Yes. In other words, such a large quantity of concrete is hard to control. You'd have to get more staff - professionals at the game, of course."

"Well, I don't want to take on more staff - not yet, anyway."

"No ... I can see your point, of course." He went on turning his glass. He was becoming maddening, she thought. "Well then, guniting would still be your best bet. I guess you'll just have to hire a machine, Cyndy - unless Ken Harris and Judd between them can repair your present machine. It's pretty ancient, of course. Cliff had that machine a long time. I often thought he should have invested in a new one instead of redecorating the house."

"How do you know?" Her voice was sharp.

"Well..." he shrugged his shoulders, "I get to know a lot of things." With his slightly long hair style and immaculate suit there was almost a Regency look about him, she thought.



"Talking about staff," she said, completely ruffled now, "we used to have a Jan Bartman with us, at one time, before he happened to be lured away."

Glancing at her with a cool interest, he said, "Oh, so we've heard about Jan Bartman now, have we? I guess one day we'll know the whole story."

"I know about Jan Bartman, anyhow, and a whole lot more."

"Well, Jan had to be paid - he couldn't *always* work for nothing. That was during the times when Cliff was going through one of his big spending sprees and Ken Harris was sitting on the fence, watching him. Cliff was a great spender, you know. If it comes to that - so is his niece --" He broke off to signal the barman Mike and Cyndy sat watching, and seething, as Max ordered two more drinks.

Swivelling round to her again, he said, "Jan was unfortunate. He had a wife and kids to support. He couldn't be kept waiting for his money. Judd, on the other hand, could. Judd, even at the risk of this getting back to his ears, knows when he's on a good wicket. He and Norah have a home, food - all on the house. I'll say this much for Cliff, he was more than just a little generous. Judd could afford to wait for his money - because Cliff always met his obligations, even if a hit on the late side. Into the bargain, Judd has a pension. As for Ken Harris, well --" He shrugged those shoulders, which looked so fascinating beneath the well-tailored suit. "Ken was waiting for Cliff to collapse financially. That was - to use one of your own expressions - common knowledge. Then he intended buying Blue Champagne, for what Cliff could get for it - and there you have it."

There was a silence and then Cyndy snapped, "I always knew you were a callous, scheming devil, but I didn't think you were a gossip into the bargain!"

"What I've just told you, my very precious Cyndy, happens to be common knowledge." He coddled his drink. "I'm not asking you to like it. It's high time you saw things for what they are."

The lighting fell from copper lamps, reflecting on the gleaming counter and on her gleaming champagne-gold hair which she had arranged in a chignon.

"I don't care what you say," she said airily.

"Frankly," he replied, "I never cared a damn either what went on with Blue Champagne - until recently."

"And that's merely because you would like to see me go under. Let's face it." She felt suddenly drained. The walk, Ken's disturbing phone call, what Max had just told her were all taking their toll.

"Why weren't you frank with me when I asked you to join me in the African Drum for a drink?" Max asked softly. "Why didn't you just say, 'Oh, *wonderful*! for the very simple reason that I want to hire a guniting machine - not because I want to be with you' ? "

Restlessly, Cyndy moved her sleek jersey-silk-encased legs away from the warmth of his presence. She did not want to even brush against Max. "I was a fool to confide in you," she said. "I set a nice little trap for myself when I agreed to meet you here."

"You set a nice trap for me, you mean. Here I was," his voice was sarcastic, "looking forward to being with you in this very discreetly lit bar with its very special atmosphere - amid carvings and curios - and all the time you had but one idea in your scheming little mind, and that was what you could get out of me in the way of a guniting machine - or guniting your pools for you while you come to terms with your financial setup."

"I wouldn't take help from you if you went down on your very special knees and asked me. You have a conceited assortment of opinions about yourself - most of them false."

He accepted the insult with a little nod of his dark head. "Only-most of them?"

"Clearly," she went on, "modesty is not one of your strong points. Weren't you aiming just a little high when you kissed me today? What exactly did you expect?"

"What I got, quite frankly. Response."

"Do you know what you can do?" she asked. "You can go straight to hell and never come back again!" She stood up.

"Being common is becoming only to a few women," he said, looking at her from his stool. "You're beginning to talk like a plasterer on pay night - and it doesn't suit you."

"You can keep your guniting equipment!" she told him.

"You're not going to like this," he got to his feet, "but that is exactly what I intend doing. Let me see you to the dining- room. We've got problems, all right. You see, Kiko has arranged that we eat together, along with Avril."

"In that case, I shall ask for room service," said Cyndy.

"Well, that's up to you, of course. Allow me, in that case, to see you to your door."

She gave him a long furious look before she said, "There's no need, thank you. I'm quite used to seeing myself to my own door *and* into my own room, no matter what *you* might think."

Being in bed, with cool sheets and a light fleecy blanket bunched under her chin, after the kind of physical torture she had been through, should have been exquisite. Instead, it only served as an incubator to her disorderly thoughts. She longed for the morning when she could express her thanks to Kiko and Byron Page and leave the hotel.

She had gone into the dining-room as late as possible, when most people were finished dinner, and eaten alone. It would always be like this, she told herself. She would always be setting aside time to brood about Max ... because she was in love with him, she thought in bewilderment.

In the morning, she tried to sound calm and happy as she thanked the Pages for having her. It was very quiet driving back to the house and she did not even pass one car on the way. The loneliness moved in from the surrounding mauve mountains.

Ken and Judd, of course, had already left for the site where there was still work to do before it was time to gunite. How they were going to gunite was a different matter.

When the men returned in the late afternoon she waited until after tea before bringing up the subject of the guniting machine. "I was so worried, after you phoned," she said, and was rewarded by Ken's eyes flickering uncomfortably over her face. "I lost all interest in everything."

"I hope I didn't spoil your fun?" he asked, and she knew then, without a doubt, that Ken was jealous of Max.

"Well," she decided to be unkind, "you did, actually."

Three nights later Max phoned. "I rang to find out how things are going with you," he said.

The sound of his voice caused her to bite her lip. When she could trust her voice she demanded, "What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Do you want any help?" he asked.

"Help?" Her voice was hard. When she had put out a feeler for help he had cast it to one side.

"Yes, help. Money? Do you need - financing?"

"I'm so touched by this new concern," she said sarcastically.

"Look, I didn't phone you to quarrel with you. I phoned to find out whether you happen to need money. In other words, do you need financing?"

"I don't need financing - and even if I did, it wouldn't be by you. I wouldn't approach you."

"Well, I'm approaching you. Do you understand what I mean?"

"I don't need your help." She was pleased that her voice sounded so calm and hard. However, her hands were cold and shaking.

"Then apparently you've received help from another quarter?"

"Yes."

"Well," she could almost see him shrug, "I guess everything is all right?"

"Yes." She didn't feel it was her own voice speaking. "Everything is perfect."

A warm moon rose above the mountains and she went to the windows to watch it. In the darkness insects began to drone in the garden. There was movement in the pool even though the filter had switched itself off. It looked like a bowl of stars, she thought, set in the garden.

A week later, after days of frustration and worry, she was on the site where she had driven out in the Cortina with the wage envelopes. Ken and Judd had left the site to go into Lindeque, where they had to see about the parts for the guniting machine. They were calling back for the men at the end of the day. In fact, Cyndy found herself thinking, they should have been back by now.

The pool area was a place of unrest and immediately she drove up to it she was aware that something was wrong. Wearing a white cotton shift and gold sandals, she stepped out of the car and was exposed to a furnace Berg wind which caught at her hair and blew it across her eyes which she had narrowed against the the assault of sun and heat. The weather had been temperamental for some time now and was, in itself, enough to fray the nerves. On most afternoons thunderstorms raged about the mountain peaks and one could hear the thunder and see the lightning at play amongst blue-black knotted clouds.

It was obvious, even to the casual observer, that the nerves of the men were frayed and there was an aggressiveness about them as they argued and made wide gesticulations.

Going right up to the excavation, Cyndy said to the head-man, "Simon, is anything wrong? Is there some sort of trouble?"

"There is plenty trouble," he said. "Plenty. That man over there, Zero, he came on the job late. It was lunch-time. He had a bottle of brandy. He was very drunk. I took the bottle of brandy away from him. It was a new bottle of brandy - that means that he must have finished another bottle. I told him to get going. There was no place on the job. He was

too drunk. Now," Simon broke off to expel a long breath, "he has come back for his bottle of brandy."

"Oh!" Cyndy also expelled a breath. "Is that all? Well, you did right, I guess, in sending him away to sober up, but why don't you just give him back his bottle? It's nearly time to knock off now, anyway. There looks as if there's going to be a free fight for all presently. I think you'd better get it all sorted out as soon as possible if this is to be avoided."

Simon, regarding her with unease, said, "The bottle of brandy is empty. The men have finished the brandy. That is what all this trouble is about."

In a way, she thought, if it wasn't so alarming it would have been funny. As it was, the drink and the heat were having their way with the men and the situation was fast becoming out of control. It was frightening.

"Simon," she begged, "can you sort it out, *please*? I feel such a fool - I can't even talk the language. As soon as matters are cleared up I can pay the men and they can wash and change and begin to simmer down. By the time they've done that the truck should be back from Lindeque to pick them up." She broke off, catching her breath, as two of the men came to blows.

Simon's voice was raised above the commotion. Several men were treating the whole thing lightly and they were laughing and jeering good-naturedly, but most of them were becoming frankly roused. Looking at them, Cyndy had the feeling that she, was falling apart. Shaking, she wondered what she would do if the head-man was not able to calm the men.

Much to her relief he had managed to part the two men, but another rush of arguments was springing up as the fighters tried to justify

their actions. Baffled and frightened, Cyndy stood watching, her heart grieving for her pool business. Everything seemed to be going wrong, from one day to the next. The men were restless, money was creating a problem, the gunting machine was past repair. Parts or no parts, she knew that the machine was finished.

There had also been the article in the latest edition of the *Berg Bulletin*. Every word was like a scorch on her mind. It was headed, "Blue Champagne Pools - Nose Dive," and went on, "Is Blue Champagne worth putting right? If so, it is going to take an awful lot of swimming against the tide. It is difficult to say, without a fuller statement, what exactly has gone wrong. However, Blue Champagne Pools have been in difficulties for almost a year and a half." (This had made her realise that the business had been heading for disaster before her time. Why, then, hadn't she been warned?) "It is difficult to imagine," continued the article, "such a discrepancy coming from the poolside operation alone. Admittedly, for a small concern Blue Champagne tended to be over-staffed, on the pools side," (and here they all were - fighting, she thought bitterly) "and then, later, overstocked with ornamental precast walling, poolside and patio furniture, indoor and outdoor plants." (And this was when *she* had come in, she thought, bitterly.)

The article had continued, "The answer could be big losses on the interior decorating operation which was brought under the Blue Champagne Poolquip fold as part of Miss Cyndy Collins' 'leisure living' marketing plan, which was a dismal failure, in any marketing sense.

"However, for the real breakdown we'll just have to wait and see. It is a pity to see the beautiful and very charming Miss Collins go out in such a fashion, but it does seem that Blue Champagne was infected by incautious optimism, distorting fact in no uncertain manner." The article was now followed up by fighting on the pool site.



There was a sudden silence and then she saw that the men were looking beyond her with a mild kind of curiosity. Over all the noise she had not heard a car pull up. She turned just in time to see Max stepping out of his car and she straightened her dark glasses, watching as he came towards her.

She felt a wild, alarming kind of happiness. Alarming, because she wanted to run towards him when all she could do was to stand and wait for him as he came over to where she was standing. He carried his jacket lightly over one shoulder.

## CHAPTER XIII

"WHAT the devil is Harris up to," Max asked, "allowing you on the job on pay day?" Able to destroy her with a glance, his blue eyes went over her white shift and gold sandals, "and you believe in dressing for the occasion, don't you?" Before she could make some sort of angry reply he said, "But that can wait. Let me sort this lot out first." He dropped his jacket on the handle of a wheelbarrow.

Utterly drained, she stood by helplessly while he took over and later, when the men had been given their pay packets and had gone off to wash and change before Ken and Judd arrived in the truck, she said, "Ken and Judd have gone to search for parts for the guniting machine. We have to be guniting here within a day or two, as you can see for yourself." Baffled and insecure, she stared hopelessly at the excavation. What was the good of putting up a fight? she thought. By now, Max would have seen the *Berg Bulletin*, anyway.

Glancing in the direction of the excavation, he said, "Yes, I know that. Judd Dixon's wife told me where I could find you, by the way."

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean you went there - to the house?"

"Yes. Cyndy, let's meet this head on." He placed his hands on her shoulders and studied her with a kind of anxious concern. "I'm going to follow you in my car and you'll drive out to my place, which as you know is not far from here. When we get there I'm going to mix you a drink," he gave her a slow smile, "maybe even two drinks, depending on how you stand up to it. When you've simmered down we're going to have a talk, and after we've reached some conclusions, I intend driving you home. We'll make the usual arrangements about getting your car back to you." He gave her another smile.

She was very pale. "In other words, a case of history repeating itself?" she murmured. "You follow me, then you take me home, and then

you bring my car back to me and I take you back - it just doesn't make sense." She stepped out of his embrace.

"It makes a lot of sense."

"No, it doesn't," she argued, distrusting him, thinking about the last time she had been with him.

"You'll do as I tell you." It was an order and he took her arm, but she shook it off.

"Don't order me about!" she snapped. "Can't you understand how I feel? Can't you begin to understand? I feel absolutely submerged by men - men, men, men! All I ever see are men, apart from Norah, and Norah is always with Judd. I'm sick and tired of it all, and I'm not going to stand here and have you order me around and then later mode me, because that's what you intend doing, isn't it? I know you."

"You don't know me at all. You only think you know me."

"I don't see why you should be given the satisfaction of seeing me practically reduced to nothing. I don't see why you should gloat over me and about the article which appeared in the *Berg Bulletin*. That's why you're here, isn't it? That's why you have offered help? So that you could gloat and mock - afterwards?"

"Don't you give a damn how I feel?" he asked. "Be your age." There was something dangerously close to a command in his voice. "Why kid around? I want to help you."

Cyndy felt positively sick and dizzy with fatigue. The sky was beginning to turn pink with traces of purple. Where were Ken and Judd? "I might have to make arrangements about getting the men home," she said.

She wanted to be reassured - for Max to reassure her that everything was in control.

He glanced at his watch. "You'll do no such thing. It isn't time yet, anyway. Harris and Dixon will be here at any moment. Common, Cyndy."

"I don't like it," she said in a dubious whisper.

"I'm not asking you to like it."

"You're so bossy." She sounded sad and lost - wanting to be bossed by somebody.

"I want to get things sorted out for you," Max said. "I want to help you. Do you understand what I'm trying to say to you?"

She had herself in hand now. "Okay --" She let the word out on a long quavering breath. "I - I guess so. You're making it impossible for me to do anything else. I don't have much choice, do I?"

"You don't."

By the time they reached Max's chalet the swimming-pool in his garden was collecting the hot colours of the sunset which were gold and scarlet, laced with purple and indigo tinged clouds. Max's skin glowed dark and tanned. His eyes were very blue. It was unnerving to note that the mockery had gone from them. It made Cyndy feel like breaking down and crying.

In the exciting room with the tremendous stone fireplace and golden-yellow sofas he said, "Well, Cyndy, let's face it - you have problems." One hand left his side and went to his dark hair and she watched him as he pushed it back from his forehead. She felt a pang of hopeless love. "And," he went on, "I don't think I'm understating the case."

He brought her a drink which she carried to one of the sofas. "No," she said dully, "you aren't understating the case. I do have problems. You're pointing out the cold facts, in fact. Things are in a mess. Nothing was ever pointed out to me." She broke off, feeling vaguely disloyal to Ken.

"Let's not waste time beating around the bush. I'll do your guniting for you," he said.

Beyond the glass a big, lone bird flew towards the mountains.

"Let's not go into detail as to how Blue Champagne got into the state it is," Max was saying, "let's see how it can be straightened out."

"I keep trying to sort this out in my mind," she said. "It- it can't just be that you're sorry for me."

"No, you're right - it isn't because I'm sorry for you."

Taken by surprise, for all that, she was abruptly cautious. "Why is it, then?"

His blue eyes had the kind of intensity which she had noticed before. "It's because I'm in love with you, that's why."

She had been unprepared for the shock of this remark. "I don't believe it!" She put her glass down and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, don't. Max, *don't!*" When he came towards her she took her hands away and said again, "Don't touch me, Max. I couldn't bear it."

"Why not?" he asked. "Let me try to understand this, Cyndy. Just why don't you want me to touch you?"

"Because I couldn't stand it, that's why. I don't want you near me. Keep away!"

"That's not very flattering. What am I going to do about you, Cyndy?"

"What is it you want to do? What is it you're trying to do?"

There was a pause. "Well, you know what they say?" he asked.

"No. I have no idea what you're driving at." They were each aware of the constraint.

"If you can't beat them, join them." His voice held a hint of amusement in it, but his eyes were questioning.

"And by that you mean - what?"

"I'm asking you to marry me."

"Marry you?" Her eyes, wide and green, travelled over his face. "Isn't that just typical of Max Steele?"

"Why is it typical? I've never asked a girl to marry me - not even Avril Goddard, who's *supposed* to be common knowledge."

"But you have been intending to ask her, haven't you?"

"You, apparently, have been taken in my idle gossip," he told her.

"You'd even ride rough-shod over Avril to meet your own ends," she said bitterly. "Wouldn't you?"

"What the devil are you getting at?" He was getting angry. "I've just told you I love you. You're overdoing it. I've just asked you to marry me."

"Thank you very much! I don't want to be married to *Berg Pools*, thank you! Because, with Blue Champagne out of the way, that's exactly what it would mean."

"Cyndy, I couldn't give a damn about Berg Pools!"

"This feud between you and my uncle is nothing short of an obsession with you. You'd even marry *me* to meet your own selfish ends. You don't care about anything else."

"I happen to care about you, believe it, or not." His look was so direct she found it disconcerting.

"Well, I can't say the same thing for you," she found herself saying, while something shrieked out inside her that this was not true.

"How can you be so sure?" he asked, and when she made no reply, he went on, "Perhaps I should *make* you care."

"How will you do that?" Her voice, in an effort to sound hard, merely sounded small.

Max put his glass down, and when he came towards her, she sat breathing hard, feeling the thud of her heart, and looking up at him from the golden-yellow sofa. Then, still without taking her eyes from his face, she put out her arm and began to grope around for some place to put her glass. She stood up. "I advise you not to try, Max."

His blue gaze went over her. "You shouldn't do that," he said, very softly. "With your eyes - those grape-green eyes. Are you afraid of me, Cyndy?"

"Of what?" The words were just two little pieces of breath.

"Of what you *feel*, maybe."

He covered the short distance between them and then his hands were upon her. She made no attempt to defend herself when he took her into his arms and tilted her chin.

"Let's get this on record," he said. "When I first saw you and learned who you were I thought, 'What a beautiful, damnably stupid little fool to have inherited Cliff's pool business.'"

Later, I knew you were a fighter. Looking back, I knew right from the start that I *wanted* you. I've always known that when the time came for me to want a girl I would know it from the start."

When Cyndy could find her voice she said, "What do you expect to gain by telling me all this? Do you expect me to swoon with relief because you say you - you want me?"

"I may be wrong, but I don't think so - I think you *want* me to want you, Cyndy."

"Well, that's where you're mistaken," she told him, on a shaken breath. "Let go of me!"

"No, let me - give me a chance to prove it." There was a gathering impatience in his voice.

He turned her face up, and when he put his mouth on hers, , she struggled with her tears, willing herself not to cry, and then the despair she was feeling gave way to a throbbing, restless interest. Feeling Max so close to her was the most exciting, wonderful thing that could ever happen to her. Against her mouth he said, "What have you to say to me ? "

He went on holding her, looking down at her. Then he bent his head and kissed her again.

When he released her, her eyes were like green jewels in her pale face. Her silence emphasized the depths of her feelings. She longed to be able to tell him that she was in love with him, that she wanted him to want her, but such things could not be said to a man who was only trying to use her to satisfy his own selfish obsession - and that



obsession was to see Blue Champagne Pools ruined. Not only that, but to see Cliff Collins' niece humiliated and ruined with it.

"Let me say this one thing," she said, wanting to hurt him, "I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth. That sounds pretty corny, I know, but it's true. All I want is to get out of here and never see you again."

"Is that all you have to say to me?" he asked. She saw the hurt in his blue eyes and was glad.

"Yes. I could say more - a whole lot more," she said. "I could begin by telling you how despicable I think you are - but I won't."

"Well, go ahead. You're entitled to anything that will make you happy," he said. After a moment he went on, "If you're ready, I'll drive you back - as I said I would."

"You don't need to. I'm quite capable of driving myself," she answered. "I'll say one thing - and that is, you passed a remark that I was a fighter. Well, I'm afraid I don't have very good news for you - you see, I intend to go on fighting. I'll fight to keep Blue Champagne Pools alive, and what's more, I don't have to pretend to swoon in your big, strong arms to get my pools gunited - or my accounts paid."

"If that's your impression, we'll call it a day," he said, while she stood looking at him, shattered by conflicting thoughts. "I won't keep you."

He made no attempt to see her out and she felt the snub, although he touched her with his eyes. "Will you be all right?" he asked. His voice was cool and impersonal.

"Why should it mean anything to you?" she asked, turning. "It certainly didn't mean anything to you while you were mauling me a moment ago."

"For a so-called smart girl," he told her, "you talk like an idiot."

"Next time you want a girl to tease your appetite for - for sensation," she went on, "I suggest you keep to your own ruthless type."

Inclining his dark head, he drawled, "I'll make a note of your suggestion."

For a while after she left the chalet, Cyndy drove furiously and recklessly. Dust and small stones spurted up from under the wheels and made loud and, sometimes, alarming metallic noises as the larger stones hit the car. The countryside was blotted by shadows now that the sun had practically gone, although, long and fiery, its golden fingers still stroked the dying colours in the sky.

When the car skidded Cyndy caught her breath as she allowed it to right itself and then, after a few seconds, she pulled over on to the side of the road and switched off. Immediately she was exposed to the loud silence of the Berg and the heavy beating of her heart. She found herself almost hoping that she would collapse over the wheel in a flood of tears and that Max would drive after her and find her like that.

The silence was a refuge and she sat for a long time just listening to it - thinking of absolutely nothing. It was amazing, but one could actually hear the silence. The sun had folded its long fingers now and there was something almost colourless about the Berg - like a black and white photograph, almost. Her thoughts, as she knew they would, went to Max and, automatically, she closed her heavily-lashed eyes, remembering his kisses, the awareness of his body against her own. She remembered, with a kind of hungry eagerness which she clutched at, determined not to let the memory escape.

As she tilted back her head, Max was almost there with her. She felt the slant of her wide green eyes, reaching to the outer corners of her

face, the lids closed - drugged - the lashes touching, caressing her cheeks as Max kissed her. She imagined herself in trousers and a brief top to go with them which left her tanned torso bare and she could almost see Max, as his blue eyes went over her before he gathered her to him, his hand sliding up to her hair which was a wild tangle of nerves, like the rest of her.

Then, with a low moan, she opened her eyes. Her nails, long, pink-varnished and perfect, dug into her palms. Was there something degrading and indecent about a girl who wanted a man she actually despised? she asked herself. A man who actually went as far as to offer her some kind of marriage to go along-with his own gimmick - "If you can't beat them, join them." How could any decent, self-respecting girl *want - no love*, because she knew she loved Max - a man like that?

Realising that her life had suddenly collapsed around her, she started the car and drove home.

Ken and Judd had not been able to do a thing about the guniting machine. Instead, they were talking about trying to buy a second-hand machine. Cyndy was filled with despair as she listened to them, during the next few days.

They had started re-vamping the pool which Ken had told her about some time ago. The pool which was ready for guniting, however, was at a standstill. This was because they were waiting on news about an offer they had made for a secondhand machine.

One morning, before Ken went out to the truck, he asked "By the way, have you heard about Max? I only heard the news last night when I was up at the hotel having a few drinks with a friend."

"Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it," she said. "I'm not interested in him."

"Somehow, I rather think you will be interested in this."

"Why should I?"

"Because in a way it concerns you - *us*"

"Ken, I don't want to talk about Max Steele. You'll make me scream in a moment."

"Okay." He turned as Judd began revving the truck engine. "Judd's getting worked up because we're late this morning, I'll tell you later."

The goldness of the morning had lost itself somewhere in a gloomy depressed corner of Cyndy's mind. She went back inside and began to tidy drawers and cupboards, and gradually the pampered comfort of her lovely home began to take hold of, her jagged nerves, soothing them.

Some time later the phone rang and she heard Norah answering it, then Norah came through to her room and said, "Telephone for you, Cyndy."

The phone, with the receiver off, lay in a pool of yellow sunlight on the desk in the study. Cyndy picked it up. "Hello?"

"Cyndy? Kiko here."

"Oh, hello, Kiko. It's lovely to hear you. How are you?" Cyndy's voice was tight, wary of something. She hoped this was not going to be another invitation to the hotel.

"Fine," Kiko answered. "Busy, as usual. Especially in view of everything - but I suppose you've heard the news ? "

Suddenly Cyndy went cold. "News? What news?"

Had Ken been trying to tell her that something had happened to Max?

"Don't tell me you haven't heard what's going on around these parts?" Kiko laughed. "My word, Cyndy, you must be wrapped up in your pool business!"

"Wrapped up in my worries, as it so happened."

"Well, I'm afraid we all have those. Can't seem to get away from them. What's worrying you, Cyndy? Anything I can do to help?"

"No, I'm afraid not. They're strictly business worries." Cyndy tried to laugh lightly. "Tell me, Kiko, what is this news?"

"Max has bought the hotel - lock, stock and barrel. Negotiations have been going on for some considerable time, of course, but everything is finalized at last. Byron hasn't been well for some time now, although one would never say so to look at him and to hear him sometimes - the way he goes on. Much as it breaks our hearts, we're leaving."

"I - didn't know. I'm sorry you're going. I'm going to miss you. When?" Cyndy felt no consolation in this knowledge. This would simply mean that she was losing two friends and that the Kathlamba Hotel was going to be out of bounds so far as she was concerned. In a way, she found herself wishing that Max was leaving the Berg.

"We'll be here for another two months, and then we'll be off."

"So you aren't phoning to say goodbye?"

"No - not yet. I'm phoning to ask you to come to a dinner party we're giving for Max."

Cyndy's mind reeled with panic. To gain time she said, "He's going to be very busy, isn't he? Apart from his guniting concern, which

just seems to run on wheels in the background - wherever that is - there's Berg Pools and now the Kathlamba. He's quite a superman."

"Well, Berg Pools is in the throes of closing down," Kiko said, "so Max doesn't have that to worry about. Don't tell me you didn't know about *that*? Max started to wind up Berg Pools soon after you arrived here."

Cyndy felt herself going pale. "I didn't know," she said.

"Well, yes," Kiko went on, "but you don't just close down a business overnight, you know. Anyway, to get back to the dinner party, which happens to be a week ago to the day - you will come, won't you?"

Cyndy saw herself cornered.

"Well, thank you. I - I might be going away for a while, but - may I let you know, Kiko? "

"Of course. I spoke to Ken Harris last night when he was up here and I've managed to talk him into coming. I know all about the feeling which exists there, but it's too ridiculous to go on this way - especially as Ken is always coming to the hotel."

After she had replaced the receiver Cyndy stood next to the desk for several long minutes. Kiko's news about Max struck her with devastating effect.

## CHAPTER XIV

DURING the week it became obvious that there was a girl in Ken's life.

"I wonder what's happened to the girl in Newcasde?" Cyndy remarked to Norah one morning, as they strolled round the garden together, admiring Judd's pink geraniums. Cyndy lifted her eyes and gazed at the mountains that she looked on as her own.

"Well, that's Ken all over," Norah answered. "He met that girl when they were building a pool there. Judd was saying that while they were building the pool for the man who owns the garage in Lindeque there was a girl who was always hanging around the site. This is the result. Ken is always in and out of love, but I suppose he'll settle down one day. Let's hope so, anyway."

The relief that Ken was involved with a girl close by was wonderful, Cyndy thought. It would make working with Ken simple again.

What was more, Kiko had suggested to Ken that he brought the girl along to the dinner party.

"I'll collect Sarah first," he said to Cyndy, "and then we'll come back here for you and all go to the hotel together. How's that?"

Enjoying the sense of freedom she was feeling, she said, "Don't bother to come back here for me. I'll drive to the hotel myself. That way, I can take my time about dressing and leaving here at the last moment."

"Kiko is doing her best to see that we cease hostilities," Ken told her, smiling sheepishly. "Now that Max is packing up the pool business I see no reason why we shouldn't forget about all the ill-feeling of the past - especially if I want to visit the Kathlamba pub from time to time, or to take Sarah dancing thefe."

"Well, yes, I agree with you," Cyndy's voice was tight. She was still finding it difficult to forgive Ken for granting an interview to the Financial Editor of the *Berg Bulletin*. She had found out, of course. The article in the *Bulletin* had been the result of Ken's interview with this man.

Then, trying to forget, she shrugged her shoulders. "It's never made much sense to me, anyway." She decided to change the subject. "I'll be thankful when we get sorted out about a new guniting machine... or should I' say, a second-hand machine?"

"Yes ... well, we've got to be careful we don't buy another packet of trouble," Ken answered. "Anyway, Judd and I are going to look at new machines - we want to find out the terms involved, and so on. It might pay us to invest in a new machine. You've got to outlay money in order to make money."

"I outlaid money to make money," she said, "and look where it got me. Half the stuff is still sitting in the wretched little shop."

"That was different, of course." His voice was cautious.

"Well, why didn't you tell me?" There, it was out now. She went on. "Why tell the Financial Editor? I often find myself wondering why you didn't curb me from starting a shop. You must have known that there was no scope for that sort of thing in the Berg, even if I was fool enough not to reason that one out for myself. Somehow, I got carried away by all this talk going on about mountain chalets springing up all over the Berg. I wanted to get in while the going was good, so to speak. Even though I inherited the business I was still open to criticism from you and Judd. I thought I made that clear?"

"I was asked for an interview," Ken replied shortly. "I wasn't exactly responsible for the kind of article that materialised from the



interview. Besides, you must admit your mind seemed made up about the shop."

There was a pause and then she said, "Was it because you - wanted to buy me out - when the time came?" It was a relief to say these things. She had spent enough time brooding on them.

For a moment she thought that Ken was going to lose his temper and walk out on her, but then he said, very quietly, "I've had my eye on Blue Champagne Pools for some time, I'll be perfectly frank with you. Somehow, I couldn't see you wanting to carry on. I thought it would be a passing interest and that when the time came you would be only too willing to get rid of the business."

"To you?"

"To me, of course."

"Well," she shrugged, "I have a lot of things to sort out. Taking it all round, though, I'd like to keep on here. I've grown to love the Berg. What are your plans for the future - taking into consideration that I'll keep on in an endeavour to build up the business again?"

"I'd like to stay on with Blue Champagne - if you still want it that way, naturally. I'll be honest again. I'd like my own business, eventually, but that wouldn't be for at least a couple of years."

"Well, I agree with you," she sounded sad. "I might have to sell one day. I might be forced to leave the Berg."

"You said there was a man in Johannesburg - are you thinking of going back there to marry him?" Ken asked.

"No. I'm thinking in terms of going back to work in Johannesburg. It might be best all round. I'd have to sell this lovely house along with the business, and that would break my heart - but there you are."

"You could live here and find work in Lindeque, maybe," he suggested.

"Hardly. I don't think I'd earn quite the same salary in Lindeque as I did in Johannesburg. Anyway, it's good to know that you'll consider staying on here for another two years - if I keep on. I'll let you know definitely in the very near future."

"Things could go from strength to strength now that Max has called it a day," he said. "You've taken that into consideration, I take it?"

"Yes, I have."

"That's one favour he's done us," Ken said.

"Yes," she said again, wondering whether Max had decided to pack up Berg Pools in order to give her a chance. She picked up a scarlet towel from the veranda table. "I'm going for a swim," she said, "before dinner. The water was super before lunch today."

"Before you go," he gave her a direct look, "are you quite sure about driving to the hotel yourself?"

"Absolutely positive." She gave him a smile which hid the mixture of anticipation and dismay she experienced when she thought of the party and subsequent meeting up with Max again. Somehow she could not bring herself to go to Max's chalet and apologise for having treated his offer of helping out with regard to guniting with such contempt. If she could gather enough courage to attend the party, and if she managed to speak to Max alone, she would tell him that she had misjudged him. She would also tell him that she realised now why he had bought the furniture from Bill Gantry. It had been to help her - to safeguard her against Bill Gantry selling it as furniture of his own design. Taking all this into consideration, however, Max didn't have to tell me that he loved me, she thought. He didn't have to make a game of his help.

"I was thinking that the roads at night are lonely," Ken was saying.

"Well, yes, I know. If you like you can follow me in your car, coming back home, just in case the Cortina breaks down or something," she smiled.

She devoted one entire evening trying to decide what she would wear to the dinner party - if she went, of course - and decided finally on a cobweb dress in crochet mohair. It was a Johannesburg dress, and looked like golden dust.

The frock was champagne-gold, to go with her hair, and it was a garment of web and air and worn over a deeper gold slip. However, at the very last moment she began to lose confidence about going and nearly phoned Kiko to tell her that it would be impossible for her to attend the dinner - she could plead a headache, maybe. That was always a good old-fashioned standby.

She realised that she had made a mistake in saying that she would be there to welcome Max as the new owner of the Kathlamba. Her greatest mistake of all time, though, was in not writing Max a short letter of apology. Had she done this she would have felt free to go wherever she wished in the Berg. She would have wiped the slate clean.

She tensed as she heard Ken's car starting up in the drive and then it became a drone as he left the drive at the foot of the garden and joined the road, heading for Lindeque where he was to collect Sarah.

Some time later Norah came into the lounge to say that she and Judd were going into Lindeque to visit friends. "I thought you would have left first," she said, her eyes flickering over Cyndy's glamorous frock, "before it gets too dark."

"I'll be leaving presently." Cyndy tried to keep her voice light. "I don't want to arrive too early, Norah. You know how it is. I don't know too

many people and getting there early could be a strain. Kiko said that there are to be drinks, first, in their private lounge. I think I'll let things get under way so that I can slip in without being noticed. I'll be leaving soon after you and Judd leave, don't worry."

After the Dixons had driven off she went into the study, and before she changed her mind, she picked up the phone and dialled the Kathlamba hotel number and asked for Kiko.

"Kiko, this is Cyndy. I'm terribly sorry, but I won't be able to come after all. I hope this isn't going to put you about - your table arrangements, and so on?"

"But, Cyndy, why?" Kiko sounded frankly disappointed. "Aren't you feeling so well? "

"It's not that." She decided not to lie. "I just don't want to see Max - that's the whole thing."

"Have you had another Collins versus Steele row?"

"I know you must be busy," Cyndy answered. "I don't want to keep you glued to the phone, Kiko."

"No - I'm interested, honestly. Go ahead."

"Well, Max offered to help out by guniting our pools. By now you'll have learned that we're in financial difficulties and our guniting machine has packed up. In view of the fact that I felt Max was mocking me I threw his offer of help bade in his face. I know now, of course, that his offer was genuine - that all along the line I've misjudged him. I feel pretty humiliated. A dinner party in his favour would hardly be the place to - er - apologise. I've thought it all out. I'll write Max a short note of apology."

"You sound so forlorn," Kiko said, "but I understand, of course. If you change your mind - please do come. There'll be dancing afterwards. It should be fun."

A gentle breeze brought the smell of mountain flowers and grass fires with it and it ruffled the curtains in the study. It was quite dark now and the sky was crusted with stars which were reflected in the shivering water of the swimming-pool.

Cyndy had just made herself some coffee, to steady the way she was feeling, when she heard a car coming up the drive and, thinking that it was Ken coming back for her, she swore mildly. Leaving the kitchen, she went through to the lounge so that she could see the car through the windows to make sure, and then she caught her breath when she realised that it was not Ken's car but Max's. As he got out she could just make out his face in the yellow light which came from the lantern attached to the veranda pillar.

She waited tensely for his knock and then, after a calculated pause, she went to the door.

Max's eyes went over the champagne-gold frock - over her gleaming hair. "All right," he said, "let's drop this nonsense and take it from here, Cyndy."

When she had collected herself she whispered, "Why have you come?"

"I never take anything for granted, I want to convince myself about one or two things."

"What has Kiko had to tell you about me? Did she send you here?" Her voice was soft, but aggressive.

"Aren't you going to ask me in?"

"Yes - if that's what you want."

"It is what I want."

"In that case, come in."

She stood watching him as his eyes flickered around the beautiful room. Then he said, "Let's examine the facts. I asked you to marry me. I'm asking you again. I happen to be in love with you. I also want to help you to keep Blue Champagne Pools going, if that's what you want. What have you to say to that?"

When Cyndy could use her voice she said, "I was going to write you a note of apology. A lot of things have fallen into pattern. For instance, I know, now, why you bought the furniture from Bill Gantry. You wanted to make sure that he didn't have it in his shop window. I couldn't see this, then. I'm sorry. And then, later, when you offered to gunite for us - what's more, to *have* your guniting machine - I didn't know you'd actually started packing up with Berg Pools and that you really meant this. There again, I'm sorry. I haven't quite known what to do about all this - how to handle the situation. I - wanted to come to your chalet, but that seemed all wrong. I was going to write and kept putting it off, then Kiko came up with this dinner invitation and I made up my mind to try and get you alone there and say these things to you - but then, at the last moment, that too seemed wrong."

"You seemed to have missed the whole point," he said. "I asked you to marry me."

"It - it sounds so businesslike, the way you put it." Her eyes, green, long and wide apart, gazed back at him. "You're not very subtle."

"Well, I'm not very subtle. Even my best friends wouldn't accuse me of being subtle."

"It was what you said when you asked me to marry you that made me so bitter," she told him. She felt herself shaking and put her thumb-nail against her teeth.

"What did I say?"

"You said - 'If you can't beat them, join them.' It sounded just like a business proposition - nothing else. A - one-sided proposition, into the bargain."

He gave her a smile. "I'm sorry. I was being very tactless."

"Well, lacking imagination, maybe. You go on sounding so businesslike, as a matter of fact. I can't begin to understand you."

"Let's put it another way," he said, and when he gathered her into his arms she made no effort to free herself. Placing his fingers beneath her chin, he lifted her lips to his own. "Darling, it's insane to go on like this. With a Collins it's not always easy - but I'm doing the best I can. I'm in love with you. The last thing I wanted to do was to hurt you," he said against her mouth. "I just want to take over for you."

Cyndy felt a sense of having been let off, somehow. She didn't know what to say and so she murmured, "Oh, Max, I wish you would." She took a long shaky breath. "If only you knew how much I need you !"

He held her away from him and looked down into her face. "What is it you're trying to tell me?"

"I want you to take over for me," she whispered. "I'm trying to tell you that I - need you."

"Are you in love with me?" he asked.

Confused and shy, she said, "It's the same thing."

"No," the old mockery was back in his voice, "it's not the same thing at all."

She started to unwind very slowly. "I'm in love with you. I suppose that's why I was always laying to prove myself to you. Why you were able to hurt me."

"Have I your permission to announce our engagement at the party tonight?" he asked. "Will you marry me, Cyndy?"

"Max, I don't just want you to feel sorry for me. That's what I keep worrying about. Is all this just because you feel sorry for me?"

"I don't feel sorry for you. I love you. You can be pretty silly at times. Do you know that?"

Woman-like, right up to the end, she said, "I don't just want your sympathy." Her green eyes were filled with question.

"Now you're being ridiculous."

"Am I?"

"Yes, because you're not going to get sympathy. I've already told you - you're going to get my love."

In his car on the way to the Kathlamba Hotel she said, "There's going to be so much to work out, Max. Where are we going to live, for instance? There's your mountain chalet, the house of my inheritance and now the hotel ... it's confusing." She bit her lip and giggled, her thoughts winging back to her tiny flat in Johannesburg.

"Let me fill you in," he said. "Work has already begun on a house in the hotel grounds." He lifted her hand and kissed her wrist.