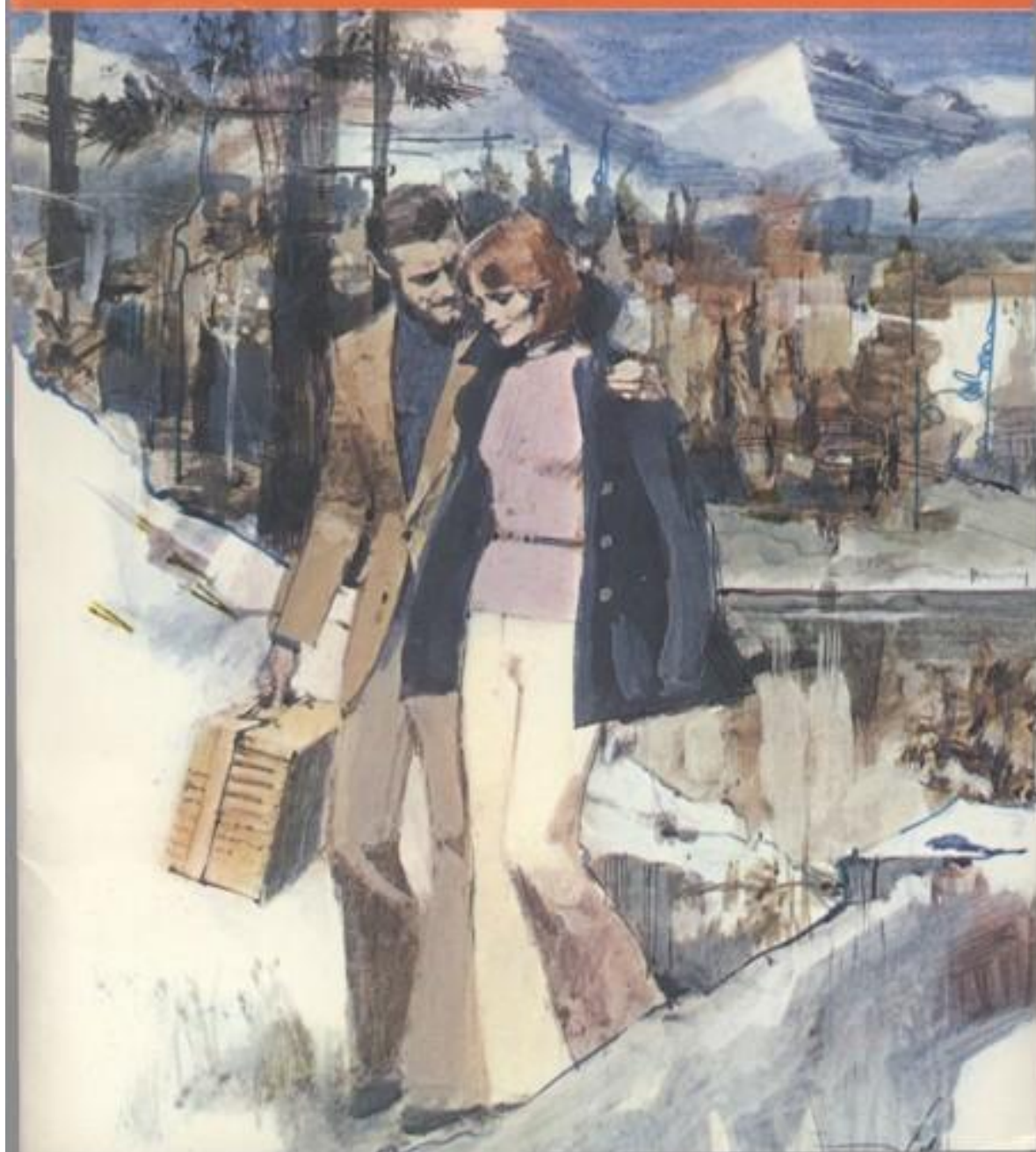




Mills & Boon

THE WILDERNESS TRAIL

Kay Thorpe



The Wildness Trail by Kay Thorpe

Regan Ferris was in British Columbia in search of her brother, and she hardly knew his boss, the forceful Cal Garrard, when he offered her a lift in his private plane. But the plane crashed in the heart of the backwoods country, and the two of them were perforce thrown into one another's company for the next few days—long enough for her to fall in love with Cal. But she was very far from sure about Cal's feelings for her—even when they got back to civilisation and he asked her to marry him. And when Regan met his beautiful widowed stepmother Dallas she began to realise why she still had this feeling that she did not come first with Cal ...

printed in Great Britain

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CHAPTER ONE

THE desk clerk coughed to attract Regan's attention from the notices she was studying, nodding towards the street doors. 'That's Cal Garrard just coming in.' She turned without haste to watch the man cross the lobby, taking in his breadth of shoulder beneath the red and black chequered mackinaw. A big man in every sense, not an inch under six foot two, features rugged and uncompromising. His head was uncovered, his hair thick and dark and faintly curly. It was the only encouraging thing about him.

He felt her gaze on him and glanced her way, brows lifting as he flicked over her own slim, trouser-clad figure. It was now or never. She took a hold on her nerve and moved to intercept him before he reached the staircase.

'Mr Garrard, may I speak with you for a moment?'

A fleeting surprise lit the grey eyes. 'British?' he queried. 'A bit far north for the tourist trade, isn't it?'

'I'm not a tourist,' she said. 'And I plan to go even further north, if I can.' She paused, aware of embarrassment. Asking a favour of a complete stranger was outside her experience, yet the desk clerk seemed to think it perfectly commonplace. 'I understand you're flying up to Fort Lester tomorrow,' she forced herself to add.

'That's right.' He made no attempt to help her out,

standing there waiting with a look on his face she found distinctly off-putting.

'Would you—I mean, do you think you could see your way to taking me with you?' she asked in a rush. 'I've tried to charter a plane but there's nothing available for days, and the bus only goes there once a week.'

It was a long moment before he answered. 'Why Fort Lester? There's nothing up there but timber.'

'There's the town—and the dam, when it's finished.'

He laughed shortly. 'Don't tell me you're working for the construction company!'

'No, of course not.' Regan tried to keep her tone level. He wasn't making this easy. 'I have a relative working for them, though.'

'And you're thinking of paying him a visit?' He shook his head, a mocking amusement in the line of his mouth. 'The intrepid British female! Never really believed it before this!'

'I don't see anything so strange about it,' she came back with some alacrity. 'It's only forty miles or so from Fort Lester. Naturally I'd be staying in the town.'

'Naturally.' The amusement was still there. 'Ever been to a backwoods town before, Miss—?'

'Ferris,' she supplied. 'Regan Ferris. No, not really. I came straight through to Prince George from Vancouver by train. We passed through some small towns on the way, though.'

'Compared with that neck of the woods you haven't even started. Give it a couple of years once the power starts flowing and that's a different story. Now—?' He shrugged.

'It's no place for a girl on her own, even a Canadian one born to it. Fort Lester's what you might call geared to the lumber industry. No beauty parlours, no restaurants; not even a permanent cinema.'

The kids get their kicks from a couple of cafés and weekend hops. Doubt if that's what you're looking for.'

'I'm not a kid, Mr Garrard,' she retorted levelly, 'and I can manage fine without beauty parlours!'

'Maybe you can at that,' glance lingering with deliberation on her faintly reddened mouth and clear, Warmly tinted skin. He looked at the silky chestnut hair cut to curve gently about her face and tilted his lips. 'Not exactly the rough-and-ready outdoor type, though, are you! '

'Does it matter?' She was fast becoming impatient with his attitude. 'I wouldn't be here if I weren't able to get along without pampering!'

'Which brings us back to the reason why you are here,' he said. 'The real reason.'

'I already told you.'

'I know what you told me. Try again. Nobody comes this far just to say hallo to a relative. What relation is this guy, anyway?'

'My brother.' She bit her lip. 'It's a long story.'

'Then you'd better get ready to tell it.' He took her arm just above the elbow and turned her firmly about in the direction of the bar. 'I'll give you fifteen minutes.'

He took off the mackinaw when they found a table and tossed it over the back of the settle-like seat. He was wearing a fine ribbed white sweater underneath with an expensive look about it. Somebody came and took their order for drinks. He took out a leather cigarette case as the man departed and offered it across to her. 'Smoke?'

Regan shook her head. 'Not just now, thanks.'

He didn't bother asking her if she minded him doing so, but selected one and shut the case with a

snap, thumbing a lighter into flame. 'Right,' he said sitting back. 'Let's have it.'

Regan looked at him for a long moment. She supposed he was entitled, considering what she was asking, but she hadn't counted on having to lay bare the details of her life in order to get where she wanted to go. His eyes met hers unwaveringly. She sighed and gave in.

'I haven't actually seen Ben for three years,' she said. 'My father—' the pause was fleeting—he left home when I was seventeen.'

'You were going to say your father threw him out,' Cal Garrard said without particular expression. 'Why?'

Her head lifted, green eyes taking on a spark of resentment. 'Is that relevant?'

'Maybe not.' The shrug was easy. 'So you haven't seen him since. How do you know he's working out at Keele?'

'I had him traced. It took me a long time.' Her voice was firm but modulated. 'My father died ten months ago, and I started trying to find Ben almost at once.'

'Your mother?' he queried.

'I can't remember her. She died when I was a baby.' There was no reaction that she could see in the strong features. 'Go on.'

'Well, as I said, I wanted to find Ben again. He's all I've got left. He was always interested in constructional work—he was taking a degree in civil engineering when he left home—so I was able to give the people who found him for me something to go on.'

'Must have cost quite a bit.'

'Not too much. Dad left me some—enough to fin-

ante a search and bring me out here when I found him, anyway.' Her gaze was on her hands clasped lightly together on top of the table, her mind going back over The years. She had almost forgotten to whom she was speaking. 'He was a very clever man, my father, an astute business mind. Whatever he touched took off in the right direction. He

did a lot of travelling, and often I went with him. After I left school he took me everywhere with him. We had an apartment in Geneva, another in London. He wanted me to learn from him.'

'In place of the son he'd lost?' The voice was quiet.

'I suppose so. Except that Ben would never have been happy doing what Dad did. Wheeling and dealing, he used to call it.'

'But you liked the life.'

'I never thought about it. It was all- I was used to. I missed Ben, dreadfully. He's four years older than I am, and he was always such good fun.'

'Not like your father.' It was a statement, not a question. Regan looked across at him quickly, heart jerking.

'He was a busy man,' she defended. 'You can't go through life laughing all the time.'

'I guess not.' He drew thoughtfully on the cigarette, exhaling the smoke in an aromatic cloud between them. 'You said he left you little money. What happened?'

'He made some bad investments.' Her voice steadied deliberately. 'He died from a tumour on the brain, so perhaps his judgement started to be impaired some time before it was discovered. Anyway, he lost just about everything. I think he was glad to go.'

Cal Garrard made no comment on that point. 'So you traced your brother and came out here to see him. Then what?'

She looked back at him in some surprise. 'How do you mean?'

'What I say. You've found him, you're going to see him and hope he hasn't changed any. Supposing he has? Three years is a long time. For all you know he might not be interested in renewing acquaintances with his little sister.'

'Ben wouldn't change—not that radically.' Her cheeks held two spots of high colour.

'He's older, but so am I.'

'And wiser?' He shook his head. 'This crazy trip of yours isn't going to impress him much. Don't suppose it occurred to you to try getting in touch with him first?'

'It occurred to me, but I rejected the idea. After all this time a letter wouldn't have been easy.'

He gave a short bark of laughter. 'And this is? You're beautiful, you really are! Crazy, but cute with it !'

'Thank you.' She made a move to get to her feet, face burning. 'Your opinion might be of importance to you, Mr Garrard, but I can assure you it means nothing to me! I'll find some other way of getting to Fort Lester.'

'Sit down.' Still smiling, he nodded over her shoulder. 'Our drinks are coming.'

Have them yourself !'

He stood up without apparent haste and moved round to her side of the table, pressing her back down into her seat with a hand on one shoulder and sliding in after her as the waiter arrived. She subsided because there was nothing much else she could do without

creating a scene. This close Cal Garrard seemed bigger than ever. The hand still on her shoulder was powerful. He removed it to pay the man, waiting until they were alone again before glancing her way.

'Keep your dander down. I didn't say I wouldn't take you. If you fly off the handle that easy you're going to find life pretty difficult.'

Regan bit down hard on the temptation to tell him where to go. She needed him if she weren't to spend several more days waiting for transport. 'Naturally I'll pay for any passage,' she said stiffly.

He shook his head. 'There's no question of payment. I'm heading....'

'Oh, but I insist! I don't expect anything for nothing, Mr Garrard.'

He studied the smouldering end of his cigarette with a considering expression. 'Guess you never learned to take no for an answer,' he remarked almost conversationally. 'As I was saying, I'm heading that way regardless. One passenger isn't going to make any difference.'

The spots of colour had deepened. 'I only meant

'I know what you mean.' His tone cut her short. 'Forget it. I keep a float plane out at the Lake. Can you be ready to leave by eight?'

'Yes, of course.' A little belatedly she tagged on. 'Thanks.'

'I said forget it.' He glanced at his watch and reached out to stub the cigarette. The whisky was drained in a single swallow. Then he was getting back to his feet and leaning across for his jacket. 'Eight,' he repeated. 'In the lobby. Wear your warmest clothes.'

Regan watched him leave, ruefully aware that she

had been put in her place. She supposed she had asked for it in part, but then so had he. There was something about the man that irked her. She had never met anyone quite like him before for certain. He was almost too male.

She thought about the morning. From Prince George to Fort Lester was approximately four hundred miles. She didn't know what speed this plane of his would do, but that surely meant no more than four hours in the air at the most. They would be landing by early afternoon. She could put up with him for that long.

She left the Cinzano he had ordered for her untouched—she hadn't really wanted it anyway. There was no sign of him when she went out through the lobby. The desk clerk caught her eye and asked a silent question. She smiled and nodded, and he gave her the thumbs-up sign, making her laugh. The hotel staff here were among the friendliest she had ever met, if somewhat short on ceremony. The man had taken a personal interest in finding her some alternative means of reaching her destination after her casual inquiry this afternoon. Without him she wouldn't even have known about Cal Garrard.

Up in her room, she checked through her suitcase for her heaviest pair of jeans and a warm sweater and laid them ready for morning. The brogues she had brought with her from home would probably be better than the lighter shoes she was wearing at the moment. The mackinaw she had purchased down in Vancouver before boarding the train out here brought a wry doubt, but it was the only really suitable coat she possessed. It was hardly her fault that it happened to be the same colour and plaid as Cal Garrard's own,

though she could imagine, his reaction when he saw it. Well, let him smile. What did it matter? He held no patent on the design.

It was dark outside now, the temperature down to a point which made one thankful for the central heating indoors. This far north the spring nights could still drop close to freezing, she had read somewhere. Summer was a month or more away as yet. Not that the northern forests of British Columbia ever experienced very hot ones, of course; it wasn't that kind of climate. She wondered how Ben had adjusted to it. He had always been so keen on the heat. She could see him now, tall and fit and bronzed, poised on

the springboard of the swimming pool that glorious summer when she was fourteen and her father had rented the house in Kent for a month. That was before he had turned against the kind of life they had been brought up to lead. Three years before the day he had walked out of their lives and never returned.

Regan winced, recalling the things father and son had said to one another. Afterwards she had been forbidden even to mention her brother's name. There had been no last-minute forgiveness either. It was as though her father had erased all memory of his son from his mind. In his own way she supposed he had loved her—so far as he was capable of loving anyone. His whole life had been wrapped up in his business interests.

And this Garrard man, was he the same? The desk clerk had said he controlled a huge corporation with interests throughout the province. The land round Fort Lester was Crown owned, as was most forest land in British Columbia, but the Garrard Corporation held felling franchises on almost two and a half mil-

lion acres of it. Knowing little about the lumber industry, Regan could still see that must bring in a hefty profit, to say nothing of other operations. With the Keele hydro-electric scheme under way the whole area would become a gold mine.

He hadn't looked a particularly wealthy man, she reflected. Come to think of it, he hadn't acted like one either. But he was accustomed to wielding authority—that certainly showed. No doubt he was just as ruthless as her father had been when it came to furthering his own ends. It was a pity she found herself forced to accept a favour from such a man. Yet the alternative was lacking in attraction. Her funds weren't limitless by any means. Another few days here in Prince George would make serious inroads into them. And she was getting this trip for free, remember. Little as she liked it, she might as well take advantage of it.

Regan was down in the lobby at a quarter to the hour next morning, having breakfasted early. There had been no appearance by Cal Garrard in the dining room. She only hoped he had not forgotten their arrangement.

He came downstairs at five minutes to eight, dressed as he had been the night before and carrying an overnight bag in his hand. If her own appearance elicited any amusement she couldn't detect it. He paid his bill, then swung up her suitcase and led the way outside to the street. There was a car waiting. He put her into the passenger seat, slung both bags in the boot and came round to slide behind the wheel. Regan wondered who would drive the car back from the lake, but forbore to ask. It was of no importance anyway.

They left the city and followed the Frazer river out

towards Sinclair Mills. Yesterday's sun was hidden today behind lowering grey cloud, lending the forested landscape a sombre appearance. Mountains loomed mistily, the higher peaks still capped in white. Up there the snow line might recede as summer advanced but probably never wholly disappeared.

'It isn't very good flying weather,' she commented at length when she could bear the lack of conversation no longer.

'I've flown in worse.' He glanced her way, lingering a moment on the slim length of her legs stretched towards the heater vents. 'Cold?'

'Not so much now,' she admitted. 'It was so warm in Vancouver compared with out here.'

'It usually is. Summer doesn't get here till June, and we're back to full winter by November. It's different on the coast with warm air coming in from the Pacific, less abrupt seasonal changes.'

'Do you come from the coast yourself?'

'Vancouver Island. I've a place about twenty-five miles from Victoria, Kenny's Bay.'

'Not Garrard's?' The emphasis was light but pointed.

'The bay was named before my grandfather bought it. He saw no call to change it.' The strong mouth had a sardonic twist. 'You've a regular chip on that shoulder of yours, haven't you?'

She brought her chin up a little. 'I don't know what you mean.'

'I mean you're asking to get it knocked off. I don't care for innuendo from little girls.'

'I already told you I'm no kid, Mr Garrard,' she retorted in quick anger. 'And I won't be spoken to like one. How old are you anyway?'

'Old enough to have discovered a pretty good way of dealing with cocky brats.' He sounded halfway between amusement and exasperation. 'I admire your spirit in getting this far, but I'll flatten it some if you come the high-handed act with me again.'

'I don't' she began.

'Not that again! You know exactly what I mean. Both last night and this morning.' His glance was assessing. 'I'm not kidding. Quit riding me.'

'I have a better idea.' Her voice was low and taut. 'I'll quit riding with you! Just let me out.'

'Now you're being silly. We're way out of town. What do you plan on doing, walking back?'

'If I have to. It needn't concern you. Will you please stop the car!'

'No,' he said. Exasperation was fast gaining the upper hand. 'Sit back and calm down. I threatened you with a spanking, not wholesale mayhem! If I stop the car at all it'll be to do just that. You could sure use it!'

She said fiercely, 'I detest men like you!'

'Doubt if you ever knew any before. That father of yours had a lot to answer for.'

'Leave my father out of it!'

'Okay,' he said. 'Let's do that. Let's start again from scratch. You asked me for a lift last night. Would you rather I'd said no?'

'Right now, yes.'

He shook his head. 'Typical female logic. You want to find your brother, don't you?'

The fire died out of her suddenly, leaving her feeling small and a little ridiculous. 'Yes,' she said.

'Then keep that in mind.'

They drove in silence after that. Regan could find

nothing to say. The derisive comments still stung. Who did he think he was? She was twenty, not sixteen! He had no right to talk to her the way he had. She stole a sideways glance at the strong hard profile, dropping to the confident brown hands on the wheel. Overbearing beast! She wished she could think of some way to put him in his place, but she doubted if one existed.

The lake looked grey and choppy when they reached it. They followed a track round to the north shore where a clutch of cabins constituted some kind of depot. The plane was fuelled and waiting at the end of the wooden jetty, a four-seater Cessna painted bright yellow, with black lettering picked out boldly against the fuselage.

Cal left the car with the man who appeared to be in charge. He carried their luggage down to the plane himself and stashed it away in the locker, then saw Regan seated and strapped into place. There were radio headphones clipped close by his own seat, but he didn't bother to put them on. She watched him bring the engine to life and check the bank of instruments, aware of his total absorption. Attention to detail was what made a successful man, she could remember her father saying. She only wished she could forget.

The weather was no worse than when they had set out, but neither had it improved any. She sat with nerves tensed a little as he taxied the plane out from the comparative shelter of the staging and into open water, feeling the waves slapping at the floats. There was a roar as he opened the throttle to full, sending them skimming forward in a cloud of feathery spray. She felt the machine rise and trim forward on to the floats, then they were clear and climbing, coming

round in a wide turn at three hundred feet to head inland over the thickly forested far banks towards the northern ridge.

Regan had flown only in large planes prior to this, with the ground so far below that looking at it soon became monotonous. At two thousand feet there was no time for boredom, the landscape an ever-changing source of discovery.

Much of British Columbia was still wilderness: a land of lakes and rivers, of forests and mountains, vast tracts of it totally unpopulated except by animals and birds. Viewing the thickly wooded valleys set amidst rugged peaks, she could sense the isolation. If they came down in that they could be lost for weeks, she realised, and hastily closed off that line of thought before it could take any hold. Cal Garrard was obviously an experienced pilot, well accustomed to flying this particular route. They weren't going to come down.

He didn't say much during the first couple of hours, and there were times when she was convinced he had entirely forgotten her presence on board. Anger still boiled in her when she remembered those moments in the car, particularly as she suspected deep down that he might have had some justification. He was so self-contained, but she knew it wasn't just that which made her want to get at him. From the moment she had set eyes on him there had been something else, something she couldn't, or didn't want to, define. He was no more than ten years her senior, nowhere near old enough to talk down to her the way he had. But perhaps that was the way they treated their womenfolk out here—like children to be kept in line. At least she would only be in his company for a relatively short

time. Once they reached Fort Lester she needn't bump into him again.

Fort Lester. Journey's end. In her dreams, Regan had never got beyond finding Ben and renewing their relationship again. What happened after that was still in the air. If she could find some kind of job in Fort Lester she could perhaps stay through until the dam was completed, then they could go back to England together. Ben wouldn't have changed, she told herself emphatically. Not to such an extent. It wasn't significant that he'd made no attempt to contact her. He couldn't know about their father's death, and whilever he thought he was still alive he'd stay away.

'You should find a flask of coffee and some sandwiches in that bag down there,' Cal Garrard said unexpectedly, breaking into her thoughts. 'I had Joe put them up. Pour me some, will you?'

She leaned forward to reach for the bag close by her feet and open it. There were two plastic beakers along with the flask. She took off the top, sniffing the familiar aroma

with appreciation. He accepted the beaker from her with one hand, keeping the other firmly on the controls.

'Thanks.'

The sandwiches were chicken and ham on rye bread. Regan hadn't realised how hungry she was until she tried one. Breakfast seemed hours ago.

'How much longer before we reach Fort Lester?' she asked after a few minutes.

'About an hour, providing that head wind doesn't get any stronger.' He glanced across at her, expression enigmatic. 'It might get rough up ahead. The cloud's closing down. I'll try and keep under it as far as possible, but you'd better get ready for a few bumps.'

She tried to smile and sound unflurried. 'Perhaps we should have waited for the coffee.'

'Maybe we should.' There was a faint answering curve to the line of his mouth. 'First time you've flown like this?'

'Yes,' She paused. 'It's different.'

'You're not doing so badly. At least you don't chatter all the time to hide your nerves.'

'I'm not nervous,' she denied. 'You seem extremely competent, Mr Garrard.'

'There you go again,' he said.

'I'm sorry.' She was genuinely surprised. 'What did I say?'

'It's not what you say but the way you say it—every word a needle. I am competent, Miss Ferris.'

She coloured. 'Don't you think you're being oversensitive?'

'Where you're concerned, no. There's something about me that riles you and you're making it plain. Remind you of someone, do I?'

'No.' She was able to say it with perfect truth. 'No one at all.'

'Then it's what I am.' His tone mocked. 'You prefer failures, is that it?'

'You're being ridiculous,' she said coldly. 'I couldn't care less what you were.'

'You're a liar, and not a very good one. You had contempt written all over you when you approached me last night.'

'That's not true!'

'It is true, and you know it.'

She swallowed thickly. 'If you think that why did you agree to bring me with you this morning?' 'Because I couldn't resist the yen to cut you down to

size. I don't seem to have succeeded—the pause was fractional—yet.'

'And you won't get the opportunity. I'll make sure of that.' She was determined not to let him anger her this time. 'Unless you own the town too.'

'Not all of it. Just enough to make it difficult for you to avoid the name.'

'Bully for you!'

'Isn't it?' His tone roughened. 'Stop hating him so much.'

'I didn't hate him.' She had no need to ask who he meant.

'I think so. In fact, I'm sure so. You should have cut loose yourself as soon as you were old enough. That way you might have kept your self-respect.'

'My self-respect?'

'Sure. You stayed with him because you couldn't contemplate roughing it alone like your brother did. That's why you're looking for him now, to put back the clock.'

Regan was silent for some time, not looking at him. 'You're so good at analysis,' she said at last. 'Where do you come in?'

'Simple. You made enquiries yesterday and found out who and what I was. The Garrard Corporation is big and it's successful. That puts me on a par with your father. A business sense doesn't have to go hand in glove with cold-bloodedness, you know.' 'It does if it's going to get anywhere. You can't make omelettes without breaking eggs.' 'Stop quoting the man—unless he ever came up with anything original. Your trouble is you let yourself be dominated by him. Now you're damned if anybody's going to tell you what to do.'

'You're so right.' She was taut with resentment, and yet strangely close to tears. 'Least of all you, Mr Garrard. Just fly your plane!'

The glance he gave her was calculating. 'My hands won't always be full.'

'They will while it matters.' She was past caring what she said, intent only on having the last word. 'I'm not listening to anymore.'

She didn't have to because he didn't speak again. Regan had the shamed feeling that she had shown herself in no good light. She even thought of apologising, but pride wouldn't let her. What he had said hurt because it was the truth. Her father had dominated her—oh, perhaps not in the way Cal Garrard tried to do, but in every other way that mattered. He had controlled her thoughts, her ideas, her ambitions : he had dictated the way she should dress, the way she should behave, even the way she walked. They had never argued because she lacked the will to go against him. She hadn't been glad when he died—she wouldn't be glad when anybody died—but there had been no particular sorrow either. She was on her own for the first time in her life and could do as she wanted within reason. Money meant little. It had brought her little happiness. All she had needed was enough to find Ben and start all over again, and that she was going to do.

The minutes ticked by. As he had predicted, the weather slowly worsened, the lowering cloud forcing them down to fifteen hundred feet. Air turbulence caused the cabin to rock and tilt alarmingly despite the steadiness of the lean brown hands on the controls. At this height they seemed almost to be skimming the tree tops along the line of the valley. There were

peaks to the west and a high broken ridge up ahead with a lake in the foreground surrounded by the interminable forest. Nowhere was there a sign of human habitation. Rain spattered against the windscreen, blurring the distant mountains and turning the world below the floats to overall misty greyness. Regan stole a glance at the hard-edged profile next to her and wondered if he ever revealed what he was thinking. Talking might have helped, but she had put paid to that form of pastime herself. They were safe enough, of course. A little rain couldn't harm them.

Even as the thought formed in her mind she heard a sudden spluttering sound from the engine and saw the propeller blades slow into view. Then they had stopped, and so had all sound apart from the lashing of rain and the wind in the struts.

Vaguely she was aware of Cal shouting something and wrestling with the controls as they side-slipped into a long slow glide towards the trees, but her own throat was frozen. Some way ahead there was a glimpse of water, grey and cold below the scudding clouds. She knew Cal was trying to hold the plane in the air long enough to reach it—knew also with fatalistic certainty that they weren't going to make it.

CHAPTER TWO

AFTERWARDS there was no clear impression of the actual moment of impact. All Regan could ever recall was the sensation of falling swiftly as in a lift, and a horrible tearing, groaning noise which seemed to be all about them. When it stopped she was still fully conscious, body held tightly in place by the securing strap despite the crazy downward tilt of the whole cabin. The smell of petrol hung heavily in the air.

There was movement at her side, hands tearing at the strap and pushing her bodily through the gaping hole in the fuselage where the side door had been.

'Get away from the plane!' Cal shouted urgently as her feet found the ground in a surprisingly short distance. 'She might go up!'

Regan stumblingly obeyed, amazed to find her legs would still carry her. A tree loomed in her path like some giant barrier, and she fell against it sobbing for breath, turning her head in time to see Cal Garrard start running away from the plane carrying something under his arm.

Even as he reached the outer edge of the circle of wreckage there was a crump and a searing flash of heat as the tank exploded, the shock wave sending him crashing to the ground. Flames leapt from the fuselage and spread like lightning to the tree in which it rested. Undergrowth in the immediate area started to burn. Thankfully she saw him pick himself up and start to-

wards her again. If he'd died she would have been on her own—but it wasn't until much later that she recalled the instinctive selfishness of that fleeting thought and knew shame,

They had so very nearly made it to the lake, they discovered when the black pyre of smoke had died down. They could see it through the belt of gees beyond the little semi-clearing where they had come down. It was the floats which had proved their undoing, catching in the topmost branches and tearing from under them, sending them plunging straight to earth. But if luck had seen fit to deny them the comparative safety of the water she had also smiled on them in choosing their path of descent. The same spreading fork which had ripped both wings clean away from the fuselage had allowed the body of the plane to slip through almost as if cradled, saving their lives; saving them even from injury of any real account. Apart from minor cuts and bruising they were both of them whole and intact.

The rain had spared them the added danger of a forest fire from the burning plane. Some of the closer bush had caught, but the forest here at the edge of the lake was thin and there had been little opportunity for the flames to spread very far. That they were cold and damp seemed a small price to pay for the sheer overwhelming relief of being alive at all.

It was an hour or more before Regan could begin to piece her thoughts together in any coherent form. Cal had rigged up a shelter of sorts against the steady drizzle of rain, using one of the blankets he had rescued from the plane with spruce boughs laid over it. Crouched beneath it at his side, she looked out on a

dark world and tried not to think too far ahead. There had been no time to use the radio, no warning of disaster until it actually happened.

'Why did the engine cut out like that?' she asked in a voice that was still far from steady. 'It was all so—sudden.'

'Blockage in the fuel line.' His voice was matter-of-fact. 'Only thing it could have been. We're lucky it didn't happen over the ridge.' He looked down at her, taking in the pallor of her face beneath the streaks of oil decorating it. 'Feeling groggy?'

'Yes,' she admitted. 'And shivery.'

'Shock. It will pass. It will have to pass. We don't have anything to treat it with.'

He was right, of course, if somewhat unnecessarily brutal about it. Regan made an effort to stiffen her backbone. They had come through the same experience.

'So what happens now?' she said. 'Do we just sit here and wait for somebody to come looking for us?' 'Nobody is going to do that. Not for some time.' 'But they must! I mean, when you don't turn up at Fort Lester, surely—'

'I don't time my visits to the minute,' he said. 'They know I'll be there some time in the next few days, but that's all. They're not likely to make any enquiries for three or four days.'

In the ensuing pause Regan could think of nothing but irrelevancies. 'So what do we do?' she asked at last on a helpless note.

'We don't have much choice. We walk out of here.' She shivered a little. 'How far?'

'Forty—forty-five miles. Say three days in this kind of country.'

Three days! She stared at him. He sounded so casual about it.

'We've no food,' she got out. 'How can we walk for three days without food?'

He bent and unwrapped the bundle at her feet. 'We've got a shotgun and ammunition, two blankets, a knife and the means to make a fire. We'll survive. Lucky I always have camping gear in the plane. Never know when it's going to be needed. I'm only sorry there wasn't time to grab more.'

He had almost waited too long as it was, she recalled, and shuddered at the thought of what might have happened. 'What means of making fire?' she asked for want of anything else to say. 'Do you rub two sticks?'

'This.' He took the gold lighter from a pocket of his mackinaw and weighed it in his hand with a dry smile. 'You can't say I came unprepared.'

'Very farseeing.' Her own tone was short.

"Cal leaned over suddenly and took her by the shoulders, jerking her head up. His mouth was taut. 'Okay, that's enough. In shock you might be, but you're going to have to shake yourself out of it. We're alive and we're staying alive, if I have to walk you off your feet to do it ! Understand?'

She looked into the strong hard features and knew a momentary leap of some new emotion. 'Yes,' she snapped back. 'I can't fail to understand. And take your hands off me!'

Sparks leapt in the grey eyes. 'Recovering fast, aren't we ! We're going to have to get a whole lot closer than this before we're through.'

'Not if I have anything to do with it ! '

'You won't be able to help it. This time of year the

night temperatures can still drop close enough to freezing. We'll need all the body heat we can muster between us.'

A quiver ran through her, and her eyes dropped. 'We're not going to get out of here alive, are we?' she whispered. 'We don't stand a chance ! '

'We stand every chance. Soon as this rain stops I'll light a fire and we can dry off.' His glance went to his wrist and he grimaced. 'My watch is smashed. How about yours?'

Hers was intact and still going. She was amazed to find it was still only a little after three. How could so much happen in so little time? Days seemed to have passed since they had set off.

The rain stopped soon after, the cloud parting to let a weak sunlight through. By the time they had crawled out from under the rough shelter and secured the blanket there was some warmth in the air and a growing brightness in their surroundings. The lake had a shore of mostly sedimentary rock. It wasn't all that big, perhaps a mile long by a quarter wide at the most. Cal found some dry driftwood under an overhanging bank and lit the promised fire, spreading the wet blanket over a frame of branches close by it.

'Take off anything that's wet,' he said. 'You can't afford a chill. Thank God you had the sense to buy a mackinaw. Even damp wool retains heat to a great extent.'

'I thought you'd be amused by it,' she confessed taking it off and hanging it out.

'Why would I be that?'

'Because I'm not Canadian.'

'I'd be a damn fool if I thought only Canadians

were entitled to wear sensible clothing. How about those jeans?'

'They're only damp,' she said swiftly. 'Look to your own.' She caught his eye and felt warmth in her face. For a moment she had almost forgotten where they were. Shock could take so many forms. She still found it difficult to assess the true nature of their predicament. Forty miles from the nearest point of human habitation and it was going to take them three days to reach it. It didn't bear thinking about.

The fire was a comfort, if also a rather nasty reminder of what they had escaped. Cal left her beside it while he went to poke about in the cooling shell-of the plane. When he finally returned he was carrying a scorched water canteen and a metal pan, plus a small tin containing fish-hooks and a couple of wire snares.

'My survival kit,' he said of the latter. 'We'll live like kings ! '

'Is there anything else left unburned?' Regan made herself ask, and he shook his head.

'Nothing worth bothering about. The fuel' blew back.'

Which left her possessing nothing but what she stood up in at present. No passport, no money, no identity almost. It was a subduing recognition.

Cal dropped to his haunches close by where she sat hunched on the hard rock, placing another couple of broken branches on the fire. The sun was dropping towards the western ridge, lending a pearl-like opacity to the rippling surface of the lake and merging the near banks into shadow. His hair was rough and springing, uncontrolled by brush or comb. In the white sweater his shoulders looked wide as a bridge.

There was both security and menace in the knowledge of his strength. They were alone out here and he was a stranger. How did she know what kind of man he really was?

'When do we start out?' she forced herself to ask as the silence grew. 'The things are just about dry.'

'Not tonight, it's too late. We'll camp down here and get an early start in the morning.'

He dusted off his hands, looking up unexpectedly to catch her eyes on him, and something in her expression must have given her away. His own hardened. 'Quit worrying,' he said. 'You're safe enough. I've other things on my mind, All I want from a kid like you is co-operation. Just do as you're told and we'll get along fine.'

She controlled herself with an effort. This was no time to put his back up. 'How do you propose finding your way?' she said. 'I don't see any signs out.'

The sarcasm was involuntary, but Cal chose to ignore it. 'The river feeding this lake is the Ender. The Keele runs into it the other side of the ridge up there. Our best bet is to follow it up to the dam. Saves cutting across country to Fort Lester.'

'You mean the dam is closer?'

'No, about the same. But it's in direct line.'

'I don't understand.' Her brain felt numb. 'You were supposed to be making for the town, not the dam.'

He nodded towards the far peaks still wreathed in cloud. 'Expect me to fly over those in that? I've been valley hopping for a reason. Rock tends to be hard When you bump into it.'

'You have instruments.'

'Not for blind navigation.' He drew in an impatient breath. 'Look, I'm not going to sit here arguing the

-

mechanics of flying with you. Take my word for it.' 'I'm sorry.' She meant it. 'I wasn't trying to be clever, I just can't seem to take anything in.'

'Then don't try. You'll feel better after you've slept.'

If they got any sleep. Already the temperature was dropping; she could feel the bite of the air. Exhilarating when one was safe and secure in a civilised setting, demoralising right now. Regan reached for her jacket, but Cal stopped her.

'Save it till you really need it. That way you'll feel the benefit.' He got up then and went over to where he had put the shotgun, breaking it open to load both barrels. 'Don't let the fire out,' he said, 'but let it die down to a good hot bed. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

'You're not going to leave me here on my own?' she said in alarm. 'What if something comes?'

'You're safe enough with the fire. We need food.' 'There must be fish in the lake.'

'Sure, there are fish in the lake. Fine as a standby if nothing else offers itself, but you need more than that for stamina. Just don't start wandering around, that's all.'

Regan had no intention. She watched him stride away along the shore with dull acceptance. A man was more resilient in a situation like this, especially one who had spent all his life in and out of such regions. To Cal Garrard the forest was nothing to fear, but surely he could see that she would fear it? Grizzlies were supposedly common to the area, and they would almost certainly be out of hibernation by now. How could he leave her alone and unprotected like this?

It was dusk when he returned. She had heard the sound of a shot some time before and was not surprised to see the feathered shape dangling from his

hand. She ignored him, leaning closer to the blaze she had created with hands outstretched.

'I told you to let it burn down,' he said. 'Don't you ever listen? How am I supposed to roast this without scorching it over a fire like that?'

'I haven't the faintest idea,' she said. Right then she couldn't have cared less. The last half hour had been fraught with tension. There had been rustlings and other strange sounds from the forest behind her, movement in the water ahead. The shadows shifted when she looked sideways at them. 'I'm not hungry, anyway.'

'Well, I am, and you're going to be, if I have to force-feed you.' He sounded curt. 'We're not going to get out of this by giving way to self-pity.'

'Self-pity ! ' Her head came up, her eyes blazing. 'You walk off with the gun and leave me here on my own, then have the nerve to accuse me of feeling sorry for myself ! ' 'I have the nerve for a whole lot of things,' he came back. 'Which you're going to find out if you don't pull yourself together. I'm not going to spend my time wet-nursing you. You make it on your own.'

'Go run up a tree,' she muttered, and felt her heart miss a beat as he dropped the bird down alongside the shotgun and came striding across to her.

The hands yanking her upright were hard and ruthless. 'Now look,' he clipped. 'I'll stand so much, but enough's enough! You're acting like a ten-year-old! We just came through a bad time—okay, it shook you up, but you came through it! Nothing else can beat that. Nothing else is going to beat it. But you're going to have to help yourself, and that means developing a few guts. So how about it?'

She stared up at him looming over her, hating him

as she had never hated anyone in her life before. Guts, was it? She would show him!

'All right,' she said, 'you made your point. I won't hold you back.'

'Good.' He was making no concessions. He let her go. 'I cut some spruce and left it along the shore just back there. Go and fetch it, will you, before it gets too dark to see. There won't be any moon tonight.'

It wasn't far, though she was angry enough not to care if she went right round the lake. She took hold of the boughs by their cut ends and dragged them back to the fire, leaving them in a pile as he directed. He had the bird, whatever it was, already plucked and drawn and was skewering it through with a roughly pointed stick. Propped eventually across the glowing embers with the aid of two forked twigs driven into the ground either side, the carcase soon started to make sizzling noises and give forth delicious smells.

Cal turned it from time to time, face bronzed by the fire light. He was obviously well accustomed to this mode of cooking. Regan had a feeling he would have been perfectly happy had the circumstances been different and he had been alone. Her resentment died a little as she acknowledged her own inadequacies. No matter how she tried she was going to be a drag. Could she really blame him for rating her so soundly when she showed signs of giving up before they'd even started?

The bird tasted as good as it smelled. 'Unsporting,' she murmured when he told her it was grouse, but there was no bite in it. The forest lay behind them, hushed and dark, fragrant with the scent of balsam. Water lapped not far from their feet, spreading out into black expanse. The stars were bright enough to

pick out detail by, the cloud almost cleared from the sky. Had it not been for the growing cold, Regan could almost have forgotten the trauma of their being there herself.

It was Cal who arranged their sleeping facilities, drawing the pile of spruce boughs closer to the newly fuelled fire and laying them out. Regan watched with mixed emotions as he took both blankets and shook them loose, realising what was expected of her. When he indicated all was ready she couldn't bring herself to move, sitting there looking at him with an unconscious plea in her eyes.

'Don't make me fetch you,' he said wearily. 'I thought we were over all that.'

'I can't help it.' Her voice held a betraying quiver despite all she could do to stop it.

'This might be commonplace to you, but it isn't to me'

'Meaning you never slept with a man before.' His smile was ironical. 'You don't have to tell me that. It's pretty obvious.'

'Is it?' Irrationally she was stung. 'Why?'

'It just is. Take my word for it.'

'Am I supposed to take your word for everything?' 'Yes, you are.' He was beginning to sound impatient again. 'Come on over here.'

'I'd rather sleep alone,' she insisted. 'There are two blankets.'

'One of which you'd find less than adequate even with the fire. It's cold now and it's going to get a darn sight colder. You're not even accustomed to sleeping rough.'

'I could manage.' The pause was brief, her jaw set. 'Please.'

'No.' The reply was unequivocal. 'I'll give you three seconds.'

She got up without haste and went over to the spruce, avoiding his eyes as she lay down on the lower blanket.

'Turn on your side,' he said. He let himself down behind her as she obeyed, reaching over her to tuck the other blanket securely in before arranging it over himself. She felt his arm come about her waist, drawing her closer into him, felt his knees come up tight under hers and the warmth of his breath on the nape of her neck.

'Relax,' he said sardonically in her ear after a minute of two. 'Your heart's thudding like a trip hammer!'

It wasn't easy. She could feel the warmth coming back into her body and had to recognise the validity of the demonstration, but couldn't bring herself to accept it with any kind of detachment. She had known this man little more than twenty-four hours. How could she be expected to accept the situation? He could deny any consciousness of her as a female as much as he liked, but she didn't believe him.

Cal gave a sudden sigh. 'Look,' he said, 'I'm tired and we've a long hard day ahead of us tomorrow. I just want to sleep, but if you're going to lie there all night waiting for me to take advantage of the situation we'd maybe better get it over with right here and now.' He pulled her over on to her back before she could say anything, finding her mouth with cool intent. 'Okay,' he said when he lifted his head again, 'so I've taken advantage. Now can we both get some sleep?'

Regan turned from him without a word and allowed him to put her back in the same position. Her lips were burning, but the message had been clear. She failed to stir him in any way. It should have been a comfort, yet it wasn't, not wholly. She felt slapped.

CHAPTER THREE

REGAN was first awake in the grey light of dawn, limbs stiff and aching. She must have moved in the night, for Cal's face was close to her own, his arm flung loosely about her. She could feel his breath on her forehead and see the dark growth of beard along the line of his jaw. When she attempted to slide away the arm tightened.

'Dallas,' he murmured, then the grey eyes came open, looking into hers with a blank expression for a couple of seconds before realisation sprang alive. 'Cosy,' he said.

'Sleep well?'

Regan pushed herself away from him without answering, sitting up with a hastily smothered groan as every joint protested. A mist hung in among the surrounding trees and swirled over the ground, damp and cold. She shivered.

'Going to be a fair day,' he said behind her. 'This will go as soon as the sun gets up.'

He got up and threw a blanket over her shoulders, folding the other into a neat oblong.

'I'll light the fire and then go and look at those snares I set last night. Pity we don't have any coffee along. A hot drink would work wonders.'

'There's always water,' Regan suggested in an attempt to copy his businesslike tone.

'It's better than nothing.'

'We might do better than that with luck.'

He had the fire going again in a very short time, and water fetched from the lake heating on it in the metal

pane Regan tried to stir herself to shame over letting him do all the work, but it was too much of an effort to move. She felt dull and depressed; the aftermath of shock, she suspected. He wasn't going to accept that as an excuse for long and she knew it, but until he made some move to ginger her up she wasn't going to worry about it.

He came back from his examination of the snares carrying a young jack-rabbit in one hand and more than a pound of mushrooms wrapped in the scarf he had worn tucked into the neck of his sweater in the other. At least, he said they were mushrooms.

Regan hoped he was right. Any stomach upset now would be the end.

Boiled in the water they made a palatable if unusual breakfast. She wished there had been more. The rabbit Cal was saving for, evening, lacking the time to start cooking it now. Lunch they would apparently be doing without. She wasn't surprised. They would have to keep moving as long as daylight lasted to make any distance. Forty miles in three days averaged out at roughly fourteen a day—not a lot in normal circumstances, but these were hardly that. Regan had a horrible feeling that the three days had been a deliberately optimistic estimate for her benefit. Regardless, she couldn't afford to let apathy hold her back.

The lake was icy. She rinsed her face and hands and did the best she could with the pan in which the mushrooms had been cooked. A sleek brown form cut through the water not far from where she squatted, heading for the bank, tail flattened out behind it. A beaver, she realised: the Canadian emblem. She watched in fascination as the rodent climbed out and shook before running busily off into a nearby thicket.

If it had scented her it wasn't afraid.

Movement in the trees just along the curve of the shoreline caught her eye as she waited for the animal to reappear, but she was too late to be certain of what she had seen. Something quite big, at any rate. She didn't want to think about what it might have been.

Cal had the blankets and other things packed into a roll when she went back to their camp site. She watched him fasten it up with the shotgun sling and hoist it over a shoulder.

'Ready?' he said as he lifted the gun in his free hand.

As ready as she would ever be, Regan acknowledged silently. She resolved not to think too far ahead, just take each hour as it came. Cal knew these northern forests. He would get them out. He had to get them out.

Getting to the northern end of the lake proved easy enough. They simply walked along the shore to the point where the river emptied into it. The surrounding peaks stood out clearly against a sky the colour of periwinkles, lower slopes cloaked in green. The lake itself was a mirror reflecting a dual landscape upside down. The beauty of it stirred her. Intemperate the climate might be, but the scenery could hardly be bettered. It was a pity she couldn't have been seeing it in rather more conducive conditions.

They made no more than four miles that first morning. Cal allowed stops every hour, though not for long. More than five minutes would only tighten up the leg muscles, he

said. The going was arduous despite the use of what game trails they could find leading in roughly the right direction. There were draws and ravines to negotiate along the twists and turns of the river. Once they left the latter altogether to cut across a

forested ridge and find it again on the other side. Cal seemed to know what he was doing and more important, where he was going. Regan could only follow, and try not to prove too much of a burden.

In spite of the demands of their route, she found time to be aware of the forest dwellers. There were birds in plenty, and red squirrels too if one were quick enough to spot them darting along the branches of a tree. Once they saw a porcupine waddling along, spines quivering. It seemed unperturbed by their closeness to its chosen path, and Regan didn't wonder. With that kind of armour to protect it it didn't need to fear very much.

'Are there any bears in the region?' she asked casually during one of their stops.

'Grizzlies, I mean.'

Cal shrugged. 'Grizzlies; blacks—they're all bears. Sure, they're around.'

'Yet you let the fire go out last night. What if one had found us?'

His smile was faint. 'I suppose you think I should have sat up with the gun at the ready. Point number one, I can't sit up half the night and hike all day, point number two, they're far more likely to turn away from human scent unless said humans happen to be violating their particular territory.'

'How can you be sure we weren't?'

'Because we'd have known about it. By territory I mean immediate. They'll normally only attack if they're either cornered or surprised.' He paused. 'Why all the interest?'

'I thought I saw one by the lake.'

'Up or down?'

'Down.'

'Then you'd nothing to worry about. You'd have been downwind of him.' He didn't sound particularly concerned. 'Forget it. We're making too much noise to come on one unexpectedly.'

She supposed he knew what he was talking about—on this score, at any rate. Nevertheless, she couldn't entirely banish the nervousness which made her keep glancing back over her shoulder.

As Cal had predicted, the day had turned warm when the sun got up high enough to make its presence felt. Warm, that was, compared with the night before. They did eat lunch because he had brought along the remainder of the grouse wrapped in some broad leaves something like dock. Regan picked the bones clean and could have eaten more. Already she was weary. Her limbs felt heavy and wooden as if they didn't belong to her, and she had started a blister on one heel where her shoe had rubbed. The thought of getting up and starting out again was almost more than she could bear. 'There's no easy way,' said Cal, watching her expression when he announced it time to move. 'Just set your mind to it.'

'It's all right for you,' she burst out resentfully. 'You're used to this damned wilderness! You couldn't care less what I feel!'

'I daren't let myself,' he came back dryly. 'Let's move.'

'I'm tired. I need a longer rest.' She was ashamed of her own behaviour, but she couldn't seem to pull herself together. 'I'll move when I feel like it!'

He didn't argue, simply walked over and yanked her to her feet, his fingers digging into her upper arms, his eyes contemptuous. 'You'll move when I tell you. And

sharpish! A few aches and pains aren't going to kill you.' He shook her. 'Now stow it!' She stumbled when he abruptly let her go, blinking back angry tears born as much of her own self-disgust as his treatment of her. 'I despise you!' she got out between clenched teeth. 'I really despise you!'

'Good. Let's keep it that way.' He didn't attempt to touch her again but moved away to lift the pack, expression set. 'By the time we come through this you'll maybe have done some growing up.'

Regan bit back the scathing retort. What was the use? Anyway, he was right; she was acting like a child. If he treated her like one she had only herself to blame.

She set her teeth and followed him as he moved off out of the clearing without a backward glance.

The blister forming on her heel grew no better as the day wore on. Walking became an agony. At one point she stuffed her folded handkerchief down between her heel and the leather. It helped stop further rubbing, but it increased the immediate pressure. It took her all her time to stop her face revealing her discomfort when Cal happened to glance in her direction.

If he noticed her difficulties he made no comment. He had spoken little since they had stopped for lunch. The rabbit he had caught in the snare hung head downwards from the blanket roll on his back, the long ears limp and pathetic. Regan knew she couldn't afford to indulge in pity for the animal, but she could and did regret the necessity of killing it. Those who hunted for pleasure should themselves be hunted in turn, she thought emphatically. Including Cal Garrard, if that was the reason he was packing a gun in the first place.

The forest was full of sound if one listened for it, yet

the main impression remained one of waiting stillness. Sometimes the trees grew so tall they seemed almost to brush the sky. There was no sign of any cutting, yet a lot of the timber was obviously mature. Regan supposed the valley might be too inaccessible to make transportation worthwhile. Keele would change all that. With electrical power so close at hand it would no doubt be deemed worth cutting in a road. There must be hundreds of thousands of dollars tied up in this one valley alone.

She wondered just what the dam would really mean to a little backwoods town like Fort Lester. Cal had said it would change out of all recognition inside two years. It would probably become something of an industrial area once the power started flowing—sawmills, pulp and paper mills, the lot. Perhaps they would even extend the railway through. That would certainly make a difference. People would come, some would stay; the town would grow. Mill workers and lumberjacks would bring their families, which meant more shops, more houses, more jobs. A big project, but there was room for expansion. In this country space was of the least concern.

By late afternoon she was limping badly despite all her efforts to ignore the raw burning pain in her heel. Her whole body felt weighted, her head stuffed with cotton wool. As the sun sank towards the horizon it became apparent that tonight was going to be even colder than the previous one, perhaps because of the very clearness of the sky. Frost wasn't impossible; it was still only early May. Odd how she had been able to read up so many details about the region she was to visit without once questioning the wisdom of her timing. But then, she hadn't expected to be sampling the

climatic vagueries at such close quarters. Central heating had been long established on this continent.

They made camp in a little ravine which afforded some protection from the bite in the air. Cal made a fire, then went to set his snares. It was full dark when he came back. He was carrying a couple of fish slung from a hook with a length of line attached.

'Thought I'd take the opportunity while I could still see,' he said. 'We'll cook the rabbit as well and have some of each. That way there'll be enough left over for tomorrow.' He looked at her huddled over the fire, the light dancing over her fatigue-drawn features and tangled hair. 'You okay?'

'Yes.' She refrained from pointing out the time he had been away. She was past caring anyway. 'Can't we keep the fire going all night somehow? I'll take turns sitting up.'

'We might not need to. I've found a cave of sorts. It isn't much, but it's dry, and likely to be a good deal warmer than out here.'

'Probably a bear's lair,' she muttered, and he gave a sudden unexpected grin.

'You've got bears on the brain. And they have dens, not lairs.'

Regan let out her breath on a small sigh. He must be tired too, but he could still find the ability to joke.. 'I've been a drag, haven't I?' she said.

He had already begun skinning the rabbit with the small harp knife, his hands sure and certain in their movements. 'You've had your moments,' he agreed without lifting his head from his task. There was a pause before he added levelly, 'What comes next, an apology from me for being rough on you?'

'Not unless you consider it due.'

He looked up at her then, expression enigmatic in the fire glow. 'I could have been rougher. You had it coming.'

'Because of what you think I am?'

'Because of what I know you are. Not that I can blame you too much. Your father made you that way.'

She swallowed thickly. 'I don't want to talk about my father.'

'I know. But it's time you did—get it out of your system. There's a lot of rubbish talked about blood being thicker than water, but it doesn't have to be like that. If it's any comfort I wasn't over fond of my own father. We were two opposites.'

'But you followed in his footsteps when he died?' 'Not quite the same ones. They didn't fit.'

'How long is it since he died?'

'Two years.' Something in his tone discouraged further questioning along that line. He waited a moment before saying, 'You're counting a lot on this reunion with Ben, aren't you?'

'I suppose I am,' she admitted. 'Perhaps too much.' She managed a wry smile. 'He's going to be even more surprised when I turn up out of the forest without warning.'

'Devastated,' Cal agreed dryly. 'Especially considering you're minus a passport, among other things. You realise it won't be practical to try fixing the legalities from Fort Lester? It's going to mean a trip back to the coast and a visit to the British Consul at least.'

Regan hadn't thought about it and didn't want to think it now. 'I'll be happy just to get there for the present,' she said. 'I'll worry about the rest later.' She hesitated before adding slowly, 'Is it likely to get very much worse going than it's been today?'

'In parts. The river cuts through a gully some miles up. We can't get through it, so we're going to have to go over the top of it. Ever done any rock climbing?'

She shook her head. 'I'm not the rugged outdoor type, remember?'

He smiled. 'I believe you. Play any sports?'

'Tennis and squash.'

'That's a pretty fast game. Any good?'

'I never tried it on a competitive basis.' The conversation was designed to make things seem more normal and it was working. Regan could feel the tension easing inside her.

'How about you?'

Cal's shrug was easy. 'Never had much time for organised sport.'

'But you go hunting?'

'Sometimes.' He glanced at her, struck by the note in her voice. 'Got a bone to pick about that?'

'No. Except—' she hesitated—'animals only kill for food.'

'So do I.' He said it quietly. 'I live off the land when I'm out, as we're doing now. That's challenge enough.'

Regan bit her lip. When would she learn not to jump in with both feet? It was too late for an apology so she kept quiet, watching him skewer the gutted fish and suspend them in front of the fire along with the rabbit. If she'd had to land herself in such a predicament she supposed she couldn't have chosen anyone more likely to succeed in getting her out than Cal Garrard. If only he weren't such an unknown quantity. She still felt uneasy in his company. How long would indifference last?

'Feeling stiff?' he asked into the silence.

'Rather.' She strove to keep any trace of self-pity from

her voice. 'I can't think why. It isn't as if I were totally unfit.'

'You've been using different muscles, that's all. Plus the bruises you collected yesterday. I'm feeling them myself. We were lucky. A broken leg or even an ankle, and we'd really have been up the creek!'

'You'd have had to leave me and go for help,' she said.

'Supposing it had been me. Think you could have found your own way out?'

'You know I couldn't.' She shivered at the thought of being alone in the forest. 'I'd be helpless without you, I don't mind admitting it.'

'You do, but that's by the way. We're in it together for better or worse.'

She said jokingly 'That sounds familiar.'

Something sparked in the grey eyes: a momentary change of expression instantly blanked out. 'I noticed you were favouring one foot,' he said. 'I guess those shoes were new?'

'Yes.' She was aware that the subject had been deliberately changed, but had no inclination to find out why. That look in his eyes had been enough to discourage anybody.

'And they've rubbed your heel? You'd better let me take a look at it after we've eaten. A small thing like that can make a lot of difference to our time.'

'If I take my shoe off I'll never get it on again,' she protested.

'And if you don't take it off you'll finish up not being able to walk at all.'

She made no further protest. It could scarcely feel worse than it did now. 'How far do you think we came today?' she asked.

'Ten or eleven miles. Hard to figure exactly.'

'It isn't enough, is it? Not to do it in three days.' 'If we don't do it in three we'll do it in four.' 'By which time you might have been missed.'

'Maybe. Won't make much difference either way by then. We'll be home and dry.'

Regan wished she could share his certainty. It was different for him because he knew exactly what they were likely to come up against. It was also different for him because he was a man. They weren't prey to the same fears and weaknesses.

The fish and rabbit made good eating. Had it not been for the growing cold, Regan would have been happy to linger over the fire after it and savour the mingling of flavours. The cave Cal had found was at the base of the ravine in an outcropping of rock deposited there in some long-gone ice age. As he had said, it wasn't very big but it was dry as a bone inside, with a lot of dried grass on the floor which seemed to indicate it might have been used as a one-time home by some animal.

'Not recently, though,' Cal said with certainty, 'or the smell would still be here. The entrance is too wide for real security. Perfect for our needs, as it happens. A fire built just in front of it will warm the cave before it burns out. Only don't blame me if the wind changes and we get the place full of smoke.'

It was surprisingly cosy inside the cave when the fire was lit and the blankets spread.

'Now let's have a look at that foot of yours,' he said. 'Take your shoe off.'

Regan did so with difficulty, drawing in her breath as the leather slid over the sore patch. The pad she had made from her handkerchief was stuck to her heel

through the hole worn in her sock. Beneath it the skin was broken and raw, stinging on contact with air. Cal made a small whistling sound between his teeth.

'That must have been giving you hell! Why didn't you say something before?'

She caught his eye and pulled a wry face. 'I daren't.'

'Ouch,' he said softly. 'Guess I asked for that.' He got up in the half crouch which was 'all that the height of the cave allowed for. be right back.'

He was gone no longer than ten minutes. When he returned he was carrying a handful of what looked like some kind of moss. He made a paste from it with water heated in the metal dish, smearing the resulting mess on to the raw patch and covering the whole area with a strong leaf.

'An old Indian remedy,' he said. 'Heals and toughens the skin. Put your sock back over it to hold it on. In the morning we'll make a pad to go inside your shoe. You'll find it will burn some.'

'It did, but she was not going to complain. 'It's fine,' she said. 'Thanks.' She looked at him curiously in the flickering glow which highlighted the planes and angles of his face, turning his skin mahogany. 'Where did you learn all that?'

'Just something I picked up.' His tone was casual. 'We'd better get some sleep.'

He moved forward to stack the fire. There was barely room in the cave for two separate beds, but she took the opportunity while his back was to her to wrap herself in one of the blankets as best she was able. He made no comment when he crawled back to her side, but took the other blanket and did likewise, making a rather better job of it. They were close but not touch-

ing, their combined breathing clearly audible in the confines of their surroundings.

Neither spoke again before they slept.

It was another fine day, warming rapidly once the sun got above the ridge. Regan's heel felt a whole lot better than the day before. Her step was almost springy. A hot bath and a change of clothing would have gone all the way towards making life worthwhile, but there was a limit to what the forest could provide. They were fed, they were rested, and they were some miles closer to their destination. It could have been a great deal worse. They made good time that morning despite the rising nature of the terrain. At noon they lunched off the remains of last night's supper and some wild

celery Cal had picked during the morning, washing it down with the clear river water. From where they sat, Regan could see down the valley back to the lake they had left almost thirty hours ago. It seemed ridiculously close viewed from this angle. On his own Cal would no doubt have made it into the next valley by now.

'Could be,' he said when she put it to him. 'Question' doesn't arise does it! We'll get there. Quit worrying.' He jerked a thumb over his shoulder in the direction they were going. 'Couple of hours or so we'll reach the gorge I told you about. This side's the worst part. Once over that we're practically home and dry.'

Home. The word itself forced Regan to give consideration to what she was going to do when they reached civilisation. It was so different from the way she had planned it. With no clothes but the ones she was wearing, and little of anything else, it was going to prove difficult to stay in Fort Lester even if Ben

wanted her around. As it was, she was going to have to ask him for money to tide her over until her traveller's cheques could be replaced.

Drawn by some sixth sense, she looked up to find Cal watching her with a half smile on his lips. Unlike the majority of people caught off guard, he made no attempt to look away and pretend to be interested in something else, but held her gaze, the smile slowly growing as her colour rose. So what did he expect? she asked herself ruefully. She didn't have his masculine equanimity in a situation like this. They were alone, the two of them, with still a long way to go. Perhaps an older, more experienced woman might have been able to handle the relationship without any trouble, but she certainly couldn't. She almost wished he would start bullying her again. There was safety in his treating her like a child.

'Time we moved on,' he said. 'Feeling up to it?'

'Yes.' She must stop reading double meanings into everything he said, she told herself desperately. She was being ridiculous. He'd given her no cause to be wary of him in that sense.

They had been moving for about an hour when they came on the bear. It was so unexpected that even Cal was taken by surprise. The animal was intent on grubbing something out of the ground at the base of a tree when the two of them rounded an outcropping of rock some eighty or ninety feet away. They were downwind of it, but it heard them, the great grizzled head swinging menacingly in their direction, the object of its preoccupation temporarily forgotten as it reared, growling, to its full height, long-clawed front paws waving at the air.

'Don't move,' Cal said softly. 'We're outside his safe

distance or he'd have been at us by now.'

Regan had no idea what a grizzly's interpretation of a safe distance might be but this was way inside hers! She wanted desperately to run. Cal had a gun. Why didn't he shoot at the beast !

He made no attempt to even lift the gun in readiness. There was a certain tension about him because she could sense it, yet compared with her frozen limbs his stance was almost relaxed.

The bear dropped back on to all four legs when they failed to react and went back to his rooting, keeping an eye on them, though, and growling once or twice, but apparently prepared to leave them alone while they kept their distance.

Regan felt a touch on her arm, and allowed herself to be drawn back around the base of the outcrop until they were out of sight of the animal.

'He isn't going to move from there in a hurry,' Cal said. 'We'll have to go round him.'

She drew in a shaky breath, reliving the terror of those last few minutes and still feeling a great deal too close to the beast.

'Why didn't you shoot at it?' she demanded. 'Not to hit it, just to scare it away ! '

His smile was grim. 'Grizzlies don't scare easy. This time of year they're hungry, and usually bad-tempered. Try banging off a gun at one and you're likely to get it down on you like a ton of bricks ! '

'So what would you have done if it had attacked us?'

'Shoved you up the nearest tree and prayed you could climb fast enough to give me a chance to follow,' he said dryly. 'If this was loaded—which it isn't at present—it would be with small buckshot, which hap-

pens to be all I'm carrying. That would no more have stopped him than a handful of pebbles! Anyway, it didn't happen.'

She took a nervous glance backwards as they found a new way round the outcrop. 'It might next time.'

'There won't be a next time. We were downwind and our friend back there was intent on filling his belly or we'd never have got that close. Even a grizzly will steer clear of humans given a choice. From now on we make sure we give ample warning.'

The words were reassuring—or would have been if she had believed them. If it had happened once, it could happen again, and no amount of knowledgeable discourse on the habits of the Canadian grizzly was going to convince her of its innate reluctance to tangle with humans. They'd been lucky, that's all.

It took them a good half hour to get back to the river at a point Cal judged far enough above the bear.

'He'll smell us if he comes in this direction,' he said, 'as well as hear us. We've lost about an hour's daylight. Might mean spending the night on the ridge.'

Regan failed to react. The incident with the bear had left her shaken. Right then she felt she couldn't care less where they spent the night providing it was a decent distance away from this place. Cal waited a moment, then shrugged and moved on again. She followed automatically.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE sun was still well up in the sky when they finally reached the place where the river became impossible to follow directly. The gorge connecting one valley with the other was more like a narrow cleft, its sides rising an almost perpendicular. two hundred feet above the fast moving water.

'A geological fault,' said Cal. 'There's evidence to suggest the whole mountainside split apart in some volcanic disturbance aeons ago. There are points further in where you can find a way beside the water, but getting there is something else. It's a ready-made road through to this valley if they re-route the river along the original bed. Seems it used to go underground twenty miles or so further down from where it enters the gorge. Be interesting to find out where it comes up again.'

Regan gave him a quick glance. 'You seem to know an awful lot about it.'

'I've dabbled in geology.' The tone was uncommunicative. 'Right, let's get started. We'll have to take it at an angle up that slope to the right there. The straight climbing comes later.'

They ran out of trees as the angle steepened, although Regan could see more clinging to the upper reaches of the rock face where it levelled off. Looking up made her feel dizzy. She concentrated on the area immediately in front of her and felt better. 'I'll go first,' Cal said when they reached the point at

which it became necessary to start the climb proper. 'There's nothing to be afraid of if you put your hands and feet where I tell you. Don't look down at any time, keep looking at the rock. It's not hostile. It won't push you away.' His smile was faint but reassuring. 'We should be able to see the escarpment from the top.'

Regan kept her mind on that hope as she watched him find the first secure handholds and start to haul himself up the rocky face. When he called to her she started up after him without allowing herself a chance to think about what she was doing. They couldn't go back, they could only go forward, and this was the only way.

It was worse than she had anticipated, not just in the climb itself but in the sheer physical strain it placed on the muscles. Progress was excruciatingly slow, with Cal pausing every few minutes to direct her to tried and tested holds. Before they were halfway Regan could feel her limbs tiring her joints seizing up. Cal let her rest where he could, but once she stopped moving she had to fight to overcome the urge to look down to the valley floor far below. Once she gave in to that urge she knew she was lost. Either she would become overcome by vertigo and lose her grip, or she would simply freeze to the rock and be unable to 'go any further. It wasn't much of a choice. She could scarcely believe it when they came to the top. She heard Cal's voice telling her where to reach next through a kind of mist, her fingers groping blindly for the spur of rock he had indicated on her left, her foot scrabbling for purchase where there seemed to be none. And then her wrist was grasped in a grip of steel and she was being hoisted bodily upwards; an arm came under one of hers, and around her

back, pulling her over the edge and face down on to blessedly level ground. She stayed there gasping for breath for several seconds until Cal roused her.

'Just a little further,' he urged. 'A few more steps and then you can relax. Come on, sweetheart, we can't stay here.'

Whether it was the danger or the unexpected endearment that got her moving again, Regan couldn't have said with any certainty. Somehow she found the strength to stumble up the brief incline to the shelter of the clump of young pine trees growing from what appeared to be solid rock. It was only when she reached them that she felt the softness of moss-covered earth beneath her feet and knew she was safe at last.

The sun was close to setting behind the distant mountain range, the landscape bathed in an amber glow beneath a sky painted in streaks of orange and red on palest turquoise. From here the whole valley was laid out in its entirety, long and wide and filled with green, the lake shaped like a figure S with a wider base than head. Beyond it she could see the low line of hills they had crossed in the plane coming up from Prince George. How many days ago was that? Three? Four? It could have been a week, even a month, it seemed so remote.

'There's the dam,' Cal said behind her, and she turned her head to look to the north, eyes eagerly searching the new vistas opened up before her.

The low rays of the sun picked out the pale contrast of concrete against darker wooded hillside, no more than fifteen miles away, perhaps even less. Too far, of course, for any signs of life to be seen with the naked eye, but she could imagine the black dots of men moving about the site, the clamour of machinery. On

this side the ridge sloped away gently, scattered with scrub pine and mountain hemlock merging slowly into the dark tide climbing to meet them. Regan could trace the line of the fault for several hundred yards before that too was hidden.

'We'll need to get a bit further down before dark,' Cal advised. 'It's too open up here, and there isn't likely to be any game, apart from the odd mountain goat. We don't have much time.' His glance was assessing. 'Feel up to it?'

She nodded, renewed a little by the knowledge of journey's end so relatively close at hand. They might not make it in a day, but they knew it was there and that was what counted.

'Which direction is Fort Lester?' she asked as she pushed herself wearily to her feet.

'Can we see it from here?'

He shook his head. It's the other side of those hills to the right. The road runs in above the dam and drops down the hillside to the powerhouse. They'll be pushing it right through here once they've cleared the Keele valley of lumber. Come August there'll be a whole new lake up there. They're due to start closing the sluices inside a month.' He had a hand under her arm in support, grip tightening as she stumbled and almost fell.

'Not much further. Just far enough into the trees for shelter.'

'Pity we can't find another cave,' she said, feeling the coolness of approaching night already penetrating her clothing.

'I'll have to scout around after I've set the snares. Not much chance of catching anything tonight, though, I'm afraid.'

'So we go without.' Regan was too exhausted to care

too much about eating. The strength in the supporting arm was a comfort. If Cal was fatigued he didn't show it. Her legs felt like jelly.

He found them a small hollowed-out piece of ground, with a screen of bushes providing a natural windbreak along one perimeter, and had a fire going in short order. Regan sat with a blanket wrapped about her shoulders and watched him load the shotgun, aware that it was probably a futile gesture. Tonight they would have to go hungry—perhaps in the morning too unless he came up with something in the snares. What they had eaten these last couple of days had been adequate to keep them going but not to build up any reserves. Tomorrow would prove harder than ever if they had to meet it on an empty stomach.

Cal was gone for what seemed a lifetime. Sitting there as night crept up from the valley she tried not to think about the grizzly they had encountered. The fire would keep away any curious prowlers—at least, she hoped it would.

When the shot came resounding through the trees she almost jumped out of her skin. She was on her feet when Cal came into view, more relieved to see him than she had ever been to see anyone. Her eyes widened on seeing the young buck slung over his shoulder.

'Venison,' he announced with some satisfaction. 'Good red meat to put body back into your blood!'

'Poor thing,' Regan said sadly, as he slung the carcass to the ground close by the fire. The antlers were just beginning to come through on the crown of the delicate head, set within a pair of ears curiously like a mule's both in size and appearance. 'He can't be more than a year old.'

'Don't let sentiment get to you,' Cal responded curtly. 'I didn't like it either, but it was a chance I couldn't afford to miss. We need more bulk than a rabbit can provide. This will see us through till we reach the dam.'

She knew he was right, but it didn't make it any easier. She couldn't watch while he butchered the long-legged little animal.

The meat took a long time to cook, and when they finally ate it was still half raw inside. Regan steeled herself to force it down regardless. Her exhaustion earlier had been due as much to lack of proper nourishment as physical exertion. Tomorrow she was going to need all her strength to cover that fifteen miles. They had to do it tomorrow. The thought of yet another night like this was more than she could bear.

Cal had been unable to find a cave of any kind, and they were as well off where they were as anywhere else in the vicinity. At least they were protected from the wind which swept the ridge.

As she had done the night before, Regan took the one blanket and rolled herself up in it before he could say anything to the contrary. For a moment she thought he wasn't going to leave it like that, then she saw him shrug and turn away.

It didn't take long for the chill to penetrate the single blanket. Tired as she was she couldn't get to sleep. Cal was lying with his back turned towards her, unmoving, his feet pointing towards the dying fire. She wondered what he was thinking, and tried not to regret her hasty rejection of the comfort of his arms. Any minute now her teeth were going to start chattering.

'Changed your mind yet?' he asked softly without turning his head.

'I'm all right.' Even now some streak of stubbornness wouldn't let her give in.

'Want me to make it up for you?'

'No,' she said, and knew it wasn't true. That was exactly what she did want. It was face-saving to be given no choice.

His laugh came low and mocking. 'Only the female can say no and make it sound like yes !'

He pushed back the blanket and got up to move across to where she lay, expression obscured by the shadows. Regan let out her breath on a small sigh as his weight came down at her side, feeling his arms come about her with a sense of familiarity.

'Better?' he asked close by her ear.

'Yes.' For the moment it was, blissfully so. She had been a fool and they both knew it. She was dropping towards sleep when the eerie howl first echoed down from the ridge.

'Coyote,' Cal said as she jerked upright. 'It won't come near us.'

'How can you be sure?' she demanded, trying to take a hold on herself. 'They're wolves, aren't they?'

'Wolf-like. It's only in winter when they hunt in packs. Food is plentiful right now.'

She shivered, but didn't move. 'Why haven't we heard them before this?'

'How do I know why? Maybe this one just moved into the district.' He reached up a hand and drew her down again, lifting himself on an elbow to look at her. 'Take my word for it, will you. If you're going to start thinking every damned animal in the vicinity is out

for our blood you're going to be a nervous wreck before morning.'

'I'm a nervous wreck now,' she said dryly. 'I can't help being a coward.'

'You're no coward.' His tone was lacking in its usual mockery. 'You tackled that rock face without a murmur, and it was no beginner's climb. You trusted me then. Why not now?'

She was silent her gaze held by his for a long, timeless moment. She saw something change in his expression and knew what was going to happen, yet made no move to avoid it. When he bent his head and put his lips to hers she responded without thinking

about it, feeling the roughness of his jaw against her skin, the tensile strength of his hand at her throat. It took a further howl from the coyote to bring her to her senses. She pushed him away, her breath coming raggedly. 'Don't ! '

'Why not? It's what you need to take your mind off our friend out there. Maybe what I need too.' His smile was twisted. 'Quit panicking. I'm not going to get carried away in these conditions. Call it a limited experiment.'

'I'd rather not call it anything at all.' She was trying hard to keep a level tone. 'Save your kisses for Dallas!'

His face went frighteningly blank for a moment, then suddenly hardened. His hand came under her chin, forcing her head round so that he could see her eyes. 'Who the devil gave you that name?' he demanded.

'You.' She was scared by the change in him, regretting the hasty exclamation. 'You said it in your sleep once.' Something in her forced her to add unsteadily, 'Is she—your wife?'

His laugh was short and harsh. 'Working on the assumption that if I mentioned her name in my sleep I must have slept with her, and if I've slept with her I must be married to her? That's what I call an unsullied mind ' He studied her for a long hard moment, making no attempt to release her. 'Would you expect to marry the first man who made love to you?'

She tensed. 'What makes you so sure that no one ever did?'

'I mean the whole way, not a few kisses. You've had little enough practice in those.'

'You, of course, being the expert! ' She was stung by the mockery, and all too vitally aware that he hadn't answered her first question. Fear had vanished, leaving only a fervent desire to get back at him. 'It wouldn't occur to you that I might not find your kisses worth responding to! '

The pause was brief but heart stopping. A dangerous light glinted in his eyes. 'Then we'd better try again,' he said with deliberation.

This time she tried her, utmost to avoid his mouth, but she didn't stand a chance. He controlled her by the simple process of shifting his weight halfway across her. This kiss went on for a long time, demanding an answer in a way she found herself incapable of resisting. Almost without realising it, she stopped pressing him away and let her hands rest flat against his shoulders, knowing a growing urge to slide them up and around his neck and pull him even closer. His hands were cold against her skin, but soon grew warm, the firmness tempered by an exquisite sensitivity. When he stopped and suddenly rolled away from her, she was conscious at first only of regret.

It was a moment before he spoke, lying on his back

looking up at the sky. She could hear his breath coming long and deep. 'You should have gone on fighting me,' he said.

'You wouldn't let me.' Her voice sounded husky. 'You're stronger than I am.'

'I'm not talking about that. I immobilised you-for a purpose. Trouble is, it got out of hand.' His tone was rueful. 'You're an unpredictable little devil, green eyes!'

She said unsteadily, 'Don't blame me.'

I'm not. I'm blaming myself. I set out to give you a simple lesson in tactics and finish up close to taking you.'

'That's not true! I wouldn't ' Regan broke off, swallowing on the hard lump in her throat.

'You would.' He said it with quiet certainty though without mockery. 'I know enough to recognise surrender. You were ready for more, as ready as I was. We were both lucky.'

'Both?'

'Yes, both. Think I want the responsibility?'

'I thought men preferred to be the first,' she said.

'Not in this situation. Odd as it might seem, I have a moral twist that would make it hard for me to walk away from you with an easy conscience. You keep your virginity, sweetheart. Some day some man is going to appreciate it. You'll be a quick learner.'

'Stop it!' Her voice was low and fierce. 'Don't you dare patronise me that way!' She was sitting upright now, not even feeling the cold, eyes blazing. 'I might be inexperienced enough to have let myself be carried away to a certain extent by your expertise, but that doesn't make me a silly little thing to be talked down to. If you want to know the real reason why you got a

response, it's because that was the first time you've treated me anything like an adult!

'Is that right?' He was lying down still, hands clasped now behind his head, features composed into more familiar lines. 'It doesn't appear to have had any far-reaching effects.' He moved swiftly to catch her downward swinging hand by the wrist, pulling her off balance to fall across his chest. 'Don't try it, or I'll warm you up another way. Talking of warmth, if we don't get back under these blankets we're going to freeze to death.'

'I'd rather do that than stay here with you,' she gritted, struggling to free herself.

'Well, I wouldn't, and that means you don't have the choice.' He held her firmly, a kind of anger in the hardness of his hands. 'Quit it. You're not going anywhere. Like you said, I'm stronger than you.'

She desisted abruptly, recognising the validity of the statement and the determination in Cal's hold on her. He would make her stay with him just to be certain she knew exactly what she meant to him—nothing. Well, he meant nothing to her either. Not in any way that counted. She would prove it to him.

He stopped her from turning on her side again when she lay down without further protest, tucking the blankets about the two of them with a practised hand and letting himself down to slide an arm across her waist and up under the back of her shoulder so that she was tucked right into his chest. His mouth was somewhere close by her temple; she could feel his breath stirring her hair.

'I'd rather, be the other way,' she said stiffly.

'Shut up and get to sleep.' His voice was short. 'We're not out of the wood yet.'

He didn't speak again. Regan lay rigidly listening to the sound of the wind in the tree tops, feeling the steady thud of his heartbeats against her breast. The coyote could have stalked up on them and she wouldn't have stirred a muscle. She had never felt so utterly devoid of emotion in her life before.

Rain made even fitful sleep impossible in the early hours. They spent the rest of the night miserably under a hastily rigged shelter, unable even to light a fire in the downpour.

By first light Regan was beyond thinking about getting to the dam. All she wanted was for the rain to stop. Wet and shivering, she found time to wonder how Cal managed to appear untouched by the body-racking cold. Her throat felt raw, her eyes full of sand. Differences were forgotten as she huddled as close to him as she could get. Nothing mattered but trying to keep some small area of warmth alive.,

'We're going to have to move,' he said as soon as it was light enough to see. 'We're wet enough now to make no difference.' He took his arm from around her shoulders, brushing back a tendril of damply curling hair from her cheek with a hand totally lacking in last night's hardness. 'First priority is to find somewhere to dry off. A few hours in these, and you'll have pneumonia.'

'What about you?' she said between chattering teeth. 'You're wet too.'

'I can weather it.' He crawled out from under the draped blanket and stood up, ignoring the steady beat of rain on his head and shoulders. 'Come on. We'll have to take the blankets. We might need them again.'

He wrapped the shotgun and other things inside

them, with the dryer one in the middle. Regan fell into step at his side as they made their way from the clearing, her feet sliding on the wet undergrowth. Cal moved downhill towards the fault, lending her a hand when the trail became difficult, his eyes constantly searching the rocky outcroppings for some suitable inlet.

It took him almost an hour to find one, but it was better than either of them had hoped for, a sloping fissure sealed at the top by some long past rock fall. It was large enough inside for them both to sit though not high enough to allow Cal to stand upright. He left Regan there while he went to find some dry wood for a fire, though where he was going to do so she couldn't begin to imagine.

He returned with a small amount held under his mackinaw. Once they had it going they would have to burn what they could find in the vicinity, he said. Damp wood would cause a lot of smoke, but it couldn't be helped. The most important thing was to have a fire. Regan couldn't have agreed more.

Cal lit it within the cave entrance, rigging up a baffle of sorts with the aid of the wet blanket. Fortunately the wind, what there was of it, seemed to be coming from the west, drawing the smoke out rather than blowing it in. An element of warmth crept back into Regan's frozen extremities as she held out her hands gratefully to the blaze. It was sheer bliss just to feel the heat from the flames.

'Right,' Cal said after a short period to let the warmer air circulate a little, 'Get those wet things off. You can use the other blanket to wrap yourself in. It's dryer than anything else we've got between us.'

She took off her jacket slowly and handed it to him.

The rain had gone right through to the sweater beneath; she could feel it clammy against her skin. Her jeans were soaked too, shoes sodden.

'All of them,' he insisted. He caught her eye and gave a small grim smile. 'I'll strip you myself, if I have to. And that's no idle threat.'

She knew it wasn't—he was more than capable. There was room to wriggle her way behind him. She did so with resignation, knowing he was talking sense. Already the rawness in her throat was spreading down towards her chest. If she remained much longer in damp clothing she was going to finish up with something that would finish all attempts to reach safety.

Cal took the jeans and sweater from her without turning his head. 'I said everything.'

'They're cotton,' she protested. 'And they're barely damp. They'll be dry in no time.'

'Take them off !' The impatience was dangerous. 'You're in no position to start an argument.'

She wasn't either. She tightened her lips and obeyed, drawing the folds of the blanket close about her.

'Now come on back here to the fire,' he said. 'And stop being so damned modest. Imagine I don't know what you look like without your clothes on?'
She didn't answer, fighting to keep the blanket around her as she moved back closer to his side. She felt him glance at her but couldn't bring herself to meet his eyes.
'I notice you're not stripping,' she said, and could have bitten her tongue as she sensed his dry amusement.
'Disappointed? I'm no tenderfoot; I've been wet before. Your circulation needs gingering up.'
Regan gasped as he took hold of her and began rub-

bing her briskly through the folds of the blanket, unable to do much beyond grabbing at the slipping material. 'Stop it!' she panted furiously trying to escape the ruthlessly hard hands. 'Just you stop that!'

He let her go when he was good and ready to do so, regarding her with a sardonic line to his lips. 'That should have you glowing. I told you last night you'd nothing to fear from me.'

'You told me you weren't going to get carried away by a few kisses either,' she retorted, 'but you very nearly did!'

'A temporary weakness. It won't happen again, don't worry.'

'No,' she said, 'you'll just go out of your way to humiliate me instead.' Her voice shook.

'Why can't you just leave me alone?'

There was a pause, then he said something short and sharp under his breath, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. 'Okay, so I'm a brute. There's something about you that keeps asking for it.'

'It isn't deliberate.'

'If it is I should have more sense than to rise to it.' His tone was wearily rueful. 'The sooner we're out of this the better.'

'Do you think I feel any different about it?' she demanded. 'I can't wait to get right away from you!' 'Too bad that isn't going to be possible.'

That fetched her up short. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugged. 'You can't stay at the dam site, and your brother won't be able to leave his job. That's going to leave you with nowhere to go.'

'It won't be your concern.'

'It has to be my concern. It was my plane you were in. I might have to hang around for a couple of days to

see the insurance assessors, and fix a few things, but after that I'll take you down to the coast and sort out the paper work. Till then you'll stay at my manager's place. His wife will fix you up with some clothes for the time being.'

'It won't be necessary,' she insisted in growing desperation. 'Ben will take care of everything.'

'After three years how do you know what Ben will be willing to take care of?' he said with deliberation. 'It's going to be one almighty shock for him even seeing you. Don't expect miracles.'

'What ever happens I won't accept anything from you,' she said through her teeth, and saw his face harden again.

'You'll accept what's best for you. You don't have to like it.'

Further argument was futile. Regan closed her lips tight and looked fixedly into the fire. Oh, Ben, she prayed, don't let me down!

CHAPTER FIVE

IT was gone noon before the rain stopped. They had eaten some of the venison Cal had brought along ready cooked, and at least their clothing was dry again. He decided to push on as far as they could and trust that it stayed fine during the coming night. With any luck they should make the dam the following day.

They reached leveller ground after half an hour or so, and found the going much easier. There was a lot of game in the valley, judging from the innumerable trails.

Regan was surprised that it hadn't all been driven away by the activity up ahead. Cal said it probably had become more concentrated towards this lower end.

'Animals are remarkably tenacious when it comes to moving territory,' he added. 'Some of the townsfolk are planning a rescue operation for any trapped wildlife when they start flooding the Keele. They tend to get isolated on small pieces of rising ground if they're not swimmers. Naturally they'd drown if they stayed there.'

'What about the large animals?' Regan asked: 'They can hardly carry a bear to dry land.'

'Bears swim well enough over reasonable distances. If one did get stuck they'd use a tranquilliser dart and lever it on to a raft to tow it to safety. A full-grown grizzly weighs in at about eight hundred pounds, so it would be some job. The blacks are no lightweights either. With any luck it won't happen.' He glanced at her suddenly and sharply as she moved up along level

with, him at a wider section of the trail they were following. 'You feeling okay?'

'Yes.' Not for anything was she going to admit to the throbbing head and burning throat. If he knew he would make her stop and, rest, and they would never reach the dam. She would keep going if it killed her. 'I'm fine,' she lied.

Whether he believed her or not she wasn't sure, but he didn't pull her up. She hoped he wouldn't notice when she dropped back just a little to conceal her shivering. She had a chill, that was all, just a common cold aggravated by sitting around half the night in wet clothing. A hot drink and a couple of aspirin was all she needed, and the sooner they reached journey's end the sooner she could have them. Tonight would be difficult, but she would manage. She would have to manage.

The shivering grew worse as they progressed, unhelped by the mist which still hung among the treed. The ground was sodden underfoot, her shoes soaked through again. They had never been intended for the sort of use to which they had been put. Regan moved in an exhausted daze, speaking when spoken to but otherwise barely conscious of her surroundings at all.

They came to the point where the Keele ran into the Ender about four. There were obvious signs of human activity in the area, including jeep tracks in the mud at the bottom of the cut—recent ones, according to Cal.

'You're all in,' he stated with a comprehensive glance at her white face. 'We'll make camp here and get some rest.'

'No!' She struggled to make her voice sound strong and forceful. 'We can keep on and reach the dam now.'

There'll be plenty of time to rest when we get there.' He shook his head. 'It must be nine or ten miles still. We wouldn't make it this side of midnight.'

'I don't care what time it is.' Despite all her efforts her voice quivered alarmingly. She caught at his arm. 'Please, Cal!' She was unaware of using his name for the very first time. 'I don't want to stop now ! '

'You must.' He said it quietly but firmly. 'You'll collapse if you go any further. We'll make it tomorrow.'

Something gave way inside her then bringing a surge of feverish rebellion. 'I'm going on,' she shouted fiercely, 'and you're not going to stop me !'

She started to run, cutting wildly across the small clearing, desperation lending her strength. She could hear him coming after her and didn't care. All that mattered was to keep moving.

She heard the sound of the engine before she saw the jeep, slithering down the slope which suddenly opened up under her feet and on to a rough track cutting in at right angles to the river behind. The vehicle came into view around a bend as she picked herself up, skidding to a hasty stop, the two men in it looking at her dishevelled figure as if they could barely believe the evidence of their own senses.

Behind her, Regan heard Cal come down the slope, and felt his hands on her shoulders, holding her steady. She didn't turn her head, gazing at the clean-shaven, reddish-haired man seated beside the driver with eyes gone wide and dark in an ashen face.

'Ben?' she said. Then she passed out.

She awoke to daylight and a small squarish room with prefabricated walls. She felt comfortable and relaxed in the narrow iron-framed bed, and not too ready to

search her mind for reasons why she should be here. There were two other beds in the room, neither of them occupied. The window was curtainless, the glass opaque with dust through which the sunlight filtered only weakly. Regan could hear the clamour of machinery not too far away outside, the sound of human voices raised occasionally above it.

Last night came back surprisingly clearly. She recalled coming to in the back of the jeep with Ben's face directly in her line of vision, white and shocked—a subtly different face from the one she remembered, but Ben nevertheless. He hadn't let her talk. 'Time for that later,' he said. She had a feeling he had needed that time himself to pull his thoughts together. How must it feel to see someone you thought thousands of miles and three whole years away walk out of the forest like a ghost from the past? It was a wonder he hadn't done the passing out!

They had brought her right here to the site medical officer, who had put her through a thorough examination. Exhaustion and some localised infection, had been his verdict. Another night in the open would have vastly decreased her chances of escaping more serious illness. He had allowed her to take a gloriously hot and soapy shower in the bath-house close by, then ordered her to bed in the camp sick room. Of Ben, or of Cal either, for that matter, she had seen nothing. No doubt the latter had been attending to his own ablutions.

As if in answer to her thoughts the door opened and a face came round it, its expression altering when its owner saw she was awake. Regan found a faint smile, barely knowing how to greet this stranger she hadn't seen for three long years. 'Hi,' she said.

'Hi.' Ben seemed as much at a loss as herself. He came in the whole way and stood there, tall and leanly built in the denim shirt and jeans, thumbs hooked awkwardly into his pockets. 'Mac said I could come in and see you. How do you feel?'

'Fine.' Compared with this time yesterday it was no lie. 'A hot shower and a night's sleep worked wonders.' She paused. 'Sorry for passing out on you like that. It wasn't quite the way I'd planned it.'

'I guess not.' He had picked up an accent, only slight but certainly Canadian. The thin, good-looking features slipped into a fleeting grin. 'Nobody could plan it that way outside of a film! It was a bit of a shock.'

'That's a bit of an understatement.' Regan was propping herself on an elbow, conscious of the flannelette pyjamas provided by the doctor, and of her rough and tousled hair. She had washed it last night despite strict instructions not to do so, and towelled it dry. Clean or not, she must look a mess. Surprising that Ben had recognised her at all, considering the bandbox appearance she had presented to the world when he'd been at home. She swallowed, feeling the soreness still there in her throat. 'I suppose Cal Garrard will have given you the details?'

'Most of them,' he admitted. 'We had a long talk last night after he got cleaned up.'

'Then you know about Father?'

'Yes.' There was a faint tautening of the facial muscles. 'I didn't know before. I just never heard about it. Haven't been seeing -many newspapers these last eighteen months, apart from the local one. How did you find me?'

'Private investigator.' She paused, searching his face for some sign of his inner thoughts and feelings. 'I had

to see you again,' she added thickly. 'I couldn't just let things stay the way they were.' 'I'd have come back myself if I'd known about Father, believe me.' His voice held a note of appeal. 'When he showed me the door I made a vow to forget that whole side of my life. I'm sorry that included you too, only—' He broke off, running his fingers through his long thick hair with a look of rueful uncertainty. 'What do I say?'

'Only I was as much a part of that life as he was and you saw no hope of me leaving,' she finished for him. 'I don't blame you. I saw no chance of it either, not then. I didn't have your kind of courage. It was only—' Her voice died away, and she put out a sudden impulsive hand towards him. 'Ben,' she said pleadingly.

He came over and took it, holding it awkwardly, his touch warm and dry. Involuntarily she compared him with Cal. Not that there was any real comparison to make. This was her brother and he was twenty-four years old. Cal Garrard was thirty—thirty-one, and the farthest from brotherly she knew. Yet even at twenty-four she had a feeling he would have handled this whole situation with the same overriding certainty he displayed in all his dealings.

'Sorry,' he said sheepishly. 'I'm not very good at picking up lost threads. I'm still trying to convince myself this isn't some kind of dream ! '

Or nightmare? She didn't say it. She let go of his hand and patted the side of the bed, fighting for an element of normalcy. 'Sit down and tell me what's been happening to you all these years. How long have you been in Canada?'

'A couple. I came straight out here as soon as I qualified.' He took on a new animation, eyes lighting.

'It's a great country, Regan ! Expanding so fast it's unbelievable! Keele is only a small part of it. You should see the Peace River project ! And not just cheap power either. Lumber, aluminium, copper, zinc—you name it, she's got it. In twenty years she'll be the richest country in the world, you take my word for it! '

'That seems to be a Canadian catch-phrase,' she said with an attempt at humour. 'Cal tags it on to everything.'

Ben's expression underwent a change, a subtle one but not too difficult to read.

'Garrard said you were three days getting to the point where we found you. Lucky you had somebody with you who knew the ropes.'

'Wasn't it?' She leaned back against the bedrail to look at him, closing her mind to the memory of those three days—and nights. 'Did you know him before this at all?'

'I knew of him. Everybody knows the name Garrard. He holds tree-farm licences on half the land round here. Long-term lease too. They'll be worth millions now the dam's being built.'

'I can imagine.' Her tone was a little dry. 'I picked up some business acumen over the years. I'm surprised Father never recognised the potential out here.'

'He had other fish to fry. Richer immediate pickings. He wasn't a long-term man, you must have known that. In for the quick killing, that was him. Manipulated where possible.' He sounded bitter. 'I wonder just how many people he helped ruin.'

'I don't know.' Regan didn't even want to think along those lines. She said softly, 'You realise there's nothing left? I used what little he did leave to come out here.'

'I wouldn't have touched his money anyway,' he

came back emphatically. 'I wanted no part of him!'

Including her, Regan acknowledged numbly. He had made his own life. All she could offer was complications. Nothing remained static. They were both of them different people. What on earth had made her imagine she would find him unchanged from the brother she remembered? The very act of leaving home had begun that change, granted him independence. He didn't need the liability of a kid sister around his neck. So where did she go from here? Back to England? There was nothing there for her either. Nothing, and no one.

'I've got myself into a real mess, haven't I?' she said with a little catch in her voice.

'It's all going to be taken care of.' Ben's voice was soothing. 'Garrard is going to see to things.'

'No!' She came upright in the bed. 'I don't want that!'

He looked at her in some perplexity. 'What's the alternative? I can't leave here right now.'

'I wouldn't ask you to. Just lend me enough money to see me through until I can replace my own.' She didn't bother mentioning how relatively little that was. 'I'll pay you back, Ben.'

'It isn't a question of money.' He obviously couldn't understand her attitude. 'Naturally I'll be willing to finance you in any way necessary. But you're going to need more than that if you want to stay in Canada. The kind of help I can't provide.'

'Stay?' Regan searched his face with sudden renewal of hope. 'You mean you want me to stay?'

'Well, sure. Didn't I just get through saying what a great country it is? Only Fort Lester isn't the place for a girl like you. Not yet, at any rate. Maybe in a year or so

when things start to boom. You'd be better off on the coast till then. Garrard can fix you a work permit and find you a job.'

'Did he offer or did you suggest it?'

The grin was boyish. 'It was more of a statement than a suggestion. He seems to have given it some thought.'

'He feels under an obligation because it was his plane.' Regan made a small helpless gesture. 'I suppose I'm going to have to accept.'

'I'd say you had little choice. He sounds capable of packing you right out of here.'

And he wouldn't stop him. Regan said softly, 'What would have happened if I'd turned up in Fort Lester on my own, Ben?'

He shrugged. 'Hard to tell. There's a hotel of sorts. Guess you'd have stayed there a while. Nothing I could have done about extending your visa, though, so it would have been a limited stay.'

'You could have claimed me as a relative.'

'Not without a regular address. I'll be leaving the district once this job is finished.'

'To go where?'

'Not sure yet. Plenty of choice. I might even join the Garrard Corporation for a time.

Cal's got plans afoot for a bridge spanning a canyon on one of his private holdings, knock thousands of miles off his transport costs in a year. They won't be starting work till spring, but the design team will be working on it this winter.'

'Did he actually tell you there would be a place on it for you?' she asked.

'Not in so many words, but the indication was there. Why not?'

'No reason at all; just that he seems to be taking over both our lives.'

'You could do with yours taking over—for a time, anyway. Me—I'm a free agent.' Ben got to his feet, the awkwardness returning to a certain extent. 'Got to get back on the job. Garrard said you'd be leaving for town as soon as he gets things organised. I'm invited for a meal at his manager's place Sunday, so I'll be seeing you then. He hesitated, then reached out a hand and lightly touched her cheek. 'Sorry it couldn't be any different, but we'll make up for it later.'

Regan watched him out of the door with a heavy heart. Yet what else could she expect? She 'could see Ben's point of view. The responsibility had been lifted from his shoulders and he was more than ready to take advantage of it. But where did that leave her? Cal Garrard had done enough. More she was not eager to accept.

She pushed back the covers in a sudden decisive movement and swung her feet to the floor. All things considered she felt surprisingly well. What she was going to do she wasn't certain, but anything was better than just lying around waiting for it to happen. The dirt was on the outside of the window and revealed little. It had been dark last night when she had been taken across to the bath-shed. So far as she could tell now the but was one of several set in a clearing out of sight of the dam workings themselves.

She was still standing there when the elderly medic came in with a brisk rap on the door. He was carrying her clothes over one arm, with her shoes dangling by their laces from his hand; a tray was balanced in the other.

'Playing nursemaid is outside my terms of contract,'

he said. 'Those pyjamas of mine don't do a thing for you, girl! '

Regan smiled. 'Is that coffee I can smell?'

'If it isn't it's something suspiciously like it.' He put the tray down on the plain wooden locker and tossed her things over the end of the bed. 'Ham, eggs and caffeine. Worst combination known to man, but I'd say you can take it. When you've finished and dressed, Cal Garrard is waiting to see you.'

'To see me, or to take me away?'

'Bit of both, I wouldn't wonder. You can't stay here. Bad for the men.'

'I wouldn't go anywhere near your men,' she said lightly.

'Maybe not, but they'd sure be fighting to get near you. Back of the backwoods, this place.'

`It doesn't seem to bother you very much.'

The leathery features took on a wry cast. `I'm past being bothered by the things that bother most of 'em. Due to retire this year end.'

`I'm sorry.' Regan didn't know what else to say. She sat down on the edge of the bed and toyed with the handle of the coffee mug for a moment, running her finger lightly over the curve. 'Do you know my brother personally,' she asked, 'or is he just one of many?'

`I know him well enough. He gives me a game of chess now and then. He's a good player.'

`Yes, he always was.' She hesitated, before saying slowly, 'Did he ever mention his family at all?'

His eyes met hers. 'No. You're down on his record sheet as next of kin, though.'

So he hadn't forgotten her entirely. Regan felt slightly cheered.

Doctor MacDonald nodded towards the tray. 'I didn't carry that over here for the pleasure of it. Eat!'

She lifted the mug of coffee and drank obediently, then picked up the fork. 'I don't think I can eat all this.'

'Try,' he suggested. 'Anything else you need?'

'A mirror.' Her smile was rueful. 'Or am I better off without one?'

`Couldn't say. You look fine to me. Nice to see a female face without paint or powder. No good to the skin.'

'Good for the morale, though.'

'Afraid that will have to suffer till you get into town.' He turned back to the door. 'I'll send you one in. If I don't get to see you again before you leave, take care of yourself. You've a good constitution, but you came close to ruining it.' -

Regan wasn't hungry, but she forced down as much of the food as she could. The coffee was different; it gave her a lift—she supposed that was why she hadn't been allowed it last night before sleeping. She sorted through her clothing while she drank it. Her slacks had been washed and somewhat roughly pressed, but there were stains on them nothing could remove. Jacket and shoes looked decidedly worse for wear, the latter scuffed almost through at the toes from the climb they had made two days ago, and hardened by constant soaking. Nothing to be done about those right away. It was unlikely that anyone round here had a pair of size fives kicking about. Her sweater had come off best, protected as it had been from the wear and tear of travel. The warm tan colour cheered her.

The shower last night had been hot and wonderful. She would have liked to repeat it, but it didn't seem to have occurred to the doctor to suggest it. Slipping into

clean undies felt marvellous anyway. Odd how one's ideas of luxury altered in accordance with circumstances. She had a feeling that it would be a long time before she started taking such things for granted again.

She was ready and restless when the anticipated knock came on the door. Cal followed it in, coming across to toss a small shaving type mirror and a clean comb-on to the bed.

'The doc sent you these,' he said. He studied her as she sat on the opposite edge of the mattress, eyes unrevealing. 'How do you feel?'

'Like a waif and stray,' she said. She made no attempt to reach over for the mirror. It hardly mattered now. Her throat felt suddenly dry and painful again even though she wasn't swallowing. He was wearing his own clothes, also cleaned up, with the

mackinaw slung over his shoulder. His jaw was smooth again and set in a line that suggested readiness for a fight.

'You've seen Ben,' he said. It was a statement, not a question. 'There'll be a chopper out for us inside fifteen minutes.' He caught the faint widening of her eyes and nodded relentlessly. 'You'll be okay once you're up. That was a chance in a million we hit before. It's hardly likely to happen again this soon.'

'All the same,' she returned, trying to keep her voice level 'I'd rather have travelled by road.'

'We're going by air.' That, so far as he was concerned, finished it. 'We'll be at Royd's in twenty minutes or so.'

'Royd?' she queried.

'Patterson. Manager for the Corporation holdings up here. You'll be staying with him and his wife.'

She waited a moment before saying, 'How about you?'

He shrugged. 'I don't come out often enough to keep a house going. I've a cabin some half a mile away.' Something flickered in the grey eyes and his mouth took on a satirical slant. 'You wouldn't fancy keeping me company out there for a few days?'

Regan kept a tight rein on her expression. 'I think three is more than enough for both of us. You don't have to feel this sense of obligation, you know.'

He drew in an impatient breath. 'We're not going through that again. I've already spoken with your brother about things, and he's in agreement with what I've planned.'

'You neither of you run my life!'

'You gave Ben the option by coming out here in the first place. He's passed it on to me.'

'Just like that.'

Just like that.' He was unmoved by the sarcasm. 'Are you going to use that comb? Your hair looks like a bird's nest.'

Her teeth came together. He was back to treating her like a kid again! No man would say a thing like that to a woman. 'Ashamed of being seen with a tatty-haired brat in tow,' she shot at him. 'There's a good solution to that. Don't!'

'Okay, so leave it the way it is.' From his tone he couldn't have cared less. 'I daresay Laura will have a hairbrush if you change your mind.'

Regan gave a sigh. She wasn't going to reach him by acting like a ten-year-old. Hadn't she learned anything out in that forest?. Without looking at him, she picked up the comb and mirror. Her first thought was that she looked weather-beaten, her features small and pinched, her skin roughened by exposure to wind and rain. Her hair was a total disaster area, sticking out at all angles

from sleeping on it while it was still relatively damp. 'Ouch!' she said wryly.

Cal watched her attack it expressionlessly. 'It could be worse,' he said. 'At least you're young enough to face the world without artificial aids.'

'And old enough to resent your constant harping on it.' She saw her own eyes in the mirror, dull and listless looking. Something deep inside her made her add huskily, 'I shan't try taking advantage of what happened the other night if you let up on it.'

'You can't because nothing did.' The pause was brief but meaningful. 'Not that many are going to believe it without a little help.'

The comb stayed poised for a moment. So that was it! If he treated her like a woman now people might very well think he'd done so during their days alone in the forest. If it

came down to a straight choice, she acknowledged numbly, she would rather that than this avuncular relationship.

Cal took up her mackinaw and held it out. 'We'll get outside. Our transport should be here any minute. Sure you feel fit to travel?'

'My doctor seems to think so.' She slid her arms into the sleeves and drew the coat around her as if it afforded some comfort. 'What happened to your shotgun?'

'I'll pick it up on the way over.'

The helicopter had already arrived when they reached the construction site, sitting on a cleared area some couple of hundred yards away from the dam wall itself with the dust raised by its rotor blades still settling. The site was a hive of activity, with lorries tipping sand and gravel and mixers grinding. From below the sheer curving wall looked miles high, yet

almost too delicate to withstand the millions of tons of pressure to which it would soon be subjected. A couple of platform lifts plied its surface, carrying men and materials to the top. Off to the right the generator house was still in the process of completion.

Regan thought she saw Ben over there, but couldn't be sure at the distance. Not that it made any difference. He had made his position clear enough.

Cal greeted the helicopter pilot with familiarity, making her wonder just how many Canadians of Scots descent held the diminutive of Mac. Seated between the two of them, she hung on to her nerve as the rotor blades spun into noisy life, swirling more dust upwards into the sunlit air. Then they were rising, slipping sideways across the busy site and up over the wooded ridge. Regan had a glimpse of the dam top with men at work on it, and of the valley soon to be flooded beyond, bisected by the stream which still flowed through the sluice gate.

A road curved round the hillside and down towards the base of the dam. They followed it until the lake itself 'came into view across a wide stretch of forest, then cut off to make a direct approach to the town at its foot.

CHAPTER SIX

THE Pattersons lived outside the town on a small development of houses belonging exclusively to the Garrard Corporation. Royd was a man in his early forties, almost as big as Cal and certainly as fit, his wife some two or three years his junior. They had two children, Fiona and Hugh, aged ten and eight respectively, and a menagerie of animals including two large and overwhelmingly friendly dogs. In such a household nobody bothered to stand on ceremony. Regan felt at home there from the start.

She found Fort Lester neither more nor less than it had been painted for her : a few shops, a couple of service stations, a church, a hotel and little else. With Laura's help and money supplied by Ben, she managed to kit herself out with the basic necessities, plus one or two non-essentials like a lipstick and a tube of face cream. The rest could wait till she got down to the coast. She refused and kept on refusing to accept advance compensation from Cal for the belongings she had lost in the crash. His insurance company would pay out in due course, and till then she was content to wait. He was more than capable of refusing to take it back when the time came.

He spent a lot of time during those first couple of days out at the lumber camps and mills with Royd. When the assessor from the insurance company arrived he flew out by

helicopter to view the wreckage of the plane. Regan knew a strong desire to accompany them,

but she wasn't asked and hesitated to suggest it herself. It was a morbid curiosity anyway, she decided. What good would it do her to see the place where they could so easily have died? That whole episode was behind her now. Leave it that way.

Ben came on the Sunday as promised. The children took happy advantage of his presence in wangling him out into the garden the minute the meal was over to play baseball, along with Cal and their father.

'Good-looking young man,' Laura remarked to Regan as they watched the game from the porch. 'He should have a wife and children of his own.'

'I don't think he's interested.' Regan said lightly. 'Not yet, at any rate. He's too involved in helping to expand this country of yours.'

'We need all the help we can get,' the other smiled. 'There's a lot of it and too few of us. Have you thought about applying for a Canadian citizenship yourself?'

Regan shook her head. 'I don't even know that I'll be staying once this dam is finished. It depends on Ben. Anyway, it's necessary to prove you're the sort of person they want first, I imagine. I don't even have a job yet.'

'Cal will fix that for you. He can fix most things.' 'Is he so powerful?'

'More than that, he knows the right people.' Laura settled herself more comfortably in her chair, homely features content. 'His father made a lot of enemies through putting personal profit first. Cal makes few and prospers just the same.'

'You mean the Corporation does.'

'He is the Corporation. A working chairman with a loyal board of directors. Not bad at thirty-two, is it?' Regan said dryly, 'It helps when you're born to it. His

grandfather was the real Empire-builder if he began it all.'

'It goes back a bit further than that,' said Laura. 'There have been Garrards here since Mackenzie first crossed the Rockies, or not long after it. His great-grandfather struck lucky in the ' gold rush. That's where it all started.' She gave a loud cheer as Hugh hit a ball right out of the garden, then continued as though there had been no interruption.

'Cal's the last of the line, so far. If he doesn't get himself a son soon there won't be any Garrard Corporation not too far in the future.'

Regan was silent a moment. 'Doesn't his wife want children?' she got out at last.

'His wife?' Laura laughed. 'That's half the trouble, he isn't even married- yet. Not that there aren't plenty willing.'

There was no denying the relief that simple statement brought, and Regan made no attempt. Neither did she dwell on the reason why she should feel such an emotion; the answer was only too obvious. 'Did you ever hear of anyone called Dallas?' she asked on what she fondly hoped was a casual note.

The other gave her a sharp glance, expression sobering a little. 'Yes, why?'

'I just wondered. He—mentioned her once. I thought perhaps she was his wife but they were parted, something like that.'

'She's his stepmother.' The words were used with a kind of deliberation. 'Cal controls the Corporation, but I believe she holds some kind of interest. You'll meet her when he takes you down to Victoria.'

Regan wasn't sure she wanted to, not after the way he had said her name that time. His stepmother! She tried

to imagine how she would look. Well preserved without a doubt; one of those beautifully groomed middle-aged women who exuded self-confidence and awareness. She knew some men were attracted to older women; she simply hadn't thought of Cal as being one of them. Her eyes sought the tall, wide-shouldered figure at present playing backstop to Fiona's bat, hair roughened by the breeze coming in off the lake not so far distant, face relaxed in lines of enjoyment. He was proving himself a man of many surprises; why should this new one throw her so badly? She knew the answer to that too, and it hurt. Not that it made any real difference, she told herself firmly. Cal saw her as an ethical responsibility, that was all. Once her affairs had been settled he could put her out of his mind. Regan determined she would do the same.

Ben stayed until the last transport was due to leave for the dam site. Cal offered to drive him the short distance into town to catch it, suggesting Regan accompanied them as it would be the last time she would be seeing her brother before they left for the coast.

The truck was starting to pull out when they reached the pick-up point. Ben had to run to leap on it, helped by those already in the rear section. 'See you in the fall!' was his parting shout as Regan stood there on the narrow side walk looking after him. Then the darkness had swallowed the truck and she was free to slide back into the Pattersons' estate wagon beside Cal and compose herself for the run back to the house.

He made no immediate attempt to restart the engine. Ahead of them stretched the town's main street, quiet and almost deserted now that the construction crew had left. Apart from invitations to private homes, there was little for the men to do in their off-duty

times. For the majority, the money they could earn on a project like this one had to be the only incentive to stay.

'Reconciled yourself to leaving him behind yet?' Cal asked, offering cigarettes.

About to refuse, Regan abruptly changed her mind and took one, bending her head to the flame of his lighter and sitting back to draw cautiously and shallowly on it before answering. 'Does it matter?'

He shrugged. 'Guess not. You'd die of boredom out here anyway.'

'It doesn't seem to affect Laura that way.'

'Laura has a family to take care of. She can also give you a good twenty years. Makes a difference in a woman's viewpoint.'

'You mean all women of forty and over are past wanting anything different out of life?' she asked with her eyes on the glowing tip of her cigarette.

'Let's just say that in a lot of cases they're willing to settle for what they've got.'

Including Dallas? she wondered. Was she happy with her lot? If it was true that Cal was drawn to her it didn't have to follow that she felt the same way about him, otherwise they would surely have done something about it by now. She was hazy on the kind of laws which might govern a man's marrying his deceased father's second wife, but there was certainly no blood tie.

'I wish I were older,' she said suddenly and fiercely. 'It must be great to be settled and sure of yourself!'

'Can't think of one who wouldn't trade with you given the chance. There's a lot to be said for youth.'

'But not a lot when you have anything to do with it.'

`Unfair comment,' he said lightly. 'I've never tried to stop you talking. Not when you're making sense.'

`You've set yourself up as some kind of guardian, though.'

`Is that what I am?' He sounded amused. 'I could have picked an easier job.' He studied her a moment, eyes assessing. 'We're going to have to think about what you can do with your time this summer. A course at a good secretarial college would always stand you in good stead.'

`I'll need to be earning,' she said shortly. 'I shan't have enough to see me through till autumn, and I'm not going to ask Ben for more money.'

`You don't need ask anybody. It's all taken care of.' His tone was still light but with a firm edge to it. 'The Corporation owns a couple of apartment blocks in Victoria, and you'll live in one of them. You'll like Victoria. It has a real old English atmosphere.'

'I won't accept charity,' she responded. 'I have to pay my own way.'

`All right then, you can have a job with the Company in the mornings and go to college afternoons. Might only be filing till we discover your natural aptitudes. There must be a little of your father in you. Maybe you're a wizard with figures, or something.'

He was mocking her, but she refused to let it throw her. 'I can calculate the odds against my becoming a competent secretary in four months, which means this college thing is just a stopgap. Towards what?'

`Towards the time when that brother of yours is ready to assume responsibility for you, maybe.'

'I'm old enough to be responsible for myself.'

`Old enough, sure; in a position to, definitely not.'

You're new to the country and to a regular job.' 'I could always leave.'

`Is that what you want?'

She sighed and shook her head. 'No, it isn't. There's nothing to go back home for.'

`Then for God's sake stop putting obstacles in the way of a little concrete help. Pride is one thing, stupidity is something else.' His tone was short. 'Try seeing it my way. I owe you a start at least.' He sensed her refusal of that statement and made an intolerant gesture. 'Don't say it. We've done all the discussing we're going to do. Tuesday morning I've arranged transport down to Prince George. We can be in Vancouver by early afternoon.'

`Flying?' she asked.

`Naturally. It would take us a couple of days by road from here to Prince George to start with. I can't see you keen on camping out again.'

Regan fought down the fleeting impulse. 'No, you're right.'

`Glad you think so.' He started up the engine. 'I'll drop you off at the Pattersons' and then make for bed.'

Take me with you, she wanted to say, and felt no sense of shame. She had slept in his arms before. The memory of his lips on hers brought a longing she could barely stem. She wished she knew how to make him kiss her again., even if only in anger. Twelve years wasn't such an enormous gap. Cal could bridge it if he had a mind.

Except that he preferred older women, she reminded herself disconsolately.

It was raining when they landed in Vancouver, a warm, soft, gentle rain which made the Pacific look

green. On the swift journey through the city to the docks, Regan noted the way nearly every street opened on to a view of mountains or water. There seemed a

preponderance of Chinese pattering along under umbrellas, stoically indifferent to the wet. It rained often in Vancouver.

The ferry took them out under Lion's Gate Bridge into English Bay, and then down through the innumerable pine-clad islets scattered about the Straight. Once Vancouver itself vanished from view they were out in the wilderness again, mountains to either hand, towering, white-capped and breathtaking. As the island came closer, Regan saw its coastline break into little coves and inlets, and stretches of clean, shining beach. There was the occasional fishing port, small and isolated, and above and beyond the dark mass of the lumber forests.

'Shall I be able to go straight into this apartment you talked about?' she asked Cal just before they docked in Victoria Harbour.

'You could,' he said, 'but you'll come out and stay a few days at Kenny first while I get things organised.' His tone challenged her to argue with him on that score. 'There's someone I want you to meet anyway.'

'Your stepmother?' she said before she could stop herself.

- Something flickered in his eyes. 'Technically speaking I suppose she is—only don't expect to find her the motherly type.'

Regan longed to ask what type she was, but lacked the nerve. She would find out soon enough, she supposed.

'There's our Houses of Parliament,' said Cal, indicating the massive and imposing buildings overlooking the waterfront. 'That statue up there on the dome

is of George Vancouver. He was the English Captain who first circumnavigated the island. We have our foundations in the same country.'

But that was all, Regan concluded on a hollow note. She wanted suddenly to get right off this boat and lose herself in the anonymity of the city. She didn't belong out at Kenny's Bay. She never could belong. Most of all she didn't want to meet Dallas. Victoria was a city of flowers, she discovered when they landed. Flowers and wide green lawns and shady trees, all lending themselves to the charming old-world atmosphere. Even the business district contributed to the overall effect with flower pots hanging from the lamp standards.

They took a taxi from the harbour and headed out to the Island Highway which ran for two hundred miles up the east coast. The scenery was magnificent, with views clear across the straights to the mountain ranges of the mainland. Where the road rose above Saanich Inlet there were lookouts and parking spaces for those with the inclination and time to linger and look.

Cal apparently had neither. All too soon they were turning off the highway on to a narrow dirt road, and running down to the small private bay dominated by a low, white-walled house set about it. The latter was U-shaped and roofed in blue, the lawns fronting it like sloping swathes of velvet, partially concealed by rockeries and scarlet shrubs. The trees flanking the double driveway were covered for the length of their trunks in reddish brown scales which gave an odd mottled effect. Regan had seen nothing quite like them before in all her forest travels.

Cal paid off the taxi driver and himself hoisted their

scanty luggage from the vehicle. A man came running from the house to take the two cases from him as the cab pulled away, but Regan was only vaguely aware of him. Her whole attention was riveted on the woman who had appeared in the big double doorway behind him, the shock coursing through her veins. No middle-aged widow this : she was no more than thirty, her hair silver-blond and upswept from a face which

retained all its smooth beauty, her superb figure clad in tailored beige slacks and a matching shirt which managed to look both casual and expensively elegant at one and the same time. For the first time in days, Regan became truly conscious of the figure she herself must cut in her cheap denims and travel-worn mackinaw.

'I wasn't expecting you for another couple of days or so,' the other said with her eyes on Cal. 'Why didn't you let me know you were coming early?'

His shrug was easy. 'Didn't think about it, Dallas, I want you to meet Regan Ferris. She's going to be staying with us a few days till we get her fixed up in town.'

Something flickered in the cool blue gaze which turned in Regan's direction : contempt; derision—she couldn't be sure which.

'So you're the unfortunate little thing who had to suffer four days in the wilds with this thoughtless brute!'

'Three,' Regan corrected, and was surprised by the firmness of her own voice. 'And it wasn't so bad.' She ignored Cal's sardonic glance. 'I'm sorry to drop on you so unexpectedly, Mrs Garrard. I hope it isn't going to be too inconvenient.'

It was Dallas's turn to shrug, expression indifferent. 'It's Cal's house, darling, not mine. You'd better come on in and make yourself at home.'

The inside of the house was as sumptuous as first impressions had suggested, stretching away from the entrance area in a semi-open plan effect through to the inner curve of the U and beyond. There was thick gold carpet underfoot, and furniture in rich dark wood polished to a loving gleam. Settees and chairs set in various groupings filled the huge living area with subtle colour. Beyond, Regan could see out through wide glass doors to a terrace full of flowers, with the glint of a swimming pool in the middle distance.

'I put your mail in the study,' said Dallas, seeing Cal's glance go to a nearby small table. 'Naturally you'll want to change first?'

'Naturally,' he agreed on a dry note. 'I'll be going down to town again soon as I'm ready. Some things I need to catch up on.'

'What about supper?' she asked.

'Hold it till seven-thirty, then eat if I'm not back.' He glanced in Regan's direction. 'I'd have a nap, if I were you. It's been a long day.'

Regan had a feeling it was going to be an even longer evening, but she didn't voice the thought. 'I'll try,' she said.

Dallas lifted an amused eyebrow. 'He has you well trained.'

Cal saved her the trouble of finding a reply. 'Don't you believe it. There's more to this child than meets the eye.'

From the look on Dallas's face she was thinking there would have to be. 'I'll show you where you'll be sleeping,' she said. 'Lucky we keep a guest room always at the ready. In this house you never know who's going to turn up.'

Cal made no move to follow as Regan moved with her

hostess in the direction of a door leading off to the left. Through it, she found herself in a corridor looking out onto the central patio with other doors leading off it at regular intervals. Dallas opened one of them and motioned her through ahead into a large airy room decorated in lime green and white, with furnishings in the same rich wood she had noted in the main living areas. There was a wide-angled window along the far wall, draped in green and white fabric. Through it there was a view of the gardens and beyond them the sea, backed by the magnificent spectacle of the mainland mountains.

'This is lovely ! ' she exclaimed with impulsive sincerity. 'You must love living here all year round '

'I'd rather live down in town,' Dallas said from the doorway, watching her with a certain cynicism in the twist of her lips. 'Only a kid your age could get that enthusiastic about a view.'

'It isn't just the view, it's the whole place. Cal said I'd like Victoria, but he forgot to mention the rest of the island.' Regan turned enthusiastically, antipathies forgotten for the moment. 'It's' so much warmer here than anywhere else I've been in British Columbia. And all those flowers ! '

'It's still spring. Wait till high summer' The blue eyes were curious. 'You're planning on staying on the island that long I take it?'

Regan smiled a little. 'It seems to have been planned for me.' The pause was fleeting. 'You don't sound Canadian,' she added frankly.

'Probably because I'm not—except by marriage. I came out from England roughly three years ago.'

Three years. Regan managed to contain her surprise. That meant the other woman could have been mar-

ried to Cal's father only months before his death. How terrible a tragedy

'Whereabouts in England?' she asked.

'Surrey—if it matters.'

Regan tried not to be put off by the indifference. 'We rented a house there once,' she murmured, thoughts flying back to that cherished summer. 'Chaldon, it was called. Just outside Reigate.'

Now it was Dallas who looked surprised. 'I know that house. How long ago?'

'Six years.' Tone faintly ironic, Regan tagged on, 'I really was just a kid at the time.'

The irony went unnoted. 'Six years? That would be when the Baileys went to South America.' She sounded puzzled. 'But from what I can remember it was leased out to some financier that year.'

'My father.' Regan said it quietly. 'He died last year. I'm out here to see my brother. He's working on the Keele dam project up near Fort Lester.'

'I see?' From the way she said it, Dallas saw it all, and very clearly. 'From riches to rags. You poor little thing! '

Regan felt herself colour, and fought back the urge to retaliate. Let this woman enjoy her patronisation. She wouldn't be here long enough for it to matter. 'I get by,' she said.

'I'm sure you do. Having Cal as a buffer can't be bad.'

'It wasn't my idea that he should do what he's doing,' Regan protested. 'He thinks he owes it to me because I was in his plane when it crashed.'

Blue eyes went over her with deliberation. 'I suppose you do look as if you need looking after. Trust Cal to honour his obligations. He has a whole lot of

integrity going to waste. You were lucky. Another man might have taken advantage of those nights you spent in the forest, regardless of your lack of experience. Cal being Cal, he'd have left you strictly alone, of course.'

The question was faint, but it was there. For a fleeting moment Regan almost gave way to the temptation to leave doubts in that silky blonde mind, but it was only for a moment. She owed Cal better than that.

'Strictly,' she agreed. 'You're right, he is a rather unusual man. Does it feel odd having a stepson so close to your own age?'

'Not in the least. The relationship was invalidated when his father died.' On the surface Dallas appeared unmoved by the dig, but her gaze was icy. 'I'll leave you to get cleaned up. Supper won't be till seven-thirty, as you heard. We only call it dinner out here when the occasion calls for it.'

Regan drew in a wry breath as the door closed behind the other woman. She should have known better than to try tangling with someone like Dallas Garrard. She had met her type before often enough; her father had attracted them like flies. Not that he had ever allowed women to play too great a part in his life. Regan had often wondered how his marriage to her mother had come about, but never dared to ask. She wished, not for the first time, that she could remember something about her, but at two years of age what did one remember? Even Ben's recollections had been hazy at the best. Unpacking took bare minutes considering the amount of luggage she had to deal with. The only garment even remotely suitable for the evening was a simple cotton print she had bought in Fort Lester and worn on the day Ben had come to lunch with the Pat-

tersons. At least it was clean and pressed, although nothing could disguise its inadequacies. She thought of the choice of dresses she would have had for an occasion like this less than a year ago, and could not deny the pang of regret. It was wrong to hunger after only the material things in life, she knew, but it was also human. Good clothes gave one confidence, if nothing else, and she needed all she could muster to weather the coming few days here at Kenny's Bay.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAL returned from town around ten looking his usual imperturbable self.

'Had a session with Smithson,' he said in answer to Dallas's somewhat frigid enquiry.

'We ate downtown.' His glance went from one to the other of them sitting yards apart.

'You two been getting to know one another?'

'As well as we need to, considering it's only for a few days.' Dallas returned smoothly.

'Now you're back, perhaps we could liven this place up a little—get some people out for a party? I'm sure Regan would appreciate a glimpse of Canadian social life.'

'She'll have plenty of chance,' Cal said with seeming nonchalance. 'Still, it isn't a bad idea. Ring round a few folk tomorrow and organise it, if you feel like it.' His glance found Regan's. 'The insurance cheque came through. We'll go down and open you an account first thing in the morning. You might want to do some shopping while you're there. It's early closing, but you'll have the morning. I'll meet you for lunch, then take you back to the office with me to show you round.'

'And the apartment I'm to rent?' she asked, using the latter word with purpose.

'We might fit that in too.' He glanced at his watch and then out through the far glass doors to where water glinted beneath a pale moonlight. 'It's a mild night. Anyone feel like a swim before bed?'

Dallas gave him a withering look and made no

answer. On impulse, Regan said, 'I would, but I don't have a suit.'

It was a moment before he responded. She had the embarrassing impression that he had only been joking. 'There's sure to be one your size kicking around,' he said at last.

'We keep a supply of spares in case of need. I'll have one brought to your room and see you at the pool then.'

'All right.' There was nothing else for it but to go along, now that she had started. She took care not to meet Dallas's eyes as she got to her feet, sensing the other's derision. Well, so what, she thought on a sudden surge of resentment. It was a mild night and she did feel like a swim—her first of the season. Whether Cal came along or not was irrelevant. His had only been the suggestion.

The female half of the middle-aged couple who ran the Garrard home brought the promised swimsuit. Dallas hadn't bothered to introduce either of the household staff by name., Regan smiled and thanked the woman and resolved to ask Cal at the first opportunity. Whoever had guessed at her size had a good eye, she acknowledged, slipping into the blue bikini. It was comforting to know that not all the women who visited here were as voluptuous as Dallas. A towelling wrap had come with the suit. She put it on and belted it around her narrow waist, leaving her feet bare because she possessed nothing suitable in which to walk from the house to the pool.

It was unnecessary to return through the living room to reach the patio. The corridor outside her bedroom led directly outdoors. Concealed lights had been switched on, illuminating the tiled bottom of the pool and lending an inviting warmth to the water it-

self. She couldn't see any sign of Dallas when she glanced back through the closed glass doors into the living room, although the other could easily have been hidden by the back of a chair. Cal hadn't arrived yet. She told herself she didn't much care whether he came or not, and knew it wasn't true.

There was a springboard to one end of the pool. With some deliberation, she walked round to it, slipping off the robe before stepping up on to it. The night air struck cool to her bare shoulders and midriff, but not unpleasantly so. She had known midsummer nights cooler than this in England. She took a deep breath, came up on her toes and ran lightly along the board to head gracefully into the water with a gratifying minimum of splash.

Cal was standing on the edge right in her line of vision when she broke surface after swimming the length of the pool under water.

'A regular little mermaid,' he said admiringly. 'That was a neat dive!'

'I told you I enjoyed sports,' she said, treading water to look up at him. From this angle he looked all shoulders and chest, the latter tapering to narrow hips clad in black trunks. His legs were strong and muscular, and not, like so many men's, even slightly bowed at the knees. She felt the quick tautening of stomach muscles she was both old enough and experienced enough to recognise as physical attraction, and made a pretence of smoothing her wet hair back from her face in order to conceal any change in her expression from him. 'Are you coming in?'

'Now I've got this far I guess I'd better,' he said, and grinned suddenly. 'I never expected you to take me up on the offer. We only filled the pool a couple of weeks

ago for daytime use. Another couple before we'd normally start using it at night.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, tongue in cheek. 'I thought you were serious.'

'Teach me not to make idle conversation.' He walked a few feet along the side from where she was and took an angled dive into the water without breaking stride, running a hand through his hair to clear his eyes the moment he broke surface. 'Race you the length,' he called.

Regan gave a laugh of pure and sudden delight. 'You're on !'

It was a tight race because Cal let it be; she was only grateful that he didn't let her win.

'No contest,' she gasped, clinging to the chrome rail. 'You held back all the way.'

'Not as much as I thought I might have to,' he said equably. 'You've a good strong style. Where did you find the time to put in practice with the kind of life style you must have led when your father was alive?'

'I didn't much. I've only really taken it up again this last few months. Before that it was mostly at school.'

He was silent a moment, arms slung sideways along the top of the rail supporting his body in the water. 'What else did you do these last few months—apart from look for Ben, of course.'

'You mean as a job?'

'I guess so. You said your father left you barely enough to pay for this search of yours, so you must have earned a living somehow.'

'I had to supplement my income,' she agreed. Her nose wrinkled ruefully at the memory. 'I worked as a waitress part of the time, but I wasn't very good at it. I used to get orders mixed up, among other things.' She

didn't look at him. 'It isn't a very good recommendation for a job with your organisation, is it?'

'You won't be asked to work as a waitress.' He sounded amused. 'Surely there was some other job you could have done?'

'Not without experience, and I just didn't have the kind needed.'

'What about your father's friends?'

'He didn't have friends, only business acquaintances.' 'Your own, then?'

She hesitated before answering. 'They didn't want to know. Not after everything was gone. There was never much opportunity to make friends with the kind of people who might have stuck by me anyway. We didn't move in those kind of circles.'

'I know what you mean.' His tone was dry. He glanced at her and released his grasp of the rail. 'You're shivering. Time you were out of here and dried.' He had hoisted himself up and over the side before she could form a protest, reaching down a hand to her.

'Grab a hold.'

The steps were bare yards away, but it seemed churlish to refuse the offer. Regan grasped the hard brown hand and found herself drawn rapidly and without effort on to the side. Her wrap was close by, draped over the end of the springboard. Cal went to fetch it, slipping it about her shoulders and smiling faintly at the look which sprang into her eyes. 'That was another time and another place, and you were asking for it right then.'

'How?' she demanded.

'If you don't know it's maybe better not to ask.' He put out a hand and smoothed back the streak of wet hair from her cheek much as he had done that morn-

ing in the rain. 'Surprising you never learned sophistication from the kind of people you must have lived amongst. Says a lot for your strength of character.'

'Or for my naiveté,' she came back low-toned. 'Cal, please stop treating me like a child. I'm twenty. That makes me physically a woman even if I don't always act like one.'

The hand held its movement as he studied her, then slowly dropped. His face had gone expressionless. 'I think it's time we both turned in.'

'No !'. Resentment mingled with a tight unhappiness deep down inside her. 'You go if you want to. I'm staying out here.'

'Now you're being stupid,' he said roughly. 'You're already shivering.'

'I'll warm up in the water.'

He caught her around the waist as she dropped the wrap on the floor and started towards the pool edge again, swinging her in and towards him, his other arm going under her knees to lift her bodily. His mouth on hers was hard and fierce, his hands bruising her flesh. Her legs felt like jelly when he dropped her none too gently back on to her feet.

'Satisfied?' he said.

Regan put up a hand and deliberately wiped the back of it across her lips. 'Trust someone like you to misunderstand,' she managed to get out, and saw his lips twist.

'I understand a whole lot. That father of yours kept you hobbled in more ways than one. All I'm saying is if you want to do any breaking out stick to your own age group.'

'Pity you didn't think of that the other night!'

'Yes, it is. That was a mistake and I regret it.' He

turned away to reach for the towel he had flung over the handrail at the top of the steps, slinging it about his shoulders. 'Take a warm shower before you go to bed.

You'll find a hairdryer in the bedroom, I think.'

Her head went back. 'I want to move down to town tomorrow.'

The pause was brief. 'It might be best,' he agreed. 'The apartments are furnished.'

'I'll find my own. And a job.'

'We've been through all that.'

'Well, we're going through it again.' Regan was past caring how she sounded, or acted.

'I won't be under any further obligation to you! "

He looked at her for a long hard moment, a calculating look. 'Because I won't make love to you?'

Her breath caught, the fire dying out of her as swiftly as it had risen. 'I don't want you to make, love to me,' she said in a low voice. 'All I asked for was to be treated like an adult.'

'I know what you asked for.' His tone was harsh. 'The arrangements are made and you're going to stick to them. Apart from that you can please yourself.'

'Thanks '

'Go on in,' he said dangerously. 'Now! I've had just about enough.'

He wasn't on his own, but now wasn't the time to say it. She bent and picked up the wrap, tossing it over her shoulder in a gesture meant to look uncaring, though she doubted if it convinced. She only hoped Dallas wasn't watching unseen from within the house. That really would be more than she could bear.

There was a bathroom right next door to her bedroom. She took the shower as commanded and rinsed her hair through, returning to her room to find the

dryer Cal had spoked of in a drawer of the dressing table fitment. Not until she was lying between crisp linen sheets dare she allow herself to consider the events of the last hour. She was in love with Cal, she knew that now. And he knew it too—except that he would probably call it infatuation. That kiss had been meant to shock her in its brutality, pull her up short. Only it hadn't because at least it had been man to woman without pandering to her age. It was only what he had said afterwards that hurt. Stick to her own age group. How did she do that when she didn't even know any?

She was forced to accept these arrangements he had made initially, she acknowledged, but as soon as possible she would start looking for another job and somewhere else to live. In a city the size of Victoria it should be possible to quietly disappear—unless the work permit designated a particular job? That was something she would have to check. Either way, she had to be free of Cal Garrard. It was the only way she was going to get over him.

It was difficult to face him again at breakfast, especially with Dallas watching the two of them. Regan had a feeling that the other knew exactly what had gone on last night out by the pool, and was amused by it. She made no comment when Regan's departure for town was announced quite casually by Cal. He was giving her no opportunity to change her mind, Regan reflected. Not that she wanted it. She met the enigmatic grey eyes and looked hastily away again, dreading the ride to come with just the two of them alone in the car.

Dallas, however, had other ideas. 'I think I'll come down with you,' she said. 'One or two things I could do with buying. Will you have time for lunch?'

'I've made time for everything,' Cal returned. 'That's why I saw Smithson last night. The bank first, then I'll drop the two of you off and pick you up again for lunch. The apartment can wait till this afternoon.'

'Can't I go straight there after the bank?' Regan asked. 'I can do any shopping tomorrow when the shops are open all day.'

'Tomorrow you've an appointment with the principle of that secretarial college we talked about. It's only a small one but they get excellent results.' He stood up as if that settled the matter. 'Are your things ready?'

'My case is in the lobby. I just have my jacket to fetch.'

The bed had been stripped when she went back to the room she had occupied for the one brief night. An elderly woman in a flowered smock was vacuuming the floor. She nodded and smiled but didn't speak. Regan guessed she was used to visitors coming and going.

The journey down to Victoria seemed to take twice as long as coming out. Regan sat in the back of the big American Estate and looked determinedly out through the window, anywhere but at the back of the dark head in front of her. Dallas was vivacious and amusing, as if to emphasise the silence from the rear. Of them all, Cal seemed the only one totally unaffected by the atmosphere.

The bank was large and modern. Cal took her across to a desk where the clerk seemed to know all about the transaction, having the necessary paper work already prepared. A cheque was handed over, and Regan was asked to sign her name before being presented with a personal cheque book. Cal had made no attempt to let

her see the amount he was paying into the account in her name, and she was unable to read the figure entered by the clerk.

'I'd better know my balance,' she said at last with what equability she could muster.

'Otherwise I might overdraw.'

The man behind the desk looked at her oddly and then beyond her to where Cal stood waiting. In answer to the latter's brief nod, he wrote down a figure on a slip of paper and handed it over to her. As she read it off, Regan's lips tightened. It was exactly as she had thought. There must be more than twice the amount her possessions had been worth down here! She opened her mouth to protest, felt her arm taken in a vice-like grip from behind and found herself hoisted almost bodily from the chair and on to her feet.

'Thanks,' said Cal, and drew her with him away from the desk towards where Dallas stood impatiently waiting their return. 'Whatever you've got to say, save it till we're out of here,' he clipped.

The car was parked just around the block. He put her into the back as before, and saw Dallas into the front seat before sliding behind the wheel. 'Right,' he said, turning his head towards her, 'Let's have it.'

Regan's chin lifted. Not for anything was she going to argue with him about money in front of Dallas. 'No comment,' she said.

'Good.' He turned back to the front again and started the engine. 'Time we found you some decent things to wear.'

'We?' Dallas was startled enough to show it. 'Are you coming with us?'

'If I don't Miss Independent in the back there is going to finish up spending as little as she possibly

can.' His eyes met Regan's in the mirror, hard and flinty. 'I'll write the cheques and you can give me one to cover the full amount once we're through. Okay?'

'If you say so.' She was beyond even wanting to discuss it. Let him do as he thought fit. She neither had to wear the things he made her buy nor draw any further on the balance left in her account, although common sense prompted the question of how she was going to manage without at least doing the latter for the time being. So she would pay back every penny over and above the amount she believed herself entitled to, she told herself fiercely. If it took her a month of Sundays, she would do it!

The morning could have been a pleasant experience had circumstances only been different. Trying on crisp, clean cottons and linens again, seeing her slim figure and slender legs take on subtle new lines in the shorter skirts still fashionable out here, slipping her feet into a pair of dainty sandals instead of the clumpy ones she had bought in Fort Lester, smoothing on a pair of sheer tights—they were all things she could have enjoyed wholeheartedly had she only been alone and solvent in her own right. Dallas soon became bored and wandered off to do her own shopping, but true to his word, Cal refused to allow Regan to put pen to paper once. By the time they were through she had spent a small fortune—or he had.

'I hope you meant it when you said you'd accept a cheque to cover all this,' she said at one point when they were temporarily alone waiting for a bill of sale. 'If you refuse it I'll draw the cash anyway and post it to you!'

'Don't threaten- me,' he came back pleasantly smil-

ing for the benefit of a customer within possible earshot. 'We'll talk about it this afternoon.'

They wouldn't, she resolved. He either took the cheque from her, and cashed it too, or she would do exactly as she had said.

It was Cal who spotted the little green suit with its toning silky blouse, as they were on their way off the floor. Regan tried it on with reluctance, aware of its pricy tag and knowing she couldn't really afford it. It did things for her, she had to admit. Cal had a discerning eye. She was dismayed when the over-enthusiastic saleswoman yanked back the fitting room curtain to let him see her in it.

'Fine,' he said without turning a hair. 'We'll take it. In fact, keep it on.'

Recalling the Italian knit dress and jacket Dallas was wearing that morning, Regan wryly conceded that it wasn't a bad idea. The suit was no real competition, but it was at least a step in the right direction. For the first time she allowed herself to register the superb cut and fit of Cal's own light tan jacket and darker trousers. She must have looked like some country cousin tailing round after him in her jeans and sweater all morning.

The sandals she had bought earlier were a suitable match. Before they left the store she went to the ladies' cloakroom and put on a dash of lipstick. Her hair, she was glad to note, seemed to have recovered much of its old gloss and body. She felt a different person, if still not a particularly happy one. That was something she was going to have

to work out of her system, she acknowledged, meeting wide-spaced green eyes in the mirror and noting their lack of sparkle. It shouldn't be

all that difficult. Little more than a week had gone by since she had first met Cal. She barely knew him. Certainly her feelings concerning him couldn't have gone that deep in so little time.

He looked at her in approval when she joined him again. 'That's better,' he said. 'Like a butterfly emerging from the chrysalis. Ben would probably recognise you a sight more easily now.'

Regan had to agree with him. She wished Ben was here in Victoria right now. Or did she? Wasn't there enough to contend with in this strange new world without the added complication of getting to know her brother all over again? By the time he did come down to the coast she might have gained certain stability—in her emotions if in nothing else.

Dallas was waiting for them at the car. She made no immediate comment on Regan's changed appearance, though there was a certain compression 'about her mouth as Cal put the rest of the parcels in the back of the car. He took them to a restaurant close by, walking in the middle with a hand under the elbow of each. Both he and Dallas were well-known figures in the city, judging by the number of times people greeted them by name.

They ate salad and cold cuts for lunch, followed by large helpings of blueberry pie and ice-cream for Regan and Cal; Dallas having refused a dessert. It was Cal who finally forced the issue by asking the latter what she thought of the transformation.

'A distinct improvement,' she said, cool blue gaze turning briefly in Regan's direction. 'That's a sweet little suit, darling—although green might be a rather too obvious choice with your colour hair.'

'Cal chose it,' Regan returned with faint malice. 'He didn't seem to think so.'

He laughed. 'Dallas is right, it was obvious. We're creatures of logic, not subtlety.'

'You can be subtle enough when it suits you,' the lovely blonde came back coolly.

Watching them, Regan saw blue eyes clash with grey and was aware of some unspoken message transferred between them. A muscle jerked faintly in Cal's suddenly tautened jawline.

'We have to see about Regan's passport this afternoon,' he said. 'They have the details, but there are papers to be signed. Are you coming along, or do you have other plans?'

take a cab up to Oak Bay and drop in on the Calbournes.' Tone altering a fraction,

Dallas added, 'Did you know the place right next to theirs is coming up for sale?'

'No, I didn't.' Neither, his tone said quite plainly, was he interested.

If that message got across it failed to make any impact. 'You could put in an offer before it comes on the market.'

'I don't need another house,' he said with deliberation. 'There's nothing wrong with the one I already have.'

'With the house, no. But Kenny is so far out. Oak Bay or Uplands is so much more convenient.'

'I still don't need another house. And you have your own car.'

'You're being obtuse' she said with a sudden angry glitter. 'I meant for you to move into town, of course.' He studied her for a moment; they both of them

appeared to have forgotten Regan's presence. 'There's nothing to stop you moving into town if that's what you want.'

Spots of colour appeared high on the classical cheekbones as the expression in the blue eyes changed character. 'You know that's not what I want.' Her voice had softened almost pleadingly. 'Cal—'

'Some other time.' He was brusque, his gaze flicking to Regan as if in warning. 'I'll get them to call you a cab from here.'

Regan was quiet during the following hour or so of official negotiation. She signed what she was told to sign and answered questions put to her with the same numb feeling inside. Dallas wore a habitual cloak of cool sophistication over her everyday emotions, but for a moment back there that cloak had slipped. She was in love with Cal, that was almost certain, enough in love to allow the hurt he had inflicted to show. He had known he was hurting her; he had to have known. But why? Because of their relationship? Because he couldn't bear the knowledge that she had once been married to his own father? There was something odd about the whole situation. Dallas appeared to have inherited little or nothing from her husband's death.- What kind of man would leave his wife in a position where she had to rely on her stepson's charity? Only Cal knew all the answers, and he wasn't likely to supply them to her even if she had the courage to ask.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THEY passed by the Garrard building on the way across town to the apartment block where Regan was to live : an imposing six storeys of white stone with the name picked out in gold lettering above the wide main entrance. The apartment block itself was set behind a landscaped curve of garden massed with crocuses and daffodils already in full bloom. There were eight apartments in all, Cal informed her as they went up in the lift to the fourth and top floor.

Regan's own was larger than she had anticipated, consisting of an all-purpose living room, with a bedroom, bathroom and beautifully equipped kitchen off it. Patio doors gave on to a balcony with views out across a wide, city centre park to the distant sea and mountains. She guessed the rentals for such accommodation must be astronomical. Certainly far more than she could afford to pay even when she did have a job.

'It's a fine place,' she said stiffly, coming back indoors to where Cal sat with apparent unconcern flicking through a glossy magazine from the rack at the side of his chair.

'Pity I can't stay. There must be somewhere less costly than this.'

'You'll stay.' He said it with finality and without looking up from the magazine. 'You'll find the kitchen already stocked. How about making me some tea?'

The request took her aback, as it had probably been meant to. 'Tea?'

'Sure. It's about time.' He looked up then, mouth satirical. 'Did you think your part of the world held the monopoly?'

'No,' she admitted. 'Laura made it every afternoon.'

'But you don't see me as a partaker. Don't worry, I wouldn't be asking just to make you feel at home. I'm not that self-sacrificing.'

'Just over-generous,' she said on a flat intonation. 'Generosity is easy when there's no sacrifice.' He

sounded impatient again. 'Did it ever occur to you that Ben might be supplying funds for your keep?' 'Not in this style. I doubt if he could afford it.' 'You've no idea of the amount a man can earn doing what he's doing, so I'd keep quiet if I were you.' - 'I could always write and ask him.' 'You do that. Right now I'm more interested in that tea.'

Regan gave up and went to make it. There was little use in arguing with him at this point. Once she had a job she would be in a better position to stand out for her independence.

The kitchen was a delight, or would have been had she been in a mood to appreciate it. She made the tea, and took the tray set with china she had found in one of the many cupboards through to the living room, placing it on the low table Cal had hooked forward in readiness.

'When do I get to start work?' she asked when they were both served.

He shrugged. 'When your papers are in order, I guess.'

'That could take ages.'

'Not too likely. Unauthorised aliens aren't regarded as desirables.' He caught the swift tensing of her jaw

and said something softly under his breath before adding out loud, 'That was a rotten crack: It isn't your fault you're without papers.'

'It isn't yours either,' she said, 'but you act as if it were.'

'Somebody has to accept responsibility. I happen to be in a better position than your brother to do it, that's all.'

She couldn't argue with that. He had proved it too many times. 'How do I spend my time till I can start a job, then?' she demanded.

'I told you—college.'

'I don't need papers to go there?'

'I think we can fix it.'

He could probably fix anything if he tried, she acknowledged. Apropos of nothing, she said, 'Is Oak Bay your local Nob Hill?'

'You might say that. It's predominantly English.'

His lack of reaction prompted her to extend the question. 'That's perhaps why Dallas wants to live there?'

'Part of it.' He took out cigarettes and offered them to her, lighting one for himself when she shook her head. His eyes came back to meet hers as he leaned back in his seat to exhale the smoke somewhat forcibly between his teeth. 'Don't get involved in things you don't understand. Dallas can take care of herself.'

'I'm sure she can.' She said it with a coolness that surprised herself. 'It was just idle curiosity. I've no wish to delve into your—affairs.'

The slightest hesitation before the final word did not go unnoted. Cal's eyes narrowed.

'I told you once I didn't like innuendo.'

'Particularly from little girls,' she finished for him.

'And I've told you on several occasions that I'm not one. I'm grateful for all you're doing for me, but that doesn't give you the right to talk down to me. You've been doing it since the moment we met, and I'd like it to stop.'

It was a moment before he moved, then with deliberation he reached forward and stubbed the cigarette out in the glass ashtray on the table. 'All right,' he said, 'if it's straight talking you're after, let's do some. That time we were out in the forest something developed between us. Under the circumstances it was just about

inevitable. Few men could hold a lovely young body in their arms all night and feel nothing. It's against nature.' He shook his head as she made to open her mouth. 'No, we'll get the air properly cleared while we're about it. What you needed from me out there was comfort, reassurance—call it what you like. If I'd gone ahead that night and taken what you were offering, do you think you'd have been any happier for being treated like a woman? Would it be any easier now if I let you pay me back in kind for all I'm doing for you?' The anger was in his eyes and in his voice, spilling over into something even more dangerous as he looked at her sitting there so stiffly in the neat green suit. 'Your trouble is you never had the chance to grow up normally. You've a woman's instincts but no idea how to channel them.'

It was pure instinct that prompted the needle-sharp retort. 'Maybe I could take lessons from Dallas!'

His teeth came together with an audible snap. 'You need one from somebody, and now's as good a time as any, I guess.'

Frozenly Regan watched him get to his feet and take off his jacket to fling it carelessly down on the chair he

had vacated. His tie followed it. Then he was coming over and yanking her upright, turning her in front of him and pushing her bodily towards the bedroom door. 'In there. Let's have the setting right!'

She tried to twist away from his grasp, but he wouldn't let her, shoving open the door with his foot and thrusting her through, then closing it again and locking it behind him before going over to draw the curtains. She had taken off the jacket to her suit earlier, and the lack of it made her feel even more vulnerable as he came back to her.

'All right,' she got out, 'you don't need to go any further. You've made your point.'

It was difficult to see his expression in the dimness of the room, but there was no appreciable change in his tone. 'I haven't even begun to make my point. That's something else you've to learn. You can't start something like this and stop it by saying sorry. I let you get away with it last night because I didn't think you knew what you were 'doing, but this time you've gone too far.'

'Because of what I said about Dallas?' She was backing away from him. 'I didn't mean it to sound like it did.'

'I don't give a damn how you meant it. She doesn't have anything to do with you or me right now. We're going to finish what we started, out there in the woods and satisfy your curiosity.'

'No, Cal!' She caught at his hands as he tugged undone the tie bow at her neckline. 'I don't want you to. Not like this. Please—'

'You should have thought of that before you goaded me into it.' He swung her off her feet and tossed her on

to the bed, following her down to pin her under him. 'This is what being a woman is all about!'

He started kissing her, first on the mouth and then on the throat, his hands sliding inside the filmy material of her blouse and over her bare shoulders down to her upper arms. Regan felt the top button tear out under the strain and then the second. His lips burned into her skin. She wanted him to stop; even more desperately she wanted him to go on.

Of their own accord her arms slid up and over his shoulders, her fingers digging into the ridge of muscle, sensing his reaction. She buried her face in his hair, smelling the clean, crisp freshness of it, pressing her lips to his temple with purely instinctive

feather-light softness. Her mind had room only for one thought: this was Cal making love to her, and she loved him. Nothing else mattered but that.

The sudden removal of his weight from her came as a shock. She saw the grim line of his mouth, the glitter in his eyes and had a faint premonition of what was about to happen even before he grasped her shoulder and rolled her forcibly over on to her face. With the pillow half 'smothering her, she could only gasp at the stinging pain of the slap. She cringed, expecting another, but it didn't come. Instead he made a sound of disgust and got up, moving across to unlock the door and got out.

Lying there motionless, she heard him moving about in the other room. When he came back to stand in the doorway she still didn't move.

'I'm going,' he said. 'I hope you profit from something you learned today, though I doubt it. Your appointment at the college is for eleven. I'll pick you up at a quarter to.'

'I'd rather find my own way.' Her voice was muffled. 'Just tell me where it is.'

'Fair enough.' There was a pause, then an intolerant exclamation. 'For God's sake cut it out! You didn't get a fraction of what you deserved.'

Her head lifted then, her arms taking her weight. 'Am I supposed to be grateful?'

'You'd better be. You could have done worse.' 'With a man of lesser integrity, you mean.'

If you want to think of it that way. I told you before, I don't want that kind of responsibility, tempting though the offer is.'

'I wasn't offering.' She said it almost pleadingly. 'I really wasn't. It was as much your fault as mine.'

'I agree.' He sounded tired. 'I should have kept my hands off you from the first. I'm not making any excuses, only you've got to stop imagining yourself attracted to me. If you were a few years older it would be another matter, but I'm not indulging in an affair with a girl twelve years my junior.'

Her throat ached. 'I've got to start somewhere.'

'You can cut that out too. You don't start anywhere! You need a couple of years just learning to enjoy yourself without getting involved. One day you'll meet somebody around your own age who's ideal for you and you'll know what I'm talking about. Just don't confuse what you think you feel about me now with any lasting emotion.'

'All right,' she said thickly, 'I won't.' She sat up, swinging her feet to the floor and casting one fleeting glance at the tall, broad figure in the doorway, glad of the dimmed room. 'Can I ask you one question?' she said before she lost the courage.

'Go ahead.'

'Are you in love with Dallas?'

He straightened abruptly, face losing all expression. 'If I were,' he said, 'it would be my business. I'll leave directions on how to get to the college on the telephone notepad. If you need to contact me for any reason, ring me at the office rather than at home.'

'Switch will put you through if you give them your name.'

Regan listened to his footsteps crossing the room; there was a brief pause while Cal wrote on the pad at the side of the telephone, then the door opened and closed again and he was gone.

It was several moments before she stirred, coming slowly to her feet to stare unemotionally at her reflection in the dressing-chest mirror. The blouse was ruined, the material ripped where the buttons had torn away. She drew the edges together with an unsteady hand. Cal hadn't needed to answer the question. It had been right there in his manner. She understood a whole lot more now. Love Dallas he might, but that was

as far as it could go. She had been his father's wife, and that fact alone was enough to put her beyond his reach. Yet why torture himself, and her too, by sharing a house for two years? Why not a clean break for them both—a new start? It didn't bear thinking about.

Regan's papers came through some days later. It was a relief to have an identity again and to know herself qualified to stay in the country for at least the coming year. Cal didn't contact her personally, but she received a letter instructing her to attend for an interview with the Corporation accountant's chief assistant, Mr Maurice Bellamy.

The latter received her with some obvious reservations in a spacious, air-conditioned office on the third floor of the Garrard Building. He was a man in his mid-forties, fair-haired and intelligent-featured, with shrewd blue eyes behind the horn-rimmed spectacles.

'Myself and Mr Smithson are the only people aware of your connection with Mr Garrard,' he said when the formalities were completed. 'It would be best if it stayed that way. This job you're taking really requires someone with typing ability to hand, and I understand you're only at the beginning of your training?' He went straight on without bothering to wait for her confirmation. 'There's going to be some speculation as to why it's gone to an outsider when there are several members of our present staff qualified to take it. You might find yourself a little unpopular for a few days, but I'm sure things will sort themselves out.'

'If it's going to cause any trouble,' Regan said hastily, 'I'd as soon do something else. Cal—Mr Garrard suggested filing until I found my feet.'

'This particular job was his suggestion,' came the dry reply. 'I'm sure he must think you capable of filling it. By the way, we're all on first name terms in the building, apart from Mr Garrard himself and Mr Smithson, and one or two others.'

'The hierarchy?' she said with a faint smile, and received a similar one in response. .

'You've got the general idea. Don't ever refer to Mr Garrard as Cal if you can possibly help it, or you really will start tongues wagging!'

'I won't.' She wondered just how much he did know about her connection with Cal. She couldn't somehow imagine the latter imparting too many details. Stifling the inevitable ache, she said brightly, 'When do I start?'

'Tomorrow morning. I understand you're to attend the Braithdale College three afternoons a week? What are you taking exactly?'

'Shorthand/typing and general business studies.' 'Are you a quick learner?'

Her throat went tight. 'I've been told so. I'll certainly do my best.'

He nodded, paused for a moment then added unexpectedly, 'Your father was Elliot Ferris, wasn't he?' 'Yes. Did you know him?'

'I knew of him. The name once meant a great deal in the world of finance.' He caught himself up and looked uncomfortable. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply'

'It's all right,' she assured him without emotion. 'I know just what you meant. My father would rather be remembered by his successes than his failures.'

'Wouldn't we all?' He got to his feet, holding out a hand. 'We'll look forward to seeing you in the morning, then.'

The hurdle of starting work proved less difficult to clear than Regan had anticipated.

There was some slight coolness in the attitudes of a couple of girls in the departmental typing pool, but generally speaking her presence was soon accepted.

Her English accent brought friendly if sometimes satirical comment. 'Beautiful,' one would say. 'Like listening to the Queen!' 'Stuffy,' said another, not too unkindly. 'It's not

coffee, it's carfee. Try it our way.' After a few days Regan found herself doing so because it was impossible not to. The drawl, though far less pronounced than that of the USA, was infectious.

Between the office and college there was little time left to brood. Gradually she began going out in the

evenings with a variety of companions of both sexes, enjoying the experience of being one of the crowd with nothing more important on their minds than the best place to dance away the hours or eat a cheap meal. Sometimes she accepted invitations from one or other of the younger men with whom she worked, mindful of Cal's advice not to get involved and always refusing a second date. Of Cal himself she saw nothing at all, stuck away as he was on the top executive floor of the block. She trained herself not to think about him, consciously at least, and knew it was only a makeshift remedy.

It took an unexpected letter from Ben to jolt her into the realisation that she had done nothing about repaying the money she owed as yet. He confirmed that there was some kind of financial arrangement with Cal but put no figure on it, leaving her very much in the dark as to how to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. One sum she was sure about was the amount he had spent on her wardrobe that first day, and which subsequent events had prevented her from settling. In the end she drew out a cash sum large enough to cover that plus a calculated percentage of the original. deposit, and sent the lot by private messenger out to Kenny's Bay.

The reply came the following day: a single sheet of notepaper contained within an envelope bearing the Garrard stamp; the writing sharp and angular as though formed in somewhat less than casual mood : You're asking for a repeat performance, it said. The signature itself looked angry, the tail of the L slashed across the page. Regan put it on the windowsill behind one of the pottery owls she had bought from her first salary, wanting to tear it up but unable to bring

herself to do it. It was the only contact she had had with him in over a month. Even anger was better than indifference.

She was going out to dinner that evening with one of the men from Costing. Rob Duncan was twenty-five and a bit of a go-getter, but she liked his carefree manner and easy style when not at work. Up to now she had avoided having anyone call at the apartment for her, aware that her salary scale did not run to this standard of living and unwilling to cause speculation over where the balance came from. Rob refused to listen to her vague reasons for meeting him outside. He tad a car; it was only sensible that he should come and pick her up. Eventually she had given in. What did it really matter anyhow? He probably wouldn't even think anything of it.

Whatever thoughts he did have on the subject, he kept strictly to himself when she let him in at seven. Somebody in her own department had once said Rob was too good-looking for his own good, and looking at him now, she could almost agree with the statement. His features were chiselled; well balanced and enhanced by an excellent skin tone, his eyes dark brown under a thick mane of light blond hair. Regan wondered why she always thought of Cal whenever she studied Rob; perhaps because the contrast was so marked. Cal wasn't good-looking, not in the same sense. His attraction came from the strength and character in his face, the rugged enduring quality that would last long beyond Rob's film-star appeal. It always surprised Regan that the latter failed to use those same looks to further a career in other directions. He was good at his present job but surely wasted when hidden from the world at large.

'Not ready yet?' he asked now, noting her lack of lipstick. 'I'm not early, am I?'

'No, I'm late.' She closed the door and waved a light hand in the direction of the nearest chair. 'Make yourself at home for a few minutes while I finish off.'

'No hurry,' he said easily. 'The table isn't booked till eight. Thought we might drive out as far as Brentwood and look at the gardens first. You haven't seen Butchart yet, have you?'

She shook her head. 'That sounds a nice idea. Just give me five minutes.'

He was looking out of the window when she came back into the room. She thought his expression a trifle odd when he turned, but it was only a fleeting image before his smile approved her dress.

Regan enjoyed both the drive and the gardens created out of a disused gravel pit into a floral wonderland. It wasn't until they were back in town and halfway through an excellent meal that Rob started the casual questioning regarding her background that at first made little impression. She told him about Ben quite openly, and said she was waiting for him to join her in Victoria that coming fall. It was only when he showed untoward interest in her choice of Victoria as a place to live and Garrard's as a place to work that the suspicion began taking root.

'You saw that letter, didn't you?' she said bluntly at length. 'You read it!'

'I couldn't help it.' He was quite unabashed. 'I knocked it on the floor and it came out of the envelope. It's just about impossible to stop the eye from taking in a few words, and there was only the one line.' The pause was significant. 'He signed himself Cal. You know him that well?'

'It's a long story.' She caught his eye and sighed, knowing she was going to have to tell it. He had seen the apartment and now knew of her association with their chairman. If she didn't set the record straight he might put two and two together and come up with the wrong answer.

It took her through the rest of the meal and into coffee to find the right kind of words. Rob listened with sympathy and without interruption apart from the occasional murmured comment.

'Lucky you fell in with somebody like Garrard,' he said when she had finished. 'You could have landed worse.'

'Much.' Regan said it wryly. She looked at him with concern in her eyes. 'Rob, this is just between you and me. You won't let it go any further?'

'Scared of losing your job?' he asked.

'No, it's not that. I was asked to keep the whole story quiet, that's all. I suppose C—he thought it for the best. You know the sort of misunderstanding that can arise.'

'Don't I just! Lovely young English girl alone in forest with virile Canadian magnate—the possibilities are endless.' He saw her expression and made a gesture of apology, still half smiling. 'Don't look like that. It was just a joke.'

'I don't like that kind of joke,' she said. 'If you hadn't read my letter you'd never have needed to know.'

'But I might have wondered who was subsidising that apartment of yours,' he came back smoothly. 'This way it's all in the clear. Quite the philanthropist, is our Chairman!' 'My brother is financing the apartment,' Regan re-

torted with more haste than certainty. 'Can't we forget the whole thing now?' It really isn't of any importance.'

'Not going to tell me what the cryptic line meant?' He laughed and shook his head.

'Okay, I was only joking again. None of my business anyway.'

It was barely ten-thirty when he took her back to the apartment block, but she didn't invite him up. Short of leaping from the car, there was no way she could avoid the goodnight kiss he obviously expected. She kept her head when he put his hand on her breast, removing it and her lips at the same time. There was only one man she wanted touching her in any way, and Rob wasn't him. She stifled the swift surge of longing with a cool little smile.

'Thanks for a nice evening. I enjoyed most of it.'

He was torn between amusement and annoyance. 'What is it with you?' he said.

'You're old enough to be kissed, aren't you?'

'Only when I want to be.' She opened the car door. 'Goodnight, Rob.'

'We'll have to do it again.'

'Sure,' she said with irony. 'See you around.'

The letter was the first thing that caught her eye when she entered the living room. She went over and picked it up, weighed it a moment in her hand, then slowly and methodically tore it into small pieces and put them in the waste bin. Shutting the stable door after the event, perhaps, but it still seemed the best thing to do. She only hoped Rob would keep his promise. Her heart jerked suddenly. Except that he hadn't exactly made one, had he? And she'd sent him away quite definitely out of sorts with her.

CHAPTER NINE

IT took two days before Regan could be reasonably sure that her fears had not been without foundation. The curious glances, the whispers, the sudden and obvious changes of conversation when she approached a group—they all crept up on her until she was ready to scream from the sheer frustration of not daring to ask what was going on for the remote possibility that she was wrong. She supposed the obvious person to ask was Rob himself, except that he seemed determined to avoid her. He'd probably never had a total rejection before, and he didn't like it now. Regan could have kicked herself for giving him a weapon to use against her, though she failed to see what she could have done considering the circumstances. It would be a nine-day wonder and then blow over, particularly when it became obvious that Cal Garrard himself had no further interest in her. She only hoped the story stayed on this floor. - She was not to be that fortunate. The summons came via Maurice Bellamy on the following morning.

'You're wanted on the sixth,' he said, expression controlled. 'Mr Garrard's office. Right away,' he added as she continued to sit there without moving.

The lift up to the sixth floor left her stomach back on the third. She stepped out on inch-thick carpet and muted decor with a fervant desire to leave the building forthwith and never return. How she was going to face Cal again after all this time she didn't know,

particularly in these circumstances. There was only one reason he could have sent for her so summarily: the rumours had reached his ears. She could imagine his reaction; the taut anger at her apparent ingratitude in going so blatantly against his request for silence on the subject of their shared ordeal. Naturally he- would accept that the story could only have come from her. Who else 'knew all the details of the crash?

The outer office was furnished like something out of a magazine, the blonde, beautifully coiffured and frozen-faced secretary a carbon copy of many she had seen

other times while waiting for her father to emerge from a meeting. Or maybe this was the prototype and the others had been copies, she reflected, waiting for the woman to notice her presence. Assembly No.1. of too. She almost jumped out of her skin when without even bothering to glance up, the other said coolly, 'You're to go straight in, Miss Ferris.'

If the outer office had epitomised the New World, the inner did as much, if not more, for the Old. The main theme was wood, satin-smooth and glowing on walls and ceiling, darkened with beeswax and inlaid with leather when it came to the huge desk set squarely in front of the big curving window. Cal was on the telephone, leaning back in the swivel chair with one foot propped across the other knee, tone clipped as if whoever was on the other end was wearing his patience thin. He glanced at Regan without change of expression as she entered the room, and waved a hand towards one of the chairs set before the desk. Regan declined to take it, standing a little way back with her hands clasped lightly in front of her, waiting for him to finish his conversation while endeavouring to turn a deaf ear.

The view from the window behind him was magnificent. She concentrated her attention on it: the blue sheen of the inner harbour, the ivy-covered, gracious bulk of the Empress Hotel flanking it, the city beyond spreading out to the sea, interspaced with green and brilliant with summer flowers. A beautiful city: a city she was beginning to love as a home. If she lost her job here would she be able to stay, though?

The phone went down in the rest with a deliberation that drew her attention. She brought her eyes in from the view to meet the grey ones across the width of the desk, steeling herself not to reveal any inner turmoil.

'You sent for me,' she said, and couldn't resist the surge of defiance which prompted her to add a toneless, 'Sir.'

His eyes narrowed, but he let the moment pass. 'Sit down,' he said.

'I'd rather stand, thank you.'

'And I'd rather you sat.' His voice held the same note he had used on the telephone.

'So sit!'

Regan did so, retaining the same strict control over her facial expression. She fixed her gaze on a point somewhere just behind his left shoulder and waited, aware of her fast beating heart. She wasn't indifferent to him; she never could be indifferent to him. This was Cal, and he still had the same power to stir her just by being close. Only things were different now. She was an employee of the Corporation. It put their whole relationship on a new footing; one that allowed her little leeway in her dealings with him. It was her place to listen while he did the talking.

'Look at me,' he said, and then as she continued to stare at the wall, 'I said look at me, dammit ! ' empha-

sising the order with a bang of a clenched fist on the desk which startled her into obeying. He was angrier than she had ever seen him, mouth a grim line, jaw rigid. The defiance faded, leaving her slumped and defenceless inside.

'It isn't the way it must seem,' she appealed. 'I didn't deliberately start this off, and I'm sorry if it's caused you any embarrassment.'

He studied her for a long moment. 'If you didn't start it deliberately, just how did it happen?' he demanded at last. 'I've heard three different versions up to this morning—none of them particularly close to the truth. At the last count, I was keeping a twenty year-old mistress at the Corporation's expense and concealing it under the guise of philanthropy.'

That was Rob, she thought painfully. It smacked of his delicate touch. 'Someone saw that note you sent,' she said. 'They put two and two together and came up with five. I thought it better to tell him the bare facts of the case than let him go on adding up. It seems I trusted the wrong person.'

'Who?' He said it with intent.

'I can't tell you that.'

'Can't, or won't?'

'Won't, then.' Her neck felt stiff. 'It was my fault in the first place for leaving that note of yours where it could be seen. I should have followed my first inclinations and burned it.'

'Why didn't you?' There was a curious expression in the grey eyes.

The words came without conscious prompting. 'I thought I might frame it and hang it over my bed. A kind of timely reminder.'

'If you're going to carry on the way you've been

doing these last few weeks you might just need it. You haven't been out with the same date twice.'

'You advised me not to get involved.'

'I advised you to enjoy yourself with a crowd, not a whole series of one-night stands!'

'If you've been keeping a check, which you obviously have, you'll know I do that too.'

Variety is the spice of life, or so they say.' She met his gaze levelly. 'I'm finding my feet my own way. I don't intend making the same mistake again.'

It was a moment or two before Cal responded. He had a pencil in his fingers, drumming the base end of the desk edge with a rhythmic sound that drew her eyes. There was power in the hand gripping the slim length of wood, muted at the moment but able to crush on demand. Regan remembered the feel of it holding her, the sensitivity of those fingertips, the stinging hardness of his palm—so many moods and she knew them all. She was shaken by the longing to have him hold her again. It was all she could do to keep that need concealed when she lifted her head.

'You've changed,' he said.

'I had help.' Her tone was light. 'Profit from it, you said, so I did. I grew up. I suppose I should thank you for making me see how ridiculous I was.'

'I never thought of you as ridiculous,' he said. 'Naive, then.'

'You're still that if you think you've learned everything in six weeks.'

'I didn't say I'd learned everything, I said I was working on it. It might even take me another six weeks.'

His smile was humourless. 'Very funny.' He got to

his feet, throwing the pencil down on the desk, turning to look out through the window, hands thrust into trouser pockets. 'You realise I can't let you go on working here.'

'Why?' Her voice sounded ragged. 'It will blow over. I'm sure nobody in their right senses would believe I was your mistress. You'd hardly be putting me out to work if I were.'

'No,' he agreed dryly. 'I'd want you fresh for my entertainment after I'd finished work!' He brought his head round to study her, gaze sliding over the trim shirtwaister down to her belt, then back again to her face, lingering momentarily on the soft fullness of her mouth. 'Nobody in their right senses is going to believe I spent three days and nights alone with you without so much as touching you. No man, anyway.'

'I don't care what people think.'

'Then it's time you did. You're not staying in that office, and that's flat.'

'All right.' She rose unsteadily, face pale, eyes dark. 'Then I'll find another job!'
'Not without a permit, you won't.'

She stared at him in silence for what seemed an age before finally acknowledging defeat. Her slim shoulders sagged a little. 'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to go back to the apartment and wait for tonight when we'll have time to discuss it. There's a solution to every problem in the long run.' His voice had an oddly wry note. 'Maybe I should have taken advantage of this particular one before.'

Regan didn't bother asking what it was. She doubted if he would tell her until he was ready to. 'What do I say to the people I work with—Mr Bel-

lamy, for instance? I can't just walk out in the middle of the morning.'

'You don't say anything. I'll ring Bellamy and tell him as much as he needs to know. You just get your things and go downstairs. There'll be a car waiting.'

She looked at him helplessly. 'You realise they're all going to think this confirms the rumours?'

'It's of no importance at this point.' Cal glanced at his watch. 'I've an appointment in five minutes or I'd come with you now and get the whole thing over. Unless something unexpected crops up I'll be with you by five-thirty.'

'Is it likely to take long, this discussion?'

His smile was faint. 'That rather depends. No more questions—there isn't time. I'll see you later.'

There was a man waiting in the outer office when Regan went through. Something about him reminded her of her father. He gave her a speculative once-over as she passed; she could feel his eyes following her to the outer door. It felt strange going down in the lift knowing she was leaving this building for good in a few minutes. She sensed the expectant quality in the silence which greeted her return to the department, and hardly knew where to look as she quickly cleared her desk. Sue Gibbons sitting next to her was the one to voice the obvious question.

'Hey,' she said softly, 'what gives?'

'I'm leaving,' Regan told her.

'I can see that. But why?'

'Ask Rob Duncan,' she said bitterly. 'He knows all the answers—and what he doesn't know he can always make up!'

The other's eyes were curious. 'Then it isn't true about you and ' she made a gesture upwards with

her head. 'Didn't think it could be. You'd hardly be doing a job like this if you were that well in with the Big Boss.'

'Glad you see it that way. Now try convincing everybody else.' Regan caught herself up as Maurice Bellamy approached.

'The car's waiting,' announced the latter with singular lack of expression. 'I'm to see you down.'

And off the premises, Regan surmised. 'I shan't run away,' she promised with a faint attempt at humour. 'I've already had my standing orders.' She raised a brief hand to those present, and forced a smile. 'Bye, everybody. Be good. Big Brother is watching you.'

- 'You shouldn't have said that,' Maurice Bellamy commented on the way down in the lift. 'Mr Garrard wouldn't like it.'

'Mr Garrard can lump it,' she retorted wearily. 'I'm not on his payroll any longer.' She saw the look on his face and gave a small sigh. 'Sorry, Maurice, it isn't your fault this thing came out. It's all such a storm in a teacup, anyway.'

He smiled a little. 'We're going to miss those sayings of yours. I did warn you not to mention your acquaintance with Mr Garrard to anybody.'

'I know you did. You forgot to warn me about leaving personal letters around, though.'

She held out her hand as they came out into the big, shiny reception hall. 'Goodbye, and thanks. I enjoyed working for you, even for a short time.'

The car was waiting outside the main entrance. It was chauffeur-driven and about two miles long. The man already had the address. He took her there in minutes, dropping her off in front of the block. The apartment seemed extra quiet; Regan wasn't used to

being in it during the day, apart from weekends. She made herself some lunch, but found herself unable to eat a thing. She both longed for and dreaded five-thirty: Cal had some solution in mind, he had said, but what?. If she couldn't work for the Corporation where did she go? One thing was certain, she wasn't living on his charity. It was that which had contributed to the whole rotten mess.

Five-thirty came and went undisturbed. At a quarter to six there was a phone call from the prototype to say Mr Garrard had been delayed and would be there as soon as he could. The evening moved on, long and lonely and fraught with the same doubt and dull misery that had plagued her all afternoon. When the doorbell rang at last she had got past the stage of wanting to see Cal at all and wanted only to be left in peace. She viewed Rob Duncan's coldly furious features with a blank astonishment giving way to alarm as he pushed his way past her.

'You use your influence all the way, don't you?' he clipped. 'I got fired!'

'I'm sorry.' She barely knew what else to say. 'As a matter of fact, it wasn't my doing, but I don't suppose you're going to believe that.'

'You bet I'm not! You were on the top floor this morning, this afternoon I get the push. Coincidence? In a pig's eye!'

'Your name wasn't mentioned,' she said with what coolness she could muster. 'It wouldn't have been difficult for anyone to find out how the rumours started. You should have thought about that before you spread them.'

'I told one person,' he said. 'Just one! How was I to know it would go round the whole block?'

'Because that's the way gossip spreads, by telling one person. I found that out myself.' Her own anger was growing, fed by the memory of that interview with Cal. 'You didn't even start off with the truth!'

'I bet I wasn't far out.' His glance swept the room. 'A nice little change from the gorgeous Dallas. Shouldn't imagine there's much he could teach her!'

'Get out of here.' She was trembling, trying not to let him see how the implications affected her. 'Just get out!'

There was a momentary indecision in his eyes, then he shrugged. 'Okay, I'm going. I said what I came to say—more or less.'

'You've said a hell of a sight too much,' came a slow measured voice from the open doorway. The grey eyes were like chips of ice. 'You've got exactly ten seconds to make yourself scarce. And I mean scarce!'

Rob didn't stay around to argue. He was inches shorter and a half a chest narrower than the older man. Cal stood to one side to let him pass, looking as if he might even yet plant a foot in the retreating rear. He closed the door quietly after him, and stood

there with his hand resting on the knob for a long moment before finally turning to look at Regan.

'How long had he been here?'

'About five minutes—if that.' She fought for control over her voice. 'I'd no idea he was coming.'

'It didn't occur to me that you might have had.' He paused, taking stock of her bruised expression with irony in the line of his mouth. 'Don't look so shattered. Stands to reason you wouldn't be the only one with an imagination where my relationship with Dallas is concerned. Even more call for me to do something about it.'

don't imagine anything,' Regan denied. 'I might have done once, but not any more.'

'What changed your mind?'

'You did. A moral streak, you once called it. I think it applies to more than taking advantage of just one kind of situation.'

'And God made little apples,' he said softly. 'Thanks for the vote of confidence, even if it is a bit misplaced.'

'Would you like some coffee?' she asked. 'I made some just before—he arrived.'

'What I need at the moment is a good strong whisky,' he came back, 'but I'll settle for the coffee. Bring the pot in, it's going to be a longish session.'

She went to get it, stifling her curiosity and odd trepidation. Cal was leaning back with his head against the chair cushion when she returned with the tray. He looked weary, with lines about his eyes she hadn't noted before. He took the cup from her with a word of thanks, drank it before she was halfway down her own and refused a refill with a shake of his head.

'Mind if I take my jacket off?' he said. 'It's warm in here.'

'I'll turn the air-conditioning higher if you like,' she offered.

'No, it makes too much row on high. I can do without the competition.' He got up to slough the dark jacket, hitching up the knee of his trousers before sitting down again. The figured silk shirt brought back memories she preferred to forget right now. He saw her bite her lip and smiled ruefully. 'How good a job did I do of turning you off that afternoon?' he asked.

Her eyes went wide, then dropped and darkened. 'Do we have to talk about that?'

'Yes,' he said, 'we do. I need to know.'

'Why?'

He made a small sound under his breath—impatience, but with himself not with her.

'You're hardly likely to tell me, are you?' he said. 'So I'll have to find out.'

He got up and came over to where she sat, taking the coffee cup from her hand and placing it on the table. 'This is almost where we came in, I think.'

Regan went stiff as he slid both arms under her and lifted her bodily from the chair.

'Cal—'

'Relax,' he said. 'Don't fight me. I won't take it too far. Not this time.'

He took the seat she had just vacated, still holding her, bringing his arm from beneath her to slide it around her waist and draw her closer to him, his other hand and arm supporting her shoulders. When he kissed her it was gently; questioningly, his lips tender as she had never imagined they could be, taking on pressure only when she began to respond. The questions faded as he became more insistent. They could wait. She didn't care why; she only knew this was what she wanted more than anything else in the world. Her arms crept up around his neck, bringing her hard against his chest.

She couldn't get close enough to him, couldn't have enough of his caresses. He wasn't playing with her this time. He meant it. He had to mean it!

'Thank God you never learned to prevaricate,' he said softly when they had to stop for breath. His hand was over her heart, feeling the beat. 'You just act as you feel.'

'Is that bad?' she whispered against the hard edge of his jawline, delighting in the faint aroma of after-

shave overlaying the smoothness of his skin. 'You smell wonderful!'

His laugh was low and amused. 'You're not supposed to say that to a guy ! '

'Why?'

'Because I should be saying it to you—or words to the same effect.'

'You can't. I'm not wearing perfume.' Some element of sense was returning to her bemused mind; enough to bring sudden reticence with it. She took her mouth away from his face, glad of the ruffled hair partly covering her own. When she tried to sit up in his arms they tightened about her.

'Don't start getting self-conscious,' he said. 'Not now. We can talk more easily like this than sitting yards apart in a couple of chairs.' He paused, as if searching for the right words. 'Do you have any idea what I want to talk to you about?' he queried after a moment, as if he couldn't find them.

She nodded, avoiding his eyes, mouth vulnerable. 'You've decided you may as well live up to what you're supposed to be, I imagine. That's why you had to find out how I felt.'

His face had an odd expression. 'Would you go along?'

'I—I don't know.'

'You want me to make love to you.' It was a statement, not a question. 'You wanted it as much as I did a moment or two ago.'

'Does that mean you don't anymore?'

His mouth widened briefly. 'Did I say you knew nothing about prevarication? Give me a straight answer, Regan.'

'All right then. No.' Her tone was level. 'You shouldn't have given me time to think about it.'

Grey eyes glinted. 'Think I couldn't persuade you?'

'I don't want you to try.' She attempted to press herself free of him again, becoming agitated when he refused to allow her to go. 'Cal, don't! '

'Calm down. I won't.' His hands slackened their hold as she desisted from struggling, but still didn't release her. 'It's a good thing you did say no. I'd have leathered you black and blue if you'd said yes!'

She looked at him in some confusion for several seconds. 'I don't understand. If that's what you wanted why—'

'You're going to marry me.' He said it so calmly it didn't mean anything at first. 'And we're going to do it the right way. A girl should have a wedding night to remember, not just a legalised continuance of what's gone before.'

She was stunned, staring at him with widened eyes as it dawned on her that he wasn't joking. Her first instinctive reactions were natural to her feelings for him: happiness; relief; welling emotion. Then she saw his expression, cool and watchful, assessing her response, and suddenly the whole picture came clear in her mind. He didn't love her, he just wanted a buffer against his feelings for Dallas: a permanent one. A young wife held some compensation. She could be moulded; he'd already begun to do it with her. She tried desperately to rationalise her thoughts. Did it have to matter why he was

asking her to marry him, just providing he was? It was up to her to drive Dallas out of his mind if she loved him enough. But did she? Was what she felt for him really love, or something she

would grow out of? Right then she wasn't sure.

'Hey! ' Cal was smiling, eyebrows lifted quizzically. 'Don't I get an answer?'

The reply came without having to think about it. 'You didn't ask a question. You told me.'

'Past practice in dealing with you.' He paused, then added lightly, 'Do you want the Whole thing, bent knee and all?'

The image brought a smile to her own lips. 'Too out of character.'

'You're probably right about that. So?'

'You mean I still have a choice?'

'Do you want one?'

Regan looked at the strongly moulded face, at the mouth which just a short time ago had lifted her to some seventh heaven of delight, met the steady grey eyes with a quiver of awareness. 'I don't know. You gave me no idea you wanted to marry me. How—I mean, when did you decide?'

'About ten-thirty this morning when you came into that office.'

'Just like that?'

'Just like that.' He put up a hand and ran his finger down her cheek, mouth slanting a little at her involuntary tremor. 'I'd been sitting there waiting for you and getting madder by the minute, then you walked through the door looking like this and I was sunk. I tried to stay angry with you, but I couldn't. I kept wanting to take hold of you and kiss you. If I hadn't got you out of there when I did, my eleven o'clock appointment would have had a long wait.'

He did it so well, she thought. She could almost believe him. Except that he was taking care to leave one thing unsaid. She respected him for that. The

word shouldn't be used without real meaning behind it.

'Do you want me to convince you some more?' he asked. 'You didn't have doubts when I was kissing you.'

'You don't leave room for any doubts when you're kissing me,' she acknowledged wryly. 'You know how you can make me feel.'

'That's only the beginning. There's so much more. want to hold you in my arms all night, wake up with you beside me in the mornings, make love to you whenever the mood takes us. Does that thought scare you?'

Regan shook her head, stirred by the images he conjured up. 'Only that I might not be able to live up to what you expect from me.'

'There's no question of that. You respond wonderfully. A lovely little sensualist with few inhibitions, thank God.' He laughed as she coloured. 'Not when it matters, anyway. I take it the answer is yes?'

'Would you accept it if I said no?'

'I doubt it. Not without a struggle. I need you too much to give you up easily.'

She could accept that, and take comfort from it. Need was the next best thing to love, wasn't it? She leaned down impulsively and put her lips to his, feeling his arms fasten about her.

'You don't think I'm too young for you anymore?' she murmured a little later, lying with her head pillowed against his shoulder. 'You did once.'

'That was then. You've grown up these last few weeks—or maybe it's that I'm not thinking about that twelve years as much. Marriages have proved successful with a much greater gap between.' He paused. 'When are you twenty-one, anyway?'

'Not for another nine months.'

'Poor sweet,' he said. 'You really were only a kid when you were left on your own. We'll have to make something special of your twenty-first to make up for all you've missed.' She would be living out at Kenny's Bay by then, in the big white house by the sea. And Dallas? Where would she be? Surely not there still? That was one thing she wouldn't be able to bring herself to accept. She wished she dared ask, but there was no way to broach the subject right at this moment. She doubted if she had to worry about it, though. Cal was hardly likely to want the contrast underlining by her presence once they were married. Her throat constricted a little, but she resolutely ignored the flash of pain. He would forget her; she would make him forget her! No matter how long it took. 'One good thing,' she said on a practical note, 'I'll be able to keep my job a bit longer now that you're scotching the rumours so effectively.'

'No way.' He said it firmly. 'You don't go back there or anywhere else!'

'Then what do I do?'

'Get yourself a trousseau together. We'll be married at the end of the month. Where would you like to spend your honeymoon?'

A shiver ran through her, small and delicious. 'I don't know. Surprise me.'

'I'll do that.' He kissed her again thoroughly, then pushed her gently off his knee and stood up. 'I'd better go.'

Her eyes were darkened, her mouth soft. 'Do you have to?'

'No, I don't have to,' he said, 'but if I don't I'm

going to finish up staying the night, and that's something I promised myself not to do.'

'You mean you don't want to.'

'Don't tempt me,' he came back lightly. 'I'm having enough trouble convincing myself. I'll be back tomorrow round noon. Be packed and ready.'

'Packed?' she queried.

'You're coming back to Kenny with me. You didn't think I'd leave you here on your own?'

'Without supervision?'

His eyes crinkled. 'Stop making me sound like some kind of keeper. I want you where I can see you any time. Where I know you're safe from guys like Duncan bursting in.'

It took courage to say it. 'I don't think Dallas will be very happy to have me there at the house.'

Something hardened momentarily about his mouth. 'Dallas will be busy making her own plans. Naturally she'll be leaving before we get back from wherever we decide to go.'

Relief flooded her. He hadn't let her down. Knowing that she could surely bear the older woman's company for such a short time. Her heart missed a beat and caught up again, rapidly. 'Cal, it's barely more than a fortnight to the end of the month!'

'I know. It's maybe' as well, considering.' He cupped her face in his hands for a moment, searching it with a look she couldn't read. 'No reservations?' he asked.

'No.' If she had he dispersed them when he touched her like this. He mightn't love her as she wanted him to love her, but he wanted and needed her. It was up to her to make that develop into something deeper. She laughed a little. 'Ben is going to get a big surprise when he hears.'

'He's probably not the only one.' His tone was dry. 'I'm afraid it's going to be something of a news item when it gets out. Another reason why I prefer you out at Kenny. I don't want you hounded.'

'I keep forgetting what an important man you are,' she admitted. 'The only time I've ever really seen you in proper perspective was this morning when you hauled me up to your office.'

'You weren't seeing me in perspective then, only from another angle. I'm sorry for putting you through the carpeting treatment, green eyes. I should have tackled you in private about that rumour spreading. The end result would have been the same.'

'Would it?' she asked urgently, needing the reassurance. 'Even without time to think it over?'

'I've been thinking it over for weeks,' he said. 'Since the last time I was here, in fact. Why do you think I kept such a close check on your activities? It took me all my time to keep from pulling you up short before some guy got to you first. I knew how responsive you could be.'

'Not to anyone else,' she denied. 'I never let anyone else touch me.'

Cal studied her with a strange expression. 'Why? You enjoy being kissed and caressed; there's no reason why you shouldn't. Out of eight different dates there must have been some time when you felt turned on enough to respond. You did it with me that very first time.'

'That was different.'

Because it was me?' He smiled faintly when she nodded, smoothing his thumb over her chin. 'Nice to know I can draw something out of you that other men can't, even if it is limited.'

She closed her eyes to the sensation of his touch, stifling the hurt he had inflicted. 'You once said I'd be a quick learner.'

'In some things. For the rest—' he stopped and shook his head, mouth rueful—'I'm expecting too much too soon. Forget it. Go to bed and dream pleasant dreams.'

He kissed her again before he left, but there was some element of reserve in it. Regan carefully closed the door and locked it, then stood for a moment trying to come to terms with the knowledge of her own inadequacies. Cal hadn't been a monk in his relationships with women in the past; that had always been obvious. He knew too much about them; about their inner needs as well as their physical desires. But he didn't know everything. He was being gentle with her now because he hadn't always been so in the past and he believed that was what she needed. Only it wasn't. She had needed him to stay, to take her in his arms and make her belong to him in at least one complete sense. She was to be his wife, and she loved him; she was sure of it now if she hadn't been before. Was it wrong to ache for his lovemaking regardless of whether the actual words had been said?

She was in bed with the lights out before she finally acknowledged her real need. It was assurance. Once Cal had possessed her, fully and finally, he would be committed. He had said as much, and she believed him because he was that kind of man. If he changed his mind about marrying her during these coming long weeks she wouldn't be able to bear it. Not now. She didn't even care anymore that his feelings weren't all that they could be. She just wanted to be his wife.

CHAPTER TEN

THEY reached Kenny's Bay in the early afternoon with the sun lighting the far mountain peaks to spectacular beauty. The sea had never looked so blue, the sky so clear. Seeing the house standing up above the bay, Regan felt a cautious happiness steal through her. This was home, or it was going to be. Perhaps one day, not too far ahead, there would be children playing down on the beach, toys scattering the paved patios and littering the pool. She could imagine Cal's son: a miniature of himself; dark-haired; grey-eyed and independent. He would be a firm father, but a good one. She had to smile a little at that point. She was leaping a bit far ahead! They weren't even married yet. For all she knew, Cal didn't want children, only she hoped that wasn't so. It was one more thing they had to discuss, one of many. At least there should be time for it.

Dallas was significant by her absence when they went into the house. The housekeeper she now knew as Marie took her suitcase with a pleasant familiarity, any natural curiosity over the circumstances of her return well concealed. So far she and her husband Peter were the only others to know about the impending wedding, but it had to get out some time. Regan wondered if Cal would make some kind of formal announcement or just leave the news to filter through via one or two chosen confidants. He hadn't actually said.

If he thought anything of Dallas not being present, he made no comment. He had to be back in town at four, but he seemed happy enough to spend the couple of hours before that making her feel at home. They had eaten lunch before leaving the apartment, a typical light Canadian meal of cooked meats and salad with cheese to follow. When he suggested a swim in the sea she was eager to agree, dreading the moment when he had to leave her, although he would be back again for supper.

Her bedroom was the same one she had occupied on the one other night she had spent here. Changing into the brief yellow bikini she had fished out of her case, she caught sight of her reflection in the long wall mirror and thought how subtly different she looked from the girl of that previous visit. She was slender still, but somehow womanly too. She hoped Cal would be aware of it. She wanted him so desperately to see her as a woman instead of a girl. It might bring them just a little closer.

He was waiting for her when she went outside, wearing a white towelling beach robe that came to the top of his thighs, feet clad in rope sandals. He made no comment on the new suit, but she felt his eyes travel over the length of her and sensed appreciation. The knowledge of even that much power gave her a needed lift and confidence. She smiled at him gaily, moving with him down the curving stone steps to the beach.

The sea was warm and buoyant. He wouldn't allow her to go too far outside her depth, swimming beyond her and blocking her passage when she laughingly persisted.

'There are currents a bit further out you'd have difficulty handling,' he said. 'You don't ever go beyond

the line of those rocks over there unless I'm with you.'

His tone was light but emphatic. 'Promise me, Regan.'

'You're with me now,' she responded teasingly, and dived down past his legs, surfacing beyond him with a jaunty wave of her hand. 'Race you!'

He came after her with long, powerful strokes, catching hold of her round the waist and bringing her upright in the water, keeping them both afloat with the movement of his legs and other arm. It was only when she saw his expression that she realised he was not amused.

'I'm not playing games,' he said harshly. 'It's time you learned the difference between daring and plain recklessness! If you can't accept advice from me regarding matters I know about and you don't, then you'd better stick to swimming in the pool from now on !'

He was holding her against his hip; she could feel the hardness of the muscled thigh brushing hers, the cutting strength of the fingers clinching her waist. 'I'm sorry,' she said in a subdued voice. 'It was just a joke, Cal. I wouldn't really have gone all the way out.'

'You wouldn't have had the chance.' He looked and sounded thoroughly intolerant. 'If you want to be daring wait till we're on dry land. Okay?'

'Yes.' She had the sense not to say any more.

They swam back together to the beach. Regan walked out to where she had left her robe and put it on, keeping her back to him as she squeezed the water from her hair. When his arms came around her from behind she stiffened momentarily, then relaxed again as his lips found the tender spot just behind her earlobe.

'I shouldn't have shouted at you that way,' he mur-

mured against her skin. 'It wasn't necessary.' He drew her closer, his hands sliding up to gently cup her breasts through the towelling of her robe. 'You're beautiful, Regan. A nubile, tantalising little witch! I want you.'

Her breath came out unsteadily, her senses alight. She said huskily, 'It wasn't my idea to wait.'

'I know.' He sounded rueful. 'It was mine. One I'm beginning to seriously reconsider.'

She laughed a little, confidence flooding back to her in the knowledge of her ability to stir him. 'It's only for a week or two, Cal. You can wait that long.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Yes.' It was true now. She could afford to be sure. 'Yes, I do. You were right. It means more this way. To both of us.'

'Then we'll wait—but it won't be easy.'

Love for him choked her. She wanted to tell him, but the words wouldn't come.

Perhaps later, when the time was right; when she could lie in his arms and whisper it to him in the dark hush of night.

He left for town at three-thirty, dressed once more in businesslike grey. Regan lounged by the pool after he'd gone, eyes closed against the sunlight, body free of tension. In a few hours he would be back again. They would eat supper together, perhaps take a walk after it along the cliff path. Tomorrow was Saturday. They might spend the whole of it together. She didn't care how they spent it; just being with him would be enough. There was so much they had to talk about, so many plans to make. Next week she had to start thinking about what she was going to wear. White, of course; she was entitled. And a veil, she must have a veil, the kind one threw back when the clergyman told

the groom he could kiss the bride—if that really happened in real life. They were to be married in church, she knew that already, but she didn't know which one, nor how many guests would be there. They would be strangers, all of them, but it didn't matter because she would have Cal at her side; Cal, her husband. She would make him

happy, she vowed through a blissful haze. He would never have cause to regret having asked her.

She only remembered Dallas when she heard the car out front some time later, and by then her spirits refused to be dampened. How could she be sure what Cal felt for the older woman anyway? It was all surmise on her part. Just because he hadn't actually said that he loved her didn't have to mean that he didn't. She loved him, but she hadn't told him either.

She was sitting up straighter in the lounge when the other came out through the patio doors, sunglasses covering her eyes. She sensed the frigid quality behind the controlled expression on the classic face and knew its basis.

'Pleased with yourself?' came the silky query. 'Feeling a bit like the cat with the cream?'

'Feeling a lot like the cat with the cream,' Regan corrected levelly. 'I don't want to fall out with you, Dallas. We're obviously not going to be friends, but we can at least act civilised about things.'

It was quite a time before any answer came. She seemed completely taken aback. Regan couldn't blame her; she had surprised herself. She hadn't thought about the words, they simply came to her. When Dallas did finally retaliate she was ready for her, although the dig still hurt.

'You know he doesn't love you, don't you?'

Her body tensed, but she managed to keep the same tone. 'What makes you so sure?'

'Because, my sweet darling, I happen to know Cal Garrard—better than you ever will! Don't let it show, Regan told herself fiercely, clutching the swift stab of pain within her. Don't give her the satisfaction of seeing the shaft strike home! 'I daresay you might know more about him than I do,' she said with an effort, 'but that will be remedied in time. And time is something we're going to have plenty of, Cal and I. All the days of our lives—and nights.'

The laugh was short and deliberate. 'You'll only have those until he gets bored with virginity. Cal is like most men—he fancies himself teaching a young innocent the facts of life from scratch. But he needs more from a woman than you'll be able to provide. Once the novelty's worn off he'll realise that for himself, then he'll be back.'

The control shattered then. Regan came upright in the chair, her face pale, eyes blazing. 'You're a liar! Cal never—'

'Never what? Made love to me?' Blue eyes mocked. 'Darling, you really are an innocent! Who do you think first brought me here to Victoria three years ago? Who do you think introduced me to his father? I knew Cal for two months before that. He was crazy about me, wanted to marry me.'

'So you married his father.' Regan's voice trembled, hang on to it as she might. 'How perfectly logical!'

The shrug was cool and composed. 'Circumstances were different then. Cal, unfortunately, was only the son and heir, and Paul looked capable of going on forever. He wasn't an old man, you know. He was only in

his early fifties, and very fit. We hit it off from the start.' The reminiscent smile came and went. 'I suppose it gave him a real lift to take me away from his own son. They were two opposites in a lot of ways, always at loggerheads over something or other. Cal left Victoria the day before the wedding and didn't come back for more than a month. He lived down in town, in one of those same apartments he let you have, but he couldn't keep on hating me for long.' She was sitting down on the other lounge,

silk-clad legs crossed at the ankle, body alluring in the form-fitting white dress. Her voice became emotionless again.' 'Paul was killed two months later driving his car up to one of the logging camps.'

Regan swallowed on the hard cold lump in her throat. She wanted to be sick. 'He seems to have left you rather unprovided for,' she managed to get out, and was immediately ashamed. 'I'm sorry,' she said quickly, 'that was unnecessary. I don't know the details anyway.'

'As a matter of fact, you're quite right.' Dallas appeared unmoved, both by the comment and the apology. 'He never got round to changing his will. I suppose a lot of men prefer to ignore the fact that they might not be around forever, especially after they've turned their half century. Anyway, Cal inherited everything. I could have gone to the courts, of course, and fought for some part of it, but why drag the family name through that? And I didn't really need to. Cal made me a very generous allowance when he moved back here to Kenny.' She repeated it softly, 'Very generous. He's a rather special kind of man, your husband to-be. But I suppose you already know that?' 'Yes, I do.' Regan had her feet on the ground, hand

groping blindly for her wrap. 'I don't want to hear any more.'

'You don't need to hear any more, do you?' The words were callous. 'You know it's true. Cal didn't keep me out here these last two years from sympathy. He could no more let me leave than I could leave him.'

It was foolish to pause, but Regan did it. 'He offered to let you leave that time at lunch when you talked about the house for sale at Oak Bay.'

'Punishment for bringing it up. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how he chastises those who go against him. What does he do with you, turn you over his knee?' The sneer was malicious. 'Grow up, darling, see things in perspective. He's marrying you because he needs a wife who'll give him a son to carry on the line. Even if I were willing, which I'm not, he couldn't marry me. Anyway, I'd hate to have a child—maybe another reason why I married a man who already had a son.'

'You're disgusting.' It was said with a lack of emotion that made the words all the more meaningful. 'And I don't believe you.'

The blue eyes glittered. 'All right, you sort out the truth from the lies—if any. Or why not ask Cal himself and watch his reactions? There's a muscle contracts in his jaw when something hits deep, right at the side of his mouth. He probably doesn't even know it, but it's a giveaway to anyone who really knows him.'

Dalles was safe in saying it, well aware that Regan would mention nothing of this conversation to Cal. She was a clever and intuitive woman, acknowledged the latter numbly. It was a pity that such perspicacity had been channelled in the wrong directions.

It took everything she had to get up and walk away with dignity, and the control only lasted until she was in the house and out of sight. She reached her own room somehow and sank down on to the bed, pushing the cover into her mouth to stop herself from weeping. I don't believe it, she kept saying over to herself fiercely. Dallas was lying; she had to be lying! Cal wouldn't ever take as his mistress the woman who deserted him to marry his father. It wasn't in him to do such a thing! Yet how could she be so sure? She had known him such a relatively short space of time. Did she really know him at all, or was she seeing in him only what she wanted to see? The doubts hammered into her mind.

She stayed in her room for the rest of the afternoon, unable to summon the raw courage it would take to go out and face Dallas's knowing gaze. She was still there when Cal returned unexpectedly early from the city. The curtains were drawn against the evening sunlight when he tapped on the door. Regan was lying on the bed in her housecoat, and his expression was concerned when he came in and saw her.

'What is it?' he asked, sitting down on the edge of the mattress and taking her hot hand in his. 'Are you ill?'

'I think I had too much sun.' Her voice sounded far-off and strange, and she kept her eyes closed. 'I'll be all right soon.'

She could hardly bear it when he put his hand to her forehead, then smoothed it gently down her cheek. 'Poor darling,' he said. 'What a rotten way to start off our first weekend together.'

'I'll be better by morning.' She didn't know what difference a night was going to make, but it gave her

some respite, some time to think. Time to think? What else had she done for the last two hours? And how far had she got?

'I doubt it,' he was saying. 'Not if it's the sun that got to you. We'd better have the doctor out to look you over.'

'No!' She caught at his hand, eyes flying open in alarm, recognising her mistake when she saw his brows rise in astonishment. The reaction had been too strong; she made some effort to tone it down. 'Please, Cal, don't make a fuss. There's nothing wrong with me that a night's sleep won't put right.'

'Okay.' He was obviously humouring her. 'We'll leave it till morning. But you'd be better going to bed properly instead of lying around like this. Did you unpack a nightdress?' She nodded. 'I can manage,' she said as he went to get it from the drawer she had indicated. 'I—I'm not that ill.'

'I wasn't thinking of putting you into it,' he came back with tolerance. 'Stop panicking, child.'

'Don't call me that!' She caught at her lower lip with her teeth the moment the words had left her lips, aware of his pause and the faint narrowing of his eyes. 'Sorry,' she got out, 'I didn't mean to snap.'

'If your head's pounding the way I imagine it is it's enough to make anyone snap,' he said after a moment. 'I'll go and get you some aspirin while you get undressed.' He tossed the flimsy garment on to the bed close by her. 'Hardly worth bothering with that scrap. It sure wasn't intended for a sick-bed. I'll be back in a couple of minutes.'

Regan was in the bed and under the covers when he returned. He was carrying a glass of water in one hand

and a couple of white tablets in the other. He said nothing when she clutched the sheet up around her as she sat up a little to take them from him and slip them into her mouth, but she could sense his faint exasperation. She was being ridiculous and they both knew it, sick or not. It said a lot for his forbearance that he didn't tell her to stop acting like a baby.

'Try and get some sleep,' he said: 'I'll check on you later.'

She wanted to tell him not to bother, but he was scarcely going to accept it like that.

'All right,' she acknowledged, and closed her eyes again.

Cal stood there at the side of the bed looking down at her for what seemed an age before he finally left her alone.

Whether it was the aspirin exerting a calming influence•or just that her own mind was starting to rationalise at last, Regan couldn't have been sure, but during the following hour of dry-eyed staring at the darkening ceiling, she finally reached a point of decision. Whether she believed what Dallas said was true or not was really immaterial. What mattered was here and now. Cal had said the older woman was leaving before they returned from honeymoon, which meant surely that he was more than ready to let her go. Whatever had been between the two of them in the past she mustn't let it affect her feelings for Cal. She loved-him, so she accepted him as he was—for better or worse. Providing he kept his side of the bargain from here on in she wasn't going to care. She wouldn't allow herself to care!

There was no doubting Dallas's bafflement when she was greeted with apparent amnesia at breakfast next

morning. Several times Regan caught the blue eyes regarding her narrowly across the width of the table set out on the patio in the morning sunlight, and took pleasure in acting out- a total unconcern for anything beyond the question of what should be done with the morning. Cal was obviously relieved and happy to find her back to her normal self again, and why shouldn't he be? She was willing to believe in his basic regard for her, and certainly in his desire to possess her: a man couldn't exactly pretend such an emotion. Cynicism came easy, she reflected. All it took was a little bitterness.

They took the car and drove right up the coast to Campbell River and the Elm Falls park in the end, just the two of them and a picnic meal. They viewed the magnificent spectacle of the hundred-and-twenty foot fall rushing down into its rocky canyon, ate a lateish lunch amidst the huge Douglas firs, talked of all sorts of things which interested them both and never once touched on their own relationship. Once or twice Regan was aware of Cal watching her from the corner of his eye as if he suspected some element of strain about her but wasn't quite able to put his finger on the cause. She knew her gaiety was brittle and couldn't do a thing about it. Providing he didn't start asking her what was wrong she would be all right. She could cope with practically anything but that.

She had to bring all of her determination to bear on that very avowal when he stopped the car at a lonely point in the Comox Valley and took her in his arms. There was no difference in his lovemaking; the difference was in her. He sensed the restraint in her response to him and let her go after a few moments,

sitting back to look at her with an enigmatic expression.

'Don't you want me to kiss you?' he said bluntly.

'Yes.' There was panic in her heart at the thought of trying to explain away reluctance.

'Yes, of course I do ! '

'Only?' he prompted, and lifted an eyebrow at her swift sideways glance. 'There has to be an only. I'm not totally insensitive. You stiffen when I so much as touch you.'

'I'm sorry.' There was small use in denying it; she had to find a reason instead. She made herself slide closer to him and lean her head against his chest, glad of the excuse to hide her face from his too perceptive gaze. 'It isn't that I don't want you, Cal. Just that I want you too much. You—said it wouldn't be easy.'

'I said it wouldn't be easy for me.' His hand had come up to cup the nape of her neck beneath the fall of hair, his thumb slowly smoothing the hollow. 'It isn't either, but I'm not going to go back on my word, so you don't have to be afraid to let yourself go a little.'

She laughed shakily. 'If I do that I might be the one to lose sight of that promise! I can't bear the thought of a whole fortnight like this.'

It was a long moment or two before he answered. 'So what's the alternative? Am I supposed to spend the next two weeks not even coming near you?'

The very idea of it made her want desperately to deny it, but other priorities got in the way. 'It might be best, I suppose.'

'Like hell it would!' He took his hand from her nape and put it under her chin, bringing her face up so that he could see it. His own was set in lines she had

no difficulty in recognising. 'Just what is this all about, Regan? And don't try giving me that line or I'm going to get really angry! '

'You're hurting me,' she complained.

'I'll hurt you a lot more if you don't stop playing games with me!' He tightened his grip as she tried to twist her head free. 'I want an answer ! '

There was no answer—or none she could give. She said desperately, 'All right, I was teasing—trying to provoke you!'

'Into what?' He looked blank.

'I don't know. I really don't.' She couldn't meet his eyes. 'Cal, please

'When the devil are you going to grow up?' His tone was unexpectedly savage. 'You expect me to treat you like an adult, then you act like a precocious brat! You try that with me again and we'll forget all I said about waiting for anything. Believe me, you wouldn't enjoy what I'd do to you. Anger is no pleasant motivation!'

'I didn't think,' she said in a small tight voice as he let her go and reached for the ignition. 'It was just an impulse.' Her own temper rose when he started up the engine without replying. 'Perhaps you'd like to change your mind? I can always go back home to England.'

He turned his head and looked at her then, eyes hard as granite. 'I'm not changing my mind, and neither are you. 'You're going to marry me, and I'm going to make an adult of you if it's the last thing I do! Now shut up!'

There was nothing else she could do. In this mood he was capable of anything. The tongue-lashing hurt, but in his eyes she had asked for it. She wished she knew some way of retracting the last few minutes. The whole thing had got out of hand, created the wrong

impression. She wasn't a child, or even a girl any longer. She had stopped being either last night.

He started conversation going within a short time. Men like Cal didn't indulge in sulks and long silences—they got what they wanted to say or do out of their systems, then went on living. Regan tried to follow suit, but the constraint was still there.

It was almost supper time when they got back to Kenny. Regan went to change, donning a simple cotton skirt and top with a singular lack of interest. Cal was alone in the living room with Dallas when she went through. He was standing at the open glass door looking out on to the patio, while she occupied a seat a short distance away.

There was something in the air : some electric quality as though strong words had been spoken. It was impossible to tell from either face what had been going on.

Supper was an ordeal. Regan ate little, and was glad when it was over. They had coffee out by the pool, bathed in the rays of the dying sun. The sky was breathtaking, merging from ever-deepening turquoise into purple and indigo, the night clouds building up from the south-west tinged red at the edges. Nobody said a great deal, but

the peace was fraught. Regan was almost glad when Cal suggested an early night might put some colour back in her face.

'I shouldn't have taken you so far after that overdose of sun,' he acknowledged. 'You don't feel sick again, do you?'

She shook her head, refusing to look in Dallas's direction. 'No, just tired. See you in the morning.' 'Not too early,' he said. 'We'll make it a restful day.' She was in bed within fifteen minutes, but she couldn't sleep. Eventually she got up again and went

to sit at the window, looking out to the dark, silver-tipped sea and listening to the waves breaking on the beach below. The soft opening of the door startled her. She turned her head as Cal put his round it, meeting his surprised gaze.

'I saw your lamp was still on; he said. 'I thought you'd gone to sleep and left it. What are you doing sitting there?'

'Looking,' she responded, 'and thinking.' She paused before saying it, aware that it was hardly the right time but needing to know. 'Cal, do you want children straight away?'

He hadn't come further than the doorway, although he had partially closed the door. Predictably the question took him aback for a moment. He seemed to be looking for the right words. 'I hadn't actually thought of it in terms of when,' he said at length. 'But I certainly do want them some time.' The pause was brief. 'Don't you?'

She gave a faint sigh. 'Yes.'

He came to her then, sitting down on the arm of her chair to slide his hand lightly over her bare shoulder. 'You should have more on,' he said. 'You could catch a chill sitting here like this with the window open.'

'It's too warm for that.' His touch tensed her, but she made no move. The words came of their own accord. 'Do you really believe it will work out right for us?'

'I know it will.' He said it quietly and firmly. 'Once we're married everything will seem different.'

'We'll be the same.'

'No, people change too, along with circumstances.' 'You think marriage might mature me?'

'I think it will go a long way.' He bent and put his

lips to the top of her head. 'I was rough on you this afternoon. I'm sorry.'

'I asked for it,' she admitted.

'I know.' His tone was wry. 'You chose the wrong time to tease me, that's all.

Frustration holds a short fuse wire. Maybe we should have slipped away quietly and just got married without all this preparation.'

Her chest felt tight. 'Could we really have done that?'

'I guess not. It wouldn't have been the right way for you either. You need something you can look back on and remember as a highlight in your life.'

She said softly, 'But a man doesn't?'

'Not to the same extent. Weddings were invented by women for women; the groom is just an accessory. His time comes later, when the guests have gone home. That's when the bride becomes a wife.' His hand was warm against her skin. 'Do you want Ben to give you away?'

'Oh, yes!' She looked up at him with glowing eyes. 'But how?'

'We'll have him flown down for a few days. I'll contact Royd Patterson on the radio telephone and let him do the arranging.'

Regan tried to imagine Ben's reaction on hearing the news, and couldn't. Her brother was a stranger; they still had to find one another again. If they could spend a few days together before the wedding they might stand a chance.

'I suppose you'll arrange for him to have leave,' she said, and smiled a little. 'I really believe you could arrange anything if you wanted to.'

'Not everything,' he returned on an odd inflection.

He dropped another light kiss on her temple and got up. 'Don't sit here too long.'

'I won't.' She wanted to ask him if he too was retiring for the night, but couldn't find the words. She imagined Dallas waiting for him to rejoin her, the way the cool blue eyes would take on that special look she reserved purely for Cal. They might not even speak, but the air would be charged as it had been earlier: charged with the bitter frustration of a man wanting a woman he couldn't have.

She had to stop this, Regan thought desperately, as the door closed behind him. It was starting to eat her up.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THERE was little time for thinking and worrying during the following days. Regan was measured for her dress, advised at intervals throughout the proceedings that only the fact that she was marrying Mr Garrard had swayed the salon to accept the commission at such short notice. She chose a delightful little pillbox of a headdress in stiff figured brocade to match the dress, with a veil that floated as romantically as any feminine heart could wish, but could conjure little pleasure at the thought of wearing them. Cal would look at her in these things on their wedding day, and tell her she looked beautiful but he wouldn't say, the words she wanted to hear because he couldn't—not in truth. Perhaps he would never find himself able to say them to her.

The formal announcement of the coming marriage brought her instant recognition in many city stores, despite the poor quality of the photograph one newspaper ran alongside the column. As a leading citizen, Cal's affairs were naturally of public interest, she acknowledged, but she would have preferred to retain her anonymity.

'The price one pays,' was his dry reply to her mild complaint. 'Think what it must be like to be a real celebrity—a film star, or a member of Royalty. They can't set foot outside their own door without hitting the headlines: This is only a nine-day wonder, and much of that because one apparently confirmed bachelor has landed himself such a lovely young catch. Men all over the city will be looking at your photograph and Wondering what you see in me.'

'Don't be cynical about it, please, Cal,' Regan begged. 'If a man might think I was marrying you for your material assets a woman certainly wouldn't.'

His eyes softened a fraction. 'Thanks, green eyes. You know how to boost a male ego !'

If little else. He didn't have to say it, she was only too well aware of her limitations.

Dallas had said he would soon become bored with virginity, and already he was showing signs. Still, she wouldn't be one for very much longer—unless it really was all in the mind. She caught herself up there. Cynicism could be taken too far

The week wore on. Each morning Cal would drive her down to town and leave her to shop on her own; they would meet for lunch and then he would either drive her home, or if he had appointments, put her into a cab. As soon as they returned from

honeymoon she was to start learning to drive herself. Cal refused to teach her—the quickest way to break up a marriage he knew of, he'd said when she suggested it. She needed a purely impersonal instructor who would correct her mistakes with tolerance even when she did repeat them time and time again. Once she had her licence he would buy her a car of her own. She needed to be mobile if she wasn't to find life out at Kenny restrictive. Regan refrained from responding that she would never do that as long as she could be sure of his return to the place. It sounded too young and girlish a thing to say to a man.

Dallas made no attempt to offer her companionship on the shopping expeditions, much to Regan's relief.

To have the other woman standing by while she bought some item for her trousseau would spell finish to whatever enjoyment she could find in that task. Lingerie and nightwear gave her most problems. She had to steel herself against the temptation to go for the slinky blacks and purposefully sexy styles. Things like that might look marvellous on a woman with a figure like Dallas's; on her they would simply emphasise her lack of maturity.

It was a relief to have the weekend come round again. Saturday morning brought a message from Ben that he would see her on Thursday evening. With the wedding scheduled for the following Monday that gave them little enough time together, but it was better than nothing. He was to stay here at Kenny until the wedding, after which he was due to return to Keele. Cal himself was to spend the Sunday night in town in accordance with tradition.

There was a party that evening for Regan to meet some of the closer friends and acquaintances of her fiancé. She wore a purposely simple white dress with a crossover bodice edged in silver braid and a softly falling skirt. Her only jewellery was the diamond solitaire Cal had put on her finger three days before, plus a silver bracelet of her own. Her hair had grown these last weeks, reaching almost to her shoulders, the ends curving under from a central parting without adornment apart from its own smooth shine.

Dallas was in red, beautiful and seductive, Cal superbly masculine in a dark blue Italian-cut evening jacket which emphasised the breadth of his shoulders and tapering line to his hips. Standing at his side to meet the guests as they arrived, Regan felt torn apart by conflicting emotions. Keeping the smile on her face

took an effort, but she did it. No one must be allowed to guess that all was not perfect between the two of them.

People seemed to accept her without undue curiosity or speculation, although she was too well aware that it must be there in their minds, and her suspicions were confirmed at one point in the evening when she had slipped out to take a breath of air on the patio. She was standing semi-concealed by one of the rose-wreathed stone pillars which supported the pergola when she heard the voices—made voices—coming from somewhere nearby, the words quite distinct on the still air: 'Trust Cal to get his priorities right. What wouldn't I give to have that lovely young thing in my bed next Monday night!'

'Better not let your wife hear you. Moya's already caught me thinking the same thing twice tonight! Women are the devil, aren't they? She says Cal doesn't have the temperament to make a go of it. What the hell temperament has to do with it I'd like to know!'

Regan bit her lip as the laughter faded. They weren't being deliberately cruel, she told herself numbly; they couldn't have known she was listening. She supposed it was the kind of thing men were likely to say to one another in such circumstances; they mostly liked to think of themselves as libertines under the skin. Cal was an exception, perhaps. In no circumstances could she imagine him airing his inclinations towards any woman as openly as those two had been doing. What he felt he kept to himself. Only too well she knew that.

She was more than glad when it came time for people to start leaving. She made her goodnights with a smiling control which didn't falter even when she

recognised one of the voices she had heard out on the patio. The man's wife was one of the most attractive women there, himself already running to a paunch and thinning hair at a mere thirty-five or six. A wishful thinker, Regan reflected from within that newfound cloak of cynicism. Probably as basically faithful as they came.

Cal put a light arm about her shoulders when they waved off the last lot to leave, turning her back into the house. 'Tired?' he asked. 'You've been a bit quiet this last hour or two.'

'Overwhelmed,' she admitted. 'You know so many people, Cal. It's going to take a little getting used to again.'

His glance down at her held speculation. 'Did this remind you of the functions you used to attend with your father?'

Smiling faintly, she shook her head. 'Nothing like. I was talking about the numbers, that was all. The people my father mixed with were a different kind of set altogether.'

'Yet you managed to stand away.'

'I was probably too young then to learn to be anyone but myself. It annoyed my father when I tried to find excuses not to mix, so I stopped trying. I'd find a quiet corner when I could, and curl up with a book instead.'

They had paused within the lobby area. He turned her gently towards him, holding her with his hands resting on her waist. 'You must have been very lonely.'

'I suppose I was. There was rarely anyone of my own age group around to talk to. Even travelling everywhere first class limits the kind of people one meets.' She lifted her head to look at him, feeling the inevit-

able leap of her senses at the sight of the strong, reliable mouth, the swathing of emotion about her heart. Her lips longed to say the words out loud; but something stronger—or weaker—in her couldn't face the reaction. She said instead, 'I'll try not to let you down, Cal.'

'I know you will.' There was an underlying bitterness to his faint smile. He kissed her without passion and let her go. 'Better get some sleep.'

The night was warm, the air sultry; charged for a storm, perhaps. Regan dozed for an hour or so before coining awake with a finality she knew would last unless she tired herself physically. The thought of the pool waiting out there so quiet and cool was a temptation. Two or three lengths of it might do the trick. At the very least it would relax her.

The thought was parent to the deed. She found a suit and slipped into it, pulled on her robe and trod into raffia sandals. There was no sound from the rest of the house when she went along the corridor. All was in darkness, including the pool. Not that it mattered. She would enjoy swimming in the dark, with only the moon and the stars for company. They were beautiful to look at and too far away to intrude on her problems.

She slipped quietly into the water, striking out with the minimum of splashing to complete three lengths in quick time. Breathing harder but not by any means exhausted, she clung for a rest to the side rail, watching her legs float out before her like long slim, wavering stalks. I'm a water-lily, she thought, letting her mind float along with her limbs: a simple, uncomplicated piece of plant-life without emotions. I'm going to drift here forever and never go back to being a

human again. Forever and ever and ever—

The sound was soft, the movement hidden in the shadows of the house for a moment or two until Cal stepped forward a pace to stand breathing in the night air. He was wearing a thigh-length silk dressing gown, his legs pyjama-clad beneath. Regan couldn't make out his features from where she floated on the far side of the pool, only the arrogant tilt of his head. She was on the verge of calling out to him softly, but something in the quality of his stance stopped her. Instead she kept quiet and still, allowing her legs to drift downwards on their own accord.

A thin spiral of smoke curled up from the cigarette he held in his fingers. He lifted it and studied it for a moment as if contemplating whether or not he really wanted to finish it. Apparently he decided not, for he pinched it out and tossed it carelessly on to the flags. Regan thought she heard him say something in a low tone as he did so, but she couldn't be sure.

She waited until he had vanished indoors again before paddling over to the steps and pulling herself out. Her robe and sandals were where she had, left them beside the springboard. Cal would have had time to reach his own room by now. She was safe going in. Impossible to explain why she hadn't let him know she was there if he did catch her.

The cigarette was still faintly smouldering when she reached the spot where he had tossed it; she could see the red glow as a breath of breeze caught at it. Unlike Cal not to make sure of such things, yet he had given the impression of a man with other things on his mind. She could understand and appreciate his feelings. She only wished she had the capacity to relieve them.

She had picked the barely smoked cigarette up and

was looking at it without really seeing it. Now her eyes came suddenly into focus, her heart missing a sickening beat as she took in the brand name emblazoned on the lower edge just above the filter tip. Only one person in the house smoked this particular kind: an exclusive brand Cal himself dismissed as tarry. There was even a smear of lipstick on the tip—the same colour Dallas had been wearing with her glowing red dress.

How long she stood there gazing at the white tube, Regan couldn't afterwards have said. Her whole mind seemed to have seized up, her limbs turned to numb appendages. When she did finally bring herself to move it was stiffly as if automated. This time she made sure the cigarette was really out. There were too many trees and shrubs in the vicinity for any carelessness to be excused.

Her mind was working again as she went quietly indoors, but on a level that blocked out pain or any other emotion, leaving only a deadly kind of acceptance. She had to go, of course. And it had to be now—tonight. She couldn't drive, and there was no other form of transport available, but there was the telephone: She could call an all-night cab hire firm and get them to fetch her. She'd be packed and ready before they were here.

Where she was going to go she had no idea, and cared less. Somewhere Cal could never find her, was her only stipulation. Somewhere she could be alone and come to grips with the knowledge that her idol had feet of clay. He had been with Dallas these last two hours since despatching her to bed, and dressed the way he had been they had not been merely chatting, that was for sure! She had a searing image of the

lovely blonde holding out her arms to him, pulling him down to her, meeting his lips with the knowing passion of a woman who had done it all before; and of Cal responding, coming alive to emotions he had kept under such tight rein these last days. Later she would have lit the cigarette, slipping it between his lips before he left her with that sultry smile of hers. They were two of a kind; they belonged together. So let them have one another. Only she wasn't staying around to see it happen; to provide the cover behind which Cal could hide what he really was.

It took her an age to find the number of an all-night hire agency. She dialled it with unsteady fingers, trying to keep her voice as low as possible when she got an answer. They promised a car in approximately three quarters of an hour, expressing no surprise at her request for it to wait back towards the junction with the highway. Her motives in needing a car at this hour of the morning was no concern of theirs, she gathered, providing she was ready to pay the excess charge as required.

Packing took no longer than fifteen minutes. She took only the bare essentials. Let Cal do what he liked with the rest; she didn't want them. Her ring she left in a prominent position on the dressing table, her wet bathing things heaped in the chair beside it. No letter was needed; he would get the picture. And if he didn't, too bad. Let him do a little wondering for a change. She hoped his pride would stand the strain of being jilted so close to the event.

She didn't look back as she left the house, glad of the cloud at present hiding the moon as she struck out for the road. It would be morning before she could get

a ferry across to the mainland, but with any luck her non-appearance at breakfast would only lead Cal to believe her still tired and needing a lie-in. He might not even check on her before lunch, it being Sunday. He and Dallas could have a whole morning together remembering the night before!

The car came on schedule, the driver taking her case and putting her into the rear seat without saying anything at all. Regan wondered how many other moonlight escapes he had experienced in his time, and whether he realised who this one was from. If he did it appeared to make no difference to him. He was doing the job he was paid to do, and that was that.

The hotel in Vancouver was small and shabby, too close to the docks and commercial areas for the more refined clientele. But it was cheap, and in Regan's circumstances that had to matter the most. She had brought what cash she had in the house along with her, but it didn't amount to much. All it was going to give her was breathing space until she could work out how she was going to live. Perhaps it would be possible to get some kind of a job without a work permit. There must be those who would welcome cheap labour even if it was illegal. The trouble was going to be in finding them. A foot wrong and she could finish up being reported to the authorities.

Once again a desk clerk came to her rescue, this time, she hoped, with less far-reaching results. For a consideration he would introduce her to someone who might be able to help her, he said with a somewhat suggestive leer. Regan had her doubts as to the kind of work he had in mind, but couldn't afford to turn

down the possibility. She could last out no longer than a week without some money somehow.

The numbness had not lifted these couple of days; she daredn't allow it to do so. She had blanked Cal out of her mind. Some time the shield had to slip, of course. Some time she was going to waken up to the pain her whole being rejected. But by then she might be better able to withstand it. She had to be capable of withstanding it. Nobody was going to hold her hand and assure her that better times were just around the corner. This was it—all of it.

Wednesday brought a communication from the desk clerk that he had arranged the promised appointment with a possible employer. It was for that evening, and at an address close by the city's Chinatown. Regan stifled her suspicions with an effort. If it did turn out to be not what she hoped for she could always withdraw, and if she didn't go she would never really, know, would she?

She went out in the afternoon, strolling through the blessedly natural delights of Stanley Park up to Prospect Point to watch the ships entering and leaving the harbour. The mountains towering beyond the inlet reminded her too vividly of those seen from Kenny's Bay. She felt the numbness dissipating then, the dreadful heartache pulsing through her, yet her eyes remained dry. It was perhaps as well. Standing here weeping was a useless exercise. It wasn't going to change a thing.

The desk clerk was at his post when she went back to the hotel. He looked at her with an odd expression as she came through the door, making no attempt to reach behind him for the key. Some instinct turned her eyes to the left where the shabby lobby held a few

scattered chairs, her feet checking their forward movement to freeze her to the spot as Cal came slowly towards her.

His face was as totally expressionless as she had ever seen it, the only sign of tension in the faint jerk of the tell-tale muscle in his jaw. He was wearing a casual suede jacket she hadn't seen before, his shirt open at the neckline and crumpled about the collar as if he hadn't paid it much attention when donning it.

'Your things are in the car,' he said. 'Come on.'

She went with him because there was no immediate choice. He was more than capable of picking her up and carrying her out of the place if she had demurred. The hired vehicle was parked round the side of the hotel along the street. He put her into the front passenger seat and got in beside her without saying a word, pulling away from the kerb with an icy control that revealed itself in the whiteness of his knuckles gripping the wheel.

He drove them out along Broadway towards the University, turning south-east along Marine Drive where the residences of the rich overlooked the Strait of Georgia. When he finally brought the car to a halt again it was in a quiet layby close by the sea. There was silence for several minutes after he had switched off the engine. He didn't turn his head towards her once.

'Why?' he said at last. Just tell me that for a start. Why this way? If the idea of marriage was so repugnant to you after all, you at least owed me the fact to my face.'

'You wouldn't have let me go.' Her voice was low and unsteady.

'Not like this, I agree.' He looked at her then, eyes

dark with an emotion that went far beyond anger. 'Have you any idea what I've been going through these last three days? I could kill you, Regan. I could put my hands round that lovely neck of yours and choke the life out of you!'

'I wish you would,' she said. 'I'd rather be dead than live the kind of life you had mapped out for me.' Her throat felt thick and tight as a drum. She swallowed, hard. 'I was willing to accept that things would never be perfect between us, and I thought you were too.'

His brows had contracted. 'So what changed your mind?'

'You did.' She stared out through the windscreen at the water, seeing the sunlight catch the crests of the waves. 'I was in the pool when you left Dallas on Saturday night—or should I say Sunday morning? You didn't see me. You were too wrapped up in your mistress's lingering charms!'

'I was what?' He reached for her, taking her chin in his hand and jerking her face round towards him. His eyes were blazing, the skin around his mouth white with the tension of his clenched jaw. 'Say that again—if you dare!'

Regan stared at him, her breath coming in ragged little jerks. 'Are you trying to -say it isn't true?' she managed to get out against the pressure of his fingers.

'I'm not trying to say anything, I am, saying it. Dallas is not my mistress!' The emphasis came short and sharp, each word accompanied by a momentary increase of tension in his grasp on her. 'I ought to make you beg for that crack,' he grated.

'Cal—' she caught at his hand, trying to ease his grip; trying to sort out the confusion in her head —'please!'

He released her abruptly, almost as if he'd been burnt, sinking back into his seat with a self-directed contempt in his face. 'You're right, hurting you wouldn't do either of us any good. Maybe I asked for it somewhere along the line.'

Her voice was little above a whisper, her eyes wide and dark in the whiteness of her face. 'If I'm wrong I'm sorry. Only—'

'If you're wrong?' He was more frightening in control than before when he had almost lost it. 'What do you want me to do, swear to it on oath?'

'No.' She was trembling, unable to gather herself together sufficiently to clear her mind.

'If you say there's never been anything between you then I'll believe it.'

His expression altered, the tension subtly increasing. 'I didn't say there was never anything between us, only that there isn't now.'

'Then she was telling the truth.' Her tone was bitter.

'Who was telling the truth?' he demanded. 'Dallas?' The grey eyes had narrowed dangerously. 'When did she talk to you?'

'The day you took me back to Kenny, after you'd gone back to town. She told me you'd been lovers for two years, since your father died.'

'And you believed her, just like that.'

'How could I do anything else? She knew so many things about you—little intimate things; things only a woman who'd lived with a man would know.'

'She had lived with me. Or in the same house, which means almost as much. But that's all. We occupied separate rooms on all occasions.' He was clipped and hard. 'Maybe I shouldn't have let her stay on considering the circumstances. Maybe I should have

turfed her out and made provisions for her someplace else. It's easy to look back and see how things should have gone, not so easy to straighten them out when it's already too late.'

Regan said huskily 'You mean because you thought you could contain your feelings for her and found you couldn't?'

'I mean because I kept her there for a purpose which did me little credit—and not the one you're thinking of either.' He shook his head as she made to speak. 'Just keep

quiet and listen, will you? You're going to get the whole sordid little story whether you like it or not.' Mouth grim, he paused, collecting his thoughts. 'I met Dallas here in Vancouver a little over three years ago,' he said finally. 'She was recently out from England with a guy she'd grown tired of, and was looking for new blood. I apparently filled the bill.' His lips twisted. 'I can't say I was all that reluctant to accept what she offered me. She was old enough to know what she wanted, and why.'

'She said you wanted to marry her.' Regan had to say it; to know the answer.

She got it with candour. 'No way would I have married her kind! I knew of at least one other guy in her life. There could have been dozens before him.'

'Your father doesn't seem to have minded.'

'My father didn't know the half of it. Whether it would have made any difference if he had done, I can't say for sure. He wanted her because he thought I did.'

'Jealous of his own son?'

'Jealous of any guy with more years left than he had. He couldn't help it. It was the way he was, that's all. Taking Dallas from me gave him a new lease on

life. He even kept her satisfied for the short time they were married, though I doubt if it would have lasted so much longer on her side; she was never the type to stay faithful for long.'

The hardness was still there in his voice, but muted a little. It gave her courage to interrupt again. 'She appears to have done it where you were concerned the last two years.'

'If she has it's only on the surface. And faithful isn't the word for it either. Hopeful might be a better one.' 'That you'd marry her eventually?'

'No. She knew I wouldn't. She always knew it. What she was after was capitulation on my part—an admittance that I still wanted her. Gathering scalps is her particular need. We all have them of some kind or another.'

Regan drew in a small, shaking breath. 'And yours?'

'I wanted to pay her out,' he said harshly. 'I wanted to watch her play the whole pack of tricks until she finally realised she wasn't going to reach me. But I never anticipated she'd stick it out for two years. I was planning to give her her marching orders when I got back from that trip up to Fort Lester. I'd had enough. Then you came into my life and it didn't seem all that important any more—not until I'd sorted out what I was going to do about you.'

Her own thoughts were too chaotic to be sorted out without more help. 'I don't understand,' she got out. 'You did all you needed to do about me when you brought me back to Victoria and found me a job and a place to live.'

'That's what I tried to tell myself, especially when I realised how you were starting to feel about me. Every-

thing you said and did seemed designed to emphasise the gap between us.' His jaw was tense. 'That afternoon you pushed me into making love to you I intended all along to scare you rigid then give you something to remember the occasion by. Only you nearly threw it all by suddenly refusing to be scared. You don't know how close you came to a real lesson. I was on the edge and you were driving me over.'

Regan said thickly. 'So you slapped me instead—made me believe you saw me as just a silly, infatuated kid.'

'It was as much for my benefit as it was for yours. We both needed pulling up. The trouble was I still kept right on wanting you, so I got out quick.'

And left me on my own for six weeks.'

'Breathing space. I had to have time to come to terms with just what it was I did want. You needed time too, to get to know other men; other people. What I didn't anticipate was that you'd do it with such abandon.'

'Only in numbers,' she said. She wished he himself would abandon this toneless backtracking. It was doing little good. 'I already explained that.'

'Okay, you explained.' He paused, eyes inflexibly on her face. 'I was just about ready to follow up that note of mine with a personal visit to clarify a few matters when the rumours started circulating. I thought it might be some kind of retaliation. You were just about capable of going that far without realising it would hurt you far more than it would hurt me. The male always has the advantage when it comes to that kind of affair; it's expected of him. The point is, I gave you the chance to explain.'

Her head was down, her lip caught between her

teeth. 'You're saying that if I'd come to you and accused you of being with Dallas that night you'd have given me an explanation?'

'That's exactly what I'm saying. You, being you, of course, that was too simple. You just took off without a word to anybody.'

'I was—hurt, and miserable.'

'Okay, you were hurt. You wanted to hurt me right back; I can understand that too. But not like this.' His tone was suddenly savage again. 'Three days of tracing your movements; not knowing where you were or how you were living. And then finding you in that place!' He caught himself up, brought himself under control. 'Don't ever do that to me again, Regan, or I'll not be answerable for what I'll do to you!'

Her breath felt trapped. 'You're taking me back to Kenny with you?'

'What else did you imagine I was going to do with you?' The sudden twist of his lips was sardonic. 'Oh, yes, I owe you an explanation, don't I?'

'It doesn't matter. I said I believed you.' She was trying desperately not to give way to the tears prickling at the back of her lids. 'Please, Cal—'

'You're going to get one anyway,' he said, ignoring the plea. 'I was with Dallas after the party, sure. Only she came to my room, not vice versa. A last resort, you might say: the final ace in the pack: One thing about that she-cat, she doesn't give up easily. When I turned her down she tried to burn my face with her cigarette. I took it off her and gave her till Sunday morning to get out of the house.'

'Then you came outside and threw it away and I found it with the lipstick still on it,' Regan said in a small, ragged voice. 'Oh, Cal, I'm sorry!'

'So am I.' There was no relenting in his tone. 'I needed some fresh air, that's why I came outside. If I'd realised my trusting little soul of a future wife was in the vicinity I might have been less careless with that cigarette. On the other hand, how was I to realise the interpretation you'd put on it—or the way you'd react?'

'I didn't know you very well either,' she said. 'Love should bring trust with it, but it can't unless there's some depth of understanding there first.'

'Love?' His smile was derisive. 'You wouldn't know the meaning of the word. Don't mistake what I've been able to make you feel towards me as anything but what it is. You want me to love you—or to make love to you, to be more precise. You want the sensation of my hands on you, the thrill of knowing you can undermine all my better instincts. It roused something in you you'd never fully experienced before and you can't resist it, but that isn't love, darling—it's called lust!'

Her head was up now, eyes darkened by anger and hurt and the overriding need to hit back. 'Coming from someone like you that's almost funny! All right, so I made a

mistake over you and Dallas. If it's any consolation, I've been through a pretty rotten three days myself. But don't try making out that I hurt anything much but our pride in running away. I was your possession: the naive little thing you were going to make over into what you wanted me to be. Well, not any more, Cal. I finally took that step forward you were always on about. And from one adult to another, that's it. I wouldn't marry a man who thinks of me the way you do for anything on earth. I wouldn't even—' She stopped, suddenly in mid-sentence,

gazing at him with horror both at the realisation of what she was saying, and at the look on his face. 'No!' she cried in rejection, and flung herself across the seat against him, hands clutching his lapels, head going down to his chest. 'Cal, I love you ! I don't care how you feel about me. I love you

For a split second he seemed suspended, then his arms came about her, lifting her up to him, his lips finding hers with sure and certain aim. She clung to him, kissing him back with abandon, heedless of the dampness on her cheeks until he paused long enough to take out a handkerchief and gently wipe it away.

'A woman's ultimate weapon,' he said with a smile that still held a quality of reserve about it. 'Few men can withstand tears.'

'They're genuine.' She searched his face, aware that she still hadn't fully convinced him. 'Cal, believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I love you in every way there is to love you. What do I have to say or do to prove it?'

'Nothing.' He ran a finger lightly across her cheekbone, voice deliberately steady. 'Just be there on Monday morning at the church. It's all right, green eyes, I've known all along it would be impossible for you to match what I feel for you straight away. Maybe I need to learn a bit more about it too. We'll do it together.'

'It won't make any difference.' Her tone was wooden. 'You're never going to accept that I'm as capable as any other woman of loving with any real depth. A little sensualist, you called me -not so long ago. Well if I am, then it's only with you and for you because that's the kind of woman you need, and I want to be everything you need . Only what's the use in saying it? Whatever I say you're going to go right on

thinking what you want to think. Perhaps when I have your first child you'll let me start growing up a little. You'll have someone else to play father to then.'

'Regan?' He was looking at her as if he had never really seen her before this moment, eyes shadowed by emotion. He put up his hand and traced the line of her mouth with a finger tip, feeling it tremble beneath his touch, the shadows kindling suddenly to passion. 'I believe you,' he said. 'I really believe you! Regan....'

She went to him then without reservation, giving him measure for measure so far as she was capable, not worrying that there was still so much she had to learn about making love back to a man. Cal would teach her all she needed to know; he would be a wonderful teacher. But that was only a part of it. There was so much more. She had to learn how to handle this dominant man of hers, to indulge the deep-down insecurity that made him need to be so. Nobody could teach her that except herself, but she would be equal to it. She had a lifetime to do it in.