PENNY
JORDAN
To Love
Honour & Betray

PENNY JORDAN

To Love, Honour & Betray

«HarperCollins»

JORDAN P.

To Love, Honour & Betray / P. JORDAN — «HarperCollins»,

To Love, Honour and BetrayThe price of betrayal…Claudia and Garth are the perfect couple; madly in love and with a miracle daughter, life doesn't get much better… Then Claudia discovers a devastating truth. Their adopted daughter is Garth's biological child. Her husband's betrayal is one she can't forgive and she vows that her daughter will never learn the truth.But shameful secrets rarely stay hidden. Now Claudia must confess to her own betrayal, even if it means losing her beloved daughter forever….

© JORDAN P.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

About the Author 6
PENNY 7
Penny 8
1 9
2 19
3 26
4 35
5 38
6 47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 49

PENNY
JORDAN
To Love
Honour & Betray

About the Author

PENNY JORDAN is one of Mills & Boon's most popular authors. Sadly Penny died from cancer on 31st December 2011, aged sixty-five. She leaves an outstanding legacy, having sold over one hundred million books around the world. She wrote a total of one hundred and eighty-seven novels for Mills & Boon, including the phenomenally successful *A Perfect Family, To Love, Honour & Betray, The Perfect Sinner* and *Power Play*, which hit the *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller lists. Loved for her distinctive voice, her success was in part because she continually broke boundaries and evolved her writing to keep up with readers' changing tastes. *Publishers Weekly* said about Jordan: 'Women everywhere will find pieces of themselves in Jordan's characters' and this perhaps explains her enduring appeal.

Although Penny was born in Preston, Lancashire, and spent her childhood there, she moved to Cheshire as a teenager and continued to live there for the rest of her life. Following the death of her husband she moved to the small traditional Cheshire market town on which she based her much-loved Crighton books.

Penny was a member and supporter of the Romantic Novelists' Association and the Romance Writers of America—two organisations dedicated to providing support for both published and yet-to-be published authors. Her significant contribution to women's fiction was recognised in 2011, when the Romantic Novelists' Association presented Penny with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

More titles by

PENNY JORDAN

For the ultimate indulgence be sure to download
the stunningly sensational ebooks
NOW OR NEVER
and
POWER GAMES
Pure escapism, pure passion, pure decadence … it's impossible to resist!
For a full list of Penny Jordan's titles go to
www.millsandboon.com
To Love Honour & Betray

Penny Jordan

www.millsandboon.co.uk

1

Lying across her mother's bed, long legs dangling over the side, one hand propping up her chin, the other pushing aside the thick, dark heaviness of her long, curly hair, and waiting while her mother put the final touches to her make-up, Tara started to read from the local newspaper she had stopped off to buy as she drove through town.

"'Town Honours Prominent Local Businesswoman,'" she read aloud, telling her mother unnecessarily, 'that's you,' before continuing, "'Last Saturday evening, a celebratory dinner was held in the town's twelfth-century Knights Hospitallers' Hall to mark a decade of fund-raising by the Upper Charfont Beneficiary Trust and to honour one of its founder members and, more recently, its chairperson, Mrs Claudia Wallace."

'Sounds good, Ma,' Tara told Claudia in the soft, husky voice whose intonations and idiosyncrasies were so exactly those of her mother that when Tara was at home, callers often confused the two of them. She turned back to the article.

"'Over the past decade, Mrs Wallace has worked tirelessly and successfully to promote the interests and activities of the Trust and it is thanks to her that it has seen donations rise so spectacularly. Not only has Mrs Wallace worked selflessly to raise funds for charity, she has, in addition, privately given her time and her skills as a trained probation officer and the senior partner in a successful local private counselling and advisory practice to train and, where necessary, give her own services to help with the charity's work.

"'In recognition of her committed involvement with the community, the Town Council has proposed that the new day care and recreation centre for physically disadvantaged residents be named after her….'"

Tara looked away from the newspaper and studied her mother's reflection in the mirror.

'You don't look forty-five,' she told her judiciously. 'In fact … have you *ever* thought of remarrying, Ma?' she asked her mother curiously. 'I mean, it's over ten years now since you and Dad divorced and …'

Very carefully, Claudia put down her mascara and turned to face her daughter. At twenty-three, Tara might now, in the eyes of the world, be very much an adult young woman but to her she was still her daughter, her little girl, the most precious gift that life had given her, and as such, Claudia had every mother's need to protect and guard her.

'After all, it's not as though there aren't at least a dozen men that *I* know of who'd love to marry you, given half the chance.'

Claudia gave her a wry look and suggested, 'I think that's rather an exaggeration, don't you?'

'Well, there's Charles Weatherall and Paul Avery and then there's John Fellows and, of course, there's Luke,' she slipped in.

'Luke is a client, that's all,' Claudia told her calmly, but she still turned her head away just in case that small flutter of sensation she could feel inside should somehow or other reveal itself outwardly. Not that there was any reason why the mention of Luke's name *should* cause that disturbing slight palpitation of her heartbeat, she reminded herself severely. For a start, he was at least seven years her junior.

'Mmm … So you *haven't* considered remarrying, then,' Tara repeated. Claudia studied her daughter thoughtfully.

Despite all her attempts to sound and look light-hearted, Claudia could sense Tara's tension.

'I haven't, no,' she conceded, and then waited.

'Mmm … Have you seen anything of Dad recently?' Claudia's stomach muscles knotted. Now it was her turn to hide the quick, fierce stab of tension that struck through her at Tara's carefully casual mention of Garth, and instinctively Claudia looked away from her, letting the smooth, silky

bell of her blonde bob swing forward to conceal her face as she responded, 'No. No, I haven't. Is there any reason why I should have done?'

'No, none at all. It's just that … well, Dad's been seeing quite a lot of Rachel Bedlington, that's the new account executive who joined the company just after Christmas. She's in her early thirties. Dad head-hunted her from Faversham Bayliss. She specialises in women-focused ads. You know the type. New woman drives the car while wimpish boyfriend looks on.'

'Yes, I know the type,' Claudia agreed calmly, and it wasn't just the advertisements she was referring to. She could see Garth's new account executive already—elegant, intelligent, witty, young … She would be besotted with him, of course. What young woman in her position wouldn't be? And, in all fairness, Claudia had to admit that her ex-husband might be fifty, but he was still physically an outstandingly good-looking and a very masculine man—even more so now perhaps in his maturity than he had been when he had been young.

'I don't think it's anything serious,' Tara hastened to add, but Claudia could see from her expression, hear in her voice that, on the contrary, she thought it was extremely serious. Taking a deep breath, she turned her head to look smilingly at her daughter—*their* daughter—hers and Garth's.

'It's all right, darling,' she told her equably. 'Your father is, after all, perfectly free to have a relationship with someone else. We are divorced and have been for ten years.'

'I know.'

As she watched the expressions chase one another across Tara's face, Claudia acknowledged that physically no one would ever guess that they were mother and daughter.

For a start, Tara was a good eight inches taller than she was herself, but then that seemed to be the usual way of things these days. She didn't think she had a single friend whose daughter didn't tower inches above them.

Tara also had completely different colouring from her mother's. Where Claudia had a pale, delicate, English-rose complexion and the soft blonde hair to go with it, Tara's skin tone was much, much warmer, her eyes darker and her hair a rich dark brown tumbling past her shoulders in heavy, lustrous curls. Her deep green eyes were Garth's, and like her, his hair, too, was very dark, but unlike Tara's, Garth's was straight.

'Dad said that you were going to be nominated for the Businesswoman of the Year award,' Tara announced abruptly.

Now Claudia couldn't conceal her reaction.

How on earth had *Garth* known that? *She* had only been told of the nomination a matter of days ago herself.

'He's very proud of you, Ma,' Tara asserted. 'We both are. Everyone thinks you're wonderful,' she added, 'and you are.'

'The last time you flattered me like this, I seem to remember it had something to do with the fact that you'd completely burned out one of my best pans,' Claudia reminded her dryly.

'Boiling eggs, which I forgot,' Tara agreed laughing, and then suddenly the laughter died. 'Ryland is going back to Boston at the end of the month,' she told Claudia quietly. 'He's asked me to go with him.'

'For a holiday?' Claudia asked lightly even while she *knew*, guessed, sensed what was coming, felt it in every doom-laden wave of panic that struck her body.

'No … well, at first, perhaps. Ry …'

Ryland Johnson was Tara's American boyfriend, seven years her senior. Tara had brought him home to meet Claudia at Christmas, and she had liked him immediately and immensely. It was obvious to Claudia even then that the two of them were head over heels in love.

'He only planned to stay over here for a year and … He wants me to meet his family and his friends. He wants …'

Tara bit her lip.

'I know what you're thinking,' she told her mother, adding pleadingly, 'Please don't be unhappy. America isn't so very far away, not these days, and you … I love him so much, Ma,' she confessed helplessly, flinging herself bodily into Claudia's arms as the tears filled her eyes. 'I *know* how you must be feeling and *I* wish, too, that I could have fallen in love with someone from home … that we could have lived here close to you and … I'm going to miss you so much.'

Claudia closed her eyes, not to suppress her own tears but to suppress the sick feeling of dread that was surging over her.

'Does … have you told your father yet?' she managed to ask through dry lips.

Tara shook her head.

'No. I wanted to tell you first. Dad just thinks I'm going for a holiday. Well, officially, that's all it is, but … I'm not, and it will be much easier for me to get a visa that way. I don't know which I'm dreading the most,' she added with a shaky smile, 'the vetting I'm going to get from the US government or the one Ryland says I'll get from his aunt. If anything, I suspect his aunt's will be worse. Apparently, she's fantastically wealthy and very WASP about whom Ryland marries. Ryland says she's a terrifying combination of old New England blood and equally old New England money.'

Tara giggled as she released Claudia and stepped back. 'I'm dreading having to meet her,' she announced indifferently. 'According to Ry, she's going to want to know everything there is to know about my background. Not that *I've* any worries in that department. After all, your family and Dad's go back for ever, don't they?

'Ma … what is it? Please don't look like that,' Tara begged shakily as she saw her mother's expression.

Claudia had gone white, the bone structure of her pretty heart-shaped face suddenly standing out so sharply that Tara had an unnerving and distressing image of how her mother might look in twenty years' time. Her normal warm and loving soft blue eyes looked so bleak and filled with despair that Tara had to fight to control her own emotions.

'Ma, I *know* how you must feel,' she repeated huskily, 'but there'll be visits, holidays … and who knows, perhaps Ryland will change his mind once he gets me over there and decide that he doesn't want to marry me after all,' she finished lightly. But Claudia knew that she didn't mean it … didn't *want* to mean it.

'Have you applied for your visa yet?' she managed to ask as she fought to control her reactions to the blow Tara had just unwittingly dealt her.

'I've applied but I haven't got it as yet,' Tara told her cheerfully. 'Not that there should be too much of a problem getting a visitor's visa. It's when Ry and I get married and I need to apply for citizenship that we might have some difficulties. Ryland keeps teasing me that if I can pass his aunt's inspection of my antecedents, then I won't have any problems with the US government and everyone knows how strict they are and how thoroughly they go into a person's background.

'Ma … what is it … what's wrong?' Tara demanded anxiously as her mother gave a small strangled gasp and then covered her mouth with her hand.

'Nothing,' Claudia lied. 'I just don't … I think I may have eaten something that disagreed with me. I just feel a little bit nauseous.'

'If you feel sick, do you think you should be going out this evening, then?' Tara cautioned with maternal solicitude that, at any other time, would have brought Claudia to touched laughter. In that respect, in her nature, her upbringing, her reactions and responses to others, Tara was totally and completely *her* child, even if her swift intelligence and her equally swift assimilation of information were her father's inheritance to her.

'I … I … I *have* to go out,' Claudia told her truthfully. 'I'm giving a talk to the Townswomen's Guild and I can't let them down.'

'You could, but you won't,' Tara corrected her lovingly. 'I'm sorry if I've given you a shock. I …' She dipped her head in the same protectively defensive gesture Claudia herself had adopted

earlier. 'I … Ryland asked me to go back to Boston with him several weeks ago, but I couldn't get down to see you before now and I didn't want … I wanted to tell you *myself* … to be *here*. I love him so much, Ma. He's everything I've ever wanted in a man. You *do* like him, don't you?'

'Yes. I do like him,' Claudia agreed truthfully.

'I know how you must be feeling,' Tara had told her when she announced her plans. But could she? How could anyone?

Perhaps she *ought* to have been prepared … to have known … guessed … She had, after all, seen at Christmas how much Tara and Ryland were in love, but she had somehow assumed—because she had wanted, needed, to assume, no doubt—that Ryland had decided to make his future in Britain. Still, even if she had known, what could she have done? How could she have prevented the catastrophe now staring her in the face?

How *could* she prevent it? There was no way. She could only hope and pray, beg God, fate, call it what you would that ruled one's life, to help her.

'I came down specially to tell you,' she heard Tara saying softly. 'I wish I could stay longer, Ma, but I can't. I've got a client meeting in the morning and then I've got to break the news to Dad that it isn't just a few weeks' holiday that I want.' Tara reached out and hugged her mother tightly.

'Please tell me that you'll be happy for me,' she begged in a hoarse little pain-filled whisper.

'I'll be happy for you,' Claudia repeated dutifully, and as she said it she gave up a silent prayer that it would be true and that she *would* be able to be happy for her daughter instead of …

'I'd better let you get to that meeting,' Tara told her mother gruffly as she hugged her a second time even more fiercely than the first. 'I promise we'll both come and see you before we go, and once we're over there I'll want you to come and stay. I want to show you off to Ryland's family so that they can see how lucky I am to have such a special, wonderful mother. You *are* special and wonderful and I do love you very, very much … and I think I'm just so lucky to have you for my mother, to have you and Dad as my parents.'

The subject of Claudia's talk to the members of the Townswomen's Guild had originally been spurred by her awareness that many of her closest friends had recently had to readapt to a married life where their children had flown the nest and, so far as nature was concerned, they themselves were in many ways now redundant.

'It's a matter of what you actually *do* with your time,' one friend had commented woefully to Claudia, adding self-critically, 'I never thought I'd ever be the kind of mother who couldn't wait for her own children to produce their children so that she could be a grandmother but …'

'We aren't old in the same way that our mothers and their mothers before them were old at our age,' another friend had told her. 'After all, in terms of life expectancy, fifty is nothing these days, but it's what you *do* with those years … how you *fill* them … the fact that you feel a need to fill them when, for virtually the whole of your adult life, what you've been struggling to do is to *make* time, not fill it.'

But after the bombshell Tara had dropped on her, Claudia knew that she couldn't follow through with her original plans without being in danger of betraying her own emotions. So instead, and to their bemusement, she rather suspected, she gave the women an abbreviated talk on the problems that could face new, first-time fathers.

After the meeting, several people wanted to talk to her, to congratulate her in the main on the article that had appeared in the local paper and that Tara had read out to her earlier. Just listening to them brought back such a sharp mental image of Tara lying on her bed that she could hardly bear to have them speak.

It was a relief to escape and finally be on her own; it was even a relief to know that she was going to *be* alone once she got home. At least, it was a relief to know that Tara wouldn't be there, that she could finally relax her guard a little and allow herself to show some real emotion.

The intensity of her own sense of foreboding and doom, her own fear and despair had shaken her. Why had she not guessed … realised … prepared herself for something like this? Why had she allowed herself to become so complacent, to think …

'Claudia.' She stopped, forcing herself to smile as one of her closest friends approached her. 'I saw Tara driving through town earlier. You *are* lucky to have a daughter and to have such a close relationship with her,' she commented enviously, before adding, 'Not that you don't deserve it. You and Tara are both lucky,' she amended firmly. 'My boys …' She paused. 'Do you know, if you weren't so … so *you* … there are times when I could almost hate you. You've got everything right.'

'Not everything,' Claudia felt bound to point out to her quietly, reminding her when she gave her a surprised look, 'Garth and I are no longer married, Chris.'

'You're divorced. Yes, I know, but even your divorce has been a model of what a divorce should be. Neither of you has ever been heard to utter a word of criticism against the other. Despite the trauma you were going through at the time, I can remember how determined both you and Garth were that Tara shouldn't suffer. It was all done so … so quietly and discreetly, with Garth moving out of Ivy House and buying himself that new place on the other side of town.

'But it isn't just the *way* the two of you handled your divorce. It's everything even before then. While the rest of us were all complaining about having to manage our careers and bring up our children, you and Garth moved here from London. You gave up your job as a probation officer to be at home with Tara when she was a baby. Then when you and Garth divorced, you set up your own business and worked from home until you were well enough established to branch out and take on office premises.

'I *know* how hard you work—what long hours—and you've always managed to find time for your friends and your charity work. So far as I know, neither you nor Garth has ever missed even one of Tara's school events. You're a wonderful cook—'

'I'm an *adequate* cook,' Claudia interrupted her dryly.

Chris overrode her, insisting, 'You're a wonderful cook, *and* you still look stunning and sexy, as my darling husband frequently reminds me.' She continued firmly, 'I doubt that there's a single one of your friends whose husband, whose partner, hasn't compared her to you at some stage or another and found her wanting.'

'I sincerely hope not,' Claudia declared truthfully.

'Well, it's true,' Chris persisted. 'But more than that, what I envy you most of all for, Claudia, is that you are just such a nice person. You're generous, warm, witty … and honest … so totally honest in everything you do. Claudia, what is it?' she demanded uncertainly as she saw the sudden quick tears fill her friend's eyes. 'I didn't mean to embarrass you … I was just—'

'It's all right,' Claudia assured her hastily. 'I'm just … I'm just a little bit tired. I … Too many late nights,' she fibbed, 'which is why I've promised myself an early one tonight.'

'Yes, I'd better go, as well,' Chris agreed, taking her hint. 'I'll see you on Thursday … it's our week for lunch,' she reminded Claudia.

'I'll be there,' Claudia agreed.

It was still light as Claudia turned off the road and in through the arched gateway in the brick wall that surrounded her home.

She and Garth had first seen Ivy House on a cold snowy day when the branches of the tree had been bare and the ivy clothing the house itself and the brick wall around it frosted white against the mellow backdrop of the Cotswold stone.

The house had originally been built in the eighteenth century as a dower home attached to the estate of the then Sir Vernon Cupshaw. The main house had fallen into disrepair after the Great War, when all three sons of the family had been killed, and the estate had eventually been broken up. Claudia and Garth had bought the house and learned of its history from the last surviving spinster aunt of the original family. Claudia could still remember how the old lady had looked from her to

the small bundle that was Tara, whom she had been holding, as she told them, 'This house needs love and I can see that you have it. It also needs children … just as *our* family needed children.' Claudia hadn't been able to tell her what she already knew, which was that Tara would be an *only* child.

They had had to do a great deal of work to turn the house into the comfortable home it now was and, after the breakdown of their marriage, one of the hardest things Claudia had had to prepare herself for was the prospect of losing Ivy House, but Garth had insisted that she was to keep it.

'It's Tara's *home*,' he had reminded her quietly when she had pointed out to him with fierce, bitter passion that she didn't want his charity … that she didn't, in fact, want anything of him. But even then … even then that had not been entirely true and they had both known it. But Garth, whether out of guilt or compassion, had refrained from telling her so.

To discover that the man she had loved, trusted, put her faith, her whole self in, had betrayed her, had been almost more than Claudia could bear. To know that he had slept with another woman, touched her, embraced her, physically known and shared with her the intimacy that Claudia had believed was hers alone had almost destroyed her and it had certainly destroyed their marriage. How could it not have done so?

But Chris was right about one thing. She and Garth had made a pact to remember that, whatever their own differences, whatever their own pain, they would not allow the death of their love for one another to touch Tara, their precious and much loved daughter, all the more loved because for Claudia she would always be her only child. The doctors had told her that after … 'You are so lucky,' Chris had commented enviously and Claudia was remembering those words as she stopped her car and climbed out.

The ivy still clothed the front of the house but now it had been joined by the wisteria she and Garth had planted the year after they moved in. It had finished flowering now, and its silvery green tendrils rustled softly in the evening air as Claudia inserted her key in the lock.

Upper Charfont was the kind of vintage small English town where up until very recently back doors were frequently left unlocked and neighbours knew all of one another's business. Claudia had been a little wary at first about moving into that kind of environment, but Garth had gently reassured her, pointing out the advantages of a semi-rural upbringing for Tara and the fact that the town was less than an hour's drive away from the small Cotswold village to which her parents had recently retired.

Her father was an army man, Brigadier Peter Fulshaw, and it had been through him that she had originally met Garth, who had been one of his young officers. The peripatetic nature of her childhood, moving from one army base to another, had meant that Claudia had a very strong yearning to give her own child the kind of settled existence she herself had never experienced, the chance to develop friendships that would be with her all her life, and Garth had agreed with her. On that, as well as on so many other subjects, they had thought exactly alike, but even then he …

Claudia tried to shake aside her memories as she let herself into the house and locked the door behind her. But tonight for some reason, success in burying thoughts of the past eluded her. Everywhere she looked there were reminders of Garth and the life they had shared. The wall lights in the hallway, which she had just switched on, had been a find they had made in an antique shop in Brighton, pounced on with great glee and borne triumphantly home where Garth had carried them off to his workroom above the garage to clean and polish them.

He had left the army by then, working initially for the PR firm run by an old school friend of his father's and then later setting up his own rival business.

Like her own, Garth's parents were still alive, living just outside York in the constituency that Garth's father had represented as a Member of Parliament before his retirement.

Claudia still saw them regularly and loved them dearly. Just like her own parents, they adored Tara and spoiled her dreadfully. She was, after all, for both of them, their only grandchild since she and Garth were themselves only children.

'I'm so sorry that there can't be any more little ones, darling,' her mother had tried to comfort her after she had broken the news to her that Tara would be her only child. 'But sometimes … Are you sure?'

'I'm sure, Mummy,' Claudia had told her, her voice raw with pain.

'But at least you have Tara, and she's such a beautiful, healthy baby. You'd never know that she'd been born prematurely. You can't imagine how your father and I felt when we got Garth's telephone call. I wanted to come home straight away, but of course we couldn't get flights, and with Garth's parents being away at the same time … I must say I was surprised that the hospital allowed you home with her so soon.'

'They knew we were planning to move,' Claudia had reminded her mother quickly before adding, 'Anyway, that's all behind us now. I do wish you wouldn't keep harping on about it. I'm sorry, Mummy,' she had apologised when she saw her mother's expression. 'It's just that I don't like being reminded …' She bit her lip.

'It's all right, darling, I *do* understand,' her mother had assured her, patting her hand. 'I know how dreadful it must have been for you, especially when … Well, after losing your first baby and then to nearly lose our darling, precious Tara, as well …'

'Yes,' Claudia had agreed. Even nearly eighteen months after the event, she had still hated being reminded of the early miscarriage she had suffered with the baby she had been carrying before Tara's arrival. Friends had told her then that it was a relatively common occurrence and that the best thing she could do was to get pregnant again just as quickly as she could.

She had still been working at that time, of course, with Garth still in the army, and it had seemed to make sense for her to continue with her probationary work, a very newly qualified and raw probation officer, she reminded herself bleakly now, remembering the interview she had had with her supervisor at the end of her initial training period.

'Idealism and concern for others are all very praiseworthy, my dear,' the older woman had told her, 'but in this job you *have* to learn to achieve a certain amount of detachment. It's essential if one is to do one's job properly.'

In those days, twenty-odd years ago, the problems and pitfalls in the field of social work she had chosen weren't as widely recognised as they were now, Claudia acknowledged as she opened the door into the drawing room and walked in. The traumas and trials, accusations of negligence and lack of expertise, of pointless meddling in other people's lives had still lain ahead, but she had known that the older woman was right and that she *was* too sensitive, too much in danger of becoming overinvolved with the problems of her clients to be truly effective on their behalf.

She had been sensitive, too, to the unspoken criticism of her colleagues, suspicious of her prosperous and, to them, protected upper-middle-class background and upbringing. What could *she* possibly know of the difficulties and dangers that beset the people *they* were dealing with and their poverty-trapped, inner-city lives? In the end, her conscience had coerced her into accepting that no matter how much she cared, no matter how passionately she *wanted* to help, no matter how praiseworthy her commitment to the job and excellent her qualifications for it, she was simply not the best person, the right person, to help those she was supposed to be helping.

The drawing room was Claudia's second favourite room in the house. Elegantly proportioned, it faced south and always seemed to be flooded with light. It still had the same soft yellow colour scheme Claudia had chosen for it when she and Garth had first moved in. The Knoll sofas that faced one another across the fireplace had been a gift from her and Garth's parents and, if anything, Claudia loved them even more now over twenty years later than she had done then, their heavy damask dull gold covers softened and gentled with age. Mellow and lived-in, the whole room had the kind of ambience about it, the kind of feel, that made newcomers comment on how welcoming it was.

Above the fireplace was a portrait of her father in his full regimentals. It had been presented to him on his retirement and her mother had insisted that she had spent enough of her life looking at him in his uniform and that Claudia and Garth should have it.

On the stairs, Claudia had a further collection of family portraits, some simple pencil sketches, others more detailed, along with the totally un-recognisable 'picture' that Tara had drawn of her parents in her first term at school.

On the opposite wall from the fireplace above the pretty antique side table that Garth's mother had inherited from her own family and passed on to Claudia hung a portrait of another man in regimentals.

Instinctively, she walked over to it, switched on the picture light above it and studied it sombrely.

Garth had been twenty-seven when it had been painted and it had been a wedding gift from the regiment to them—a *surprise* wedding gift as the artist had painted the portrait from photographs. It was still a good likeness, though, with Garth's face turned slightly to the left so that the clear thrust of his jaw could be seen along with the aquiline profile of his nose.

Put Garth in a Roman centurion's outfit and he would immediately fulfil every Hollywood mogul's ideal of what a sexy man in uniform should look like, a friend had once commented to Claudia, and it was true. Garth's predecessors had originally come from Pembrokeshire in Wales and there was a joke in the family that it wasn't merely driftwood washed up from the shipwrecks of the fleeing remnants of the Spanish Armada that his ancestors had salvaged from the Pembroke beaches.

Clearly, Garth's skin tone and thick dark hair suggested that he could have Latin blood somewhere in his veins, and those who knew the family history had been very quick to point out that Tara's lustrous dark curls could also be a part of that inheritance.

Fact or fiction, what was true was that Garth was a stunningly handsome man, an outrageously sexy man, so Claudia had been told enviously at their wedding, but oddly enough, it wasn't Garth's strongly sensual physical appeal that had initially attracted her.

Perhaps because of his career and his knowledge of the more base and raw instincts of the male sex, her father in particular had always been very protective of her, over-protective perhaps in some ways. Certainly it had taken a good deal of persuasion and coaxing on both her own part and that of her mother to gain his approval when she had wanted to go to university.

Garth, as one of her father's junior officers, had been deputised to escort her to a regimental ball. He had called to collect her in the shiny, bright red Morgan sports car that had been his parents' twenty-first birthday present to him and Claudia remembered that she had found both the car and the man rather too over the top, too stereotypical and obvious in many ways for her own taste.

It had been a warm June night and still light as they set out for the ball. They had had the country lane that led from her parents' house to the main road to themselves, and typically, or so she had decided, Garth had insisted on driving his car rather fast if admittedly very dexterously. Then, just as they had straightened out of a sharp bend, Claudia had seen a hedgehog crossing the road. Her immediate instinct was to call out in protest as she anticipated the animal's fateful demise, but to her astonishment as he, too, spotted the small creature, Garth had immediately taken evasive action, braking and turning the front of the car away from the road and plunging it instead nose first through a muddy ditch and up a bank into a thorny hedge.

Neither the hedgehog nor Claudia and Garth themselves suffered any physical damage but the same could not be said for the car. Along with the mud spattering its immaculate paintwork, Claudia had also been able to see the long and quite deep scratches the sharp thorns of the hedge had inflicted. But it wasn't the state of his precious car and its paintwork that had Garth virtually leaping out of the car the moment he had it back on the road. No, it was the still dazed and obviously petrified little animal that he ran to rescue from its plight. He carefully picked it up and, opening a nearby farm gate, carried it to a much safer environment.

It had been then that she had fallen in love with him, Claudia remembered. Not because of his astounding good looks, nor even because of the way he apologised to her for the fact that they would now be rather late arriving at the ball, but because of the completely natural and instinctive way he had put the hedgehog's safety above the value of his clearly very personally precious car, and it had been an honest and automatic reaction, Claudia had known, not something showy and false done simply to impress *her*. And she had loved him for it … for the personality, the warmth, the genuine caring and concern she had felt it revealed. The same love and caring he had always shown to Tara.

There was a telephone on the small coffee-table next to the fire. She walked over to it and, before she could change her mind, quickly dialled the number of Garth's London penthouse. After their divorce, he had bought a small property on the other side of the town but during the week he stayed in London in order to be close to his work.

The phone rang five times and then the receiver at the other end was lifted and an attractively husky female voice that Claudia didn't recognise said hello.

Without responding, Claudia replaced the receiver. Her hand was trembling and for some ridiculous reason she could feel the aching sensation at the back of her throat that presaged tears.

Why on *earth* should she cry just because a *woman* answered Garth's phone? They had been divorced for years and she, after all, had been the one to agitate for the divorce. She knew that there had been other women in Garth's life since they went their separate ways and she knew, too, that …

Straightening her spine, she readjusted several stems of the lilies she had already perfectly arranged earlier in the day. She was at a very vulnerable age, she reminded herself, that certain age where, while physically her looks might say that she was still a very attractive and sexually valuable woman, her hormones were beginning to tell her a different story. How many times lately had she heard other women of around the same age or slightly older bemoaning the fact that it wasn't just in their almost-adult offsprings' lives that they now felt redundant but in their partners' beds, as well? 'I still want sex,' one had complained frankly to her only the other day. 'But somehow these days I feel that *it* doesn't want me very much any more.'

Claudia sympathised. She didn't have a man, a lover, in her life. She had had offers, of course, approaches … men who had hovered on the edge of her life during the years of her marriage to Garth, moving a little closer, making their intentions, their desires, a little bit plainer, some of them married, some of them not. No, she certainly needn't have gone short of sex and perhaps even love if she had wanted it … them. But she had been too busy with other and more important concerns. Tara for one … and then there had been her business, her charity work, her friends.

'Don't you miss it?' someone had asked her curiously in the early years after the divorce. 'The sex. The having someone to snuggle up to in bed, the comfort of having someone there to hold you. You must get—'

'Frustrated,' Claudia had supplied calmly for her before shaking her head and denying, 'No, not really … I don't have the time.'

And it had been true, and besides … besides … Her sex drive had always been inextricably linked to her emotions, *driven* by them almost; love for her was even more important, more driving, than lust.

And after Garth—well, after Garth it wasn't just that she couldn't ever *imagine* wanting another man, loving another man the way she had loved and wanted him, she had actively not wanted to become so emotionally involved with anyone else again.

The devastation upon discovering that Garth had been unfaithful to her had quite simply been so complete, so overwhelming, that she had never wanted to allow anyone else close enough to risk it again. Her love for Garth might have died, been destroyed, annihilated, by her discovery of his infidelity and the fact that, for so many years, she had been living a lie, a myth—believing in their marriage, in him—but her fear of the pain it had caused her had certainly not died.

She *did* have men friends, yes, and she went out on dates with them; but she had certainly never come anywhere near close to wanting to share anything more than friendship with them. Or at least she hadn't until she met Luke Palliser.

Was that further confirmation of the fact that she had reached the treacherous choppy waters of middle age, the fact that she was physically attracted to a younger man?

As she left the drawing room and turned to go upstairs, Claudia paused by Tara's picture of her parents. Neither of them was, of course, remotely recognisable if you discounted the colour of their hair—hers yellow, Garth's black and straight.

Tara!

Claudia bit her lip as she felt the familiar surge of love thinking about Tara always brought flooding through her, but this time it wasn't just love she felt. This time there was fear and dread, as well. And guilt, too. Oh, yes, there was guilt.

2

'I thought I heard the phone ring,' Garth Wallace commented as he walked into the sitting room of his London apartment carrying the papers he had been to retrieve from the briefcase in his bedroom.

'You did,' Estelle Frensham agreed. She had been working for the firm as a temp, filling in for Garth's personal assistant who was on maternity leave. 'But whoever it was rang off without speaking. I did a check on the number, though. This is it.' Silently, Garth studied the piece of paper she had given him. Apart from his eyebrows snapping together in a frown, his expression gave nothing away to Estelle as she watched him. He had recognised the number right away. How could he not do when for over ten years it had been his own? There was only one person who was likely to ring him from Ivy House, and so far as he knew, Tara, his daughter, was presently in London.

Tara. *His* daughter. *Their* daughter, his and Claudia's. Despite the fact that physically she resembled him much more than she did Claudia, Tara was in every other imaginable way so much more Claudia's child. Every mannerism, every mere inflection of her voice to him were copies of Claudia's, and sometimes watching her, he wasn't sure if those similarities made him hate himself more or loathe himself less. One thing was sure; they certainly didn't alter his love for Tara herself, nor change the way he felt about her mother.

If Tara was in London and Claudia *had* rung him, it could only be because her need to talk to him was desperately important. Claudia would never ring otherwise.

He glanced at his watch and then announced, 'Look, Estelle, I've changed my mind. We'll leave it for this evening, I think. I want to spend a little more time on this one. I'll ring the client in the morning and put off my meeting until later in the week.'

Estelle gave him an assessing look. They had been working all out at the agency to get some kind of campaign down on paper for the new client who had approached them to take on his business, which was why she was working here this evening instead of working out at the gym. Not that she minded—Garth's company was preferable any day of the week, any time of the day or night, to going to the gym, even if all he had in mind was work. At least for now.

From the moment he had first interviewed her for the temporary vacancy at the agency eight weeks ago, Estelle had decided that just as soon as she could arrange it, she and Garth were going to be lovers. Just the thought of it, of the pleasure she had promised herself that lay in store for her, made her start to ache deep down inside, the kind of ache she knew from long experience could only be soothed by the release of a full orgasm.

She wondered what Garth's reaction would be if she came right out with it now and told him how she felt, what she needed. Some men liked women who were totally up front and unashamed of admitting their sexual needs, but Garth, she suspected, was not one of them. And so far he had certainly neither said nor done anything to suggest that he *was* sexually attracted to her. Still, there was no other permanent woman in his life, apart from occasional dates with one of the agency's account executives—a woman in her thirties who Estelle knew would be no competition for her! She had managed to ascertain that much and she had checked, as well, that he was as heterosexual as he looked—no doubts there, either.

So far, it appeared he hadn't recognised her deliberate sexual come-ons to him or he had recognised them but was ignoring them—and of the two Estelle knew which one she preferred. And tonight she had hoped … but obviously tonight was not going to be the night. Estelle was no fool and she calmly gathered up the papers she had spread out on the workmanlike desk-cum-table that dominated his large square sitting room. All right, so things might not be ending as she had hoped and planned, but if she couldn't have Garth then there was always Blade. Oh, yes, there was always Blade. Blade who would happily provide her with *whatever* kind of sex she wanted, Blade with whom

her relationship was not so much one of love and hate, as mutual dislike and contempt and mutual need and lust, as well. As she collected her belongings, she was already planning how she would spend the rest of the evening.

Watching her, Garth wondered what she was thinking. She had made it clear right from their first interview that she found him sexually attractive, but Garth was used to women coming on to him, and if necessary he could always tell the agency who had supplied her to find the firm an alternative.

She wouldn't be the first young and not-so-young female employee they had taken on who had made it plain she was attracted to him, but over the years he had learned to recognise all the warning signs and to deflect potential pitfalls in plenty of time to negotiate a way around them.

'I'll call you a cab,' he told her crisply, reaching out to pick up the phone.

That was one thing about Garth, Estelle recognised. He was quite definitely very much the old-fashioned sort when it came to the way he took what he saw as his responsibility towards his female employees. Very protective, very gentlemanly, in the very best senses of both words. Unfortunately.

As she bent down to retrieve an errant piece of paper, she deliberately allowed the long wrap skirt she was wearing to part, showing him the slender gym-honed full length of her thigh and revealing, if he should be interested, the fact that what she was wearing underneath it was either extremely brief or totally non-existent. But as she glanced towards Garth, Estelle saw that he was looking the other way, his mind plainly on other things. Never mind, she promised herself as her taxi arrived, there would always be another time, and for now her growing frustration and need called out for Blade.

Garth waited until he had seen Estelle stepping safely into the taxi he had called—the same reliable firm the business always used. Garth had heard too many scary stories of women being abused by unauthorised cab drivers to take any risks with the safety of his employees. Then he reached out to pick up the telephone a second time, punching in the number Estelle had written down for him.

After she had undressed and showered, Claudia opened the drawer of her dressing-room cupboard, pausing as she stared down at the small bottle of sleeping tablets she kept there. Her doctor had prescribed them in the early weeks after she asked Garth to leave. She rarely used them now, but at the same time she was never without a bottle. Just occasionally there were nights, a week or more of them at times, when something would happen, trigger her memory, and she would know that sleep was going to be impossible … unwanted even, because if she *did* sleep, she would be haunted by her nightmares, her fears, her guilt, and then and only then did she resort to the awful and frighteningly empty oblivion of drug-induced sleep as an escape.

The last time she had taken them had been towards the end of last year. Garth's birthday … his fiftieth.

Tara had thrown a party for him. She had begged Claudia to go, but as she had quietly explained to Tara at the time, Garth was hardly likely to want her to be there.

'But we're still family,' Tara had protested stubbornly while Claudia had shaken her head.

'You and Garth are still family, Tara. You and I are still family, but the three of us …'

'You were both there for my twenty-first and for my graduation,' Tara had reminded her mother, 'and everyone said then that both of you …' She stopped.

What everyone had said at the time was that it was a shame that her parents had split up and even more of a shame that they couldn't get back together, but Tara knew that to say as much to either her father or her mother was to court one of their rare displays of anger—a defensive anger in her mother's case and a protective one in her father's.

'Gramps and Nan will be there and so will the Brig and Nannie,' she had coaxed, referring not only to her paternal grandparents but her maternal ones, as well, but still Claudia had refused.

She had known perfectly well, of course, having been told by her mother, that they had accepted Tara's invitation to celebrate their ex-son-in-law's fiftieth birthday.

'We could hardly refuse, darling, and in fact, your father simply wouldn't have heard of it. You know how much he thinks of Garth.'

'Yes, I know, and there's certainly no reason why you shouldn't both go,' Claudia had assured her mother quietly.

'It will seem so odd without *you* being there….'

'It won't seem odd at all, at least not to me or to Garth,' Claudia had had to point out to her mother as she reminded her gently, 'We *are* divorced and have been for a full decade now.'

'Yes, I realise that,' her mother had fretted, 'although I've never really understood why.'

'I told you at the time. Garth had … there was—'

'Garth was a little bit naughty, I know that, darling, but men are sometimes like that,' her mother had interrupted her. 'That's just the way they are. Even your father … not that he ever … not that there was … but Garth is such a very handsome and charming man that—'

'I'm not going,' Claudia had told her mother firmly and she hadn't done so.

Instead, she had gone to bed early with her sleeping tablet and her unwanted memories. On that occasion, the tablet hadn't worked, but her memories had. Perhaps tonight she ought to take two instead of her usual one.

When the telephone rang an hour later, Claudia was deeply asleep.

Frowning, Garth replaced the receiver and then dialled the number of his daughter's London flat.

'Daddy,' Tara exclaimed, her voice full of love and warmth as she recognised his voice. 'I'm glad you rang.'

'Oh, have you been trying to get in touch with me?'

'No, it's not that. It's just that I drove over to see Ma this afternoon. There was something I wanted to tell her. She's had the most fabulous write-up in the local rag. Have you seen it?'

'Yes, I have,' Garth agreed curtly.

He had seen, as well, the photographs accompanying the article. In one of them, a man was standing close to his ex-wife's side, his expression as he looked at her both predatory and betrayingly indulgent.

Garth knew him by reputation. He had downsized his business interests, moving out of the city and back to his roots where he was apparently intending to run his computer-based business from his old home town. Claudia, if what he had heard on the grapevine was true, had been approached by him for her views and advice on the type of problems likely to be faced by potential home computer workers he might employ. Garth had his own ideas about why Luke Palliser might be interested in his ex-wife, and they had nothing whatsoever to do with her professional expertise.

'Whatever you wanted to say to your mother must have been important if it necessitated driving all the way to Gloucestershire and then back again without staying overnight,' Garth commented as he switched his thoughts back from his ex-wife to his daughter.

'Well, yes, it was, but I couldn't have stayed anyway. There wouldn't have been any point. Ma was going out for the evening. Daddy …'

Garth waited. He knew of old *that* particular note in his daughter's voice. It had accompanied every minor and sometimes not-so-minor mishap in Tara's life, from the collision that had bent the front wheel of her first proper bike to the less dire but far more expensive bump that had damaged the small car he had given her for her eighteenth birthday.

'You know I told you that I needed to take all my holiday allowance because I was planning to spend time in Boston with Ry?'

'Yes …'

'Well, I didn't want to say anything to you at the time—not until I'd told Ma—but Ry and I … it could be *more* than just a few weeks I'll be spending in America.' She paused, allowing her words

to sink in, but Garth wasn't in need of any extra time to assimilate what she was telling him. He had known … guessed … sensed already, his guesswork keeping pace with her carefully delivered words.

As his hand gripped the telephone receiver, he could feel his palm starting to sweat. At the same time, a cold shock of nausea was gripping his stomach. *Now* he knew why Claudia had been trying to get in touch with him.

'Daddy, are you still there?' he heard Tara demanding uncertainly.

'Yes, I'm still here,' he told her, praying that his voice sounded far calmer than he felt.

'Can you talk to Ma for me?' Tara was asking him. 'I *know* she's upset and the *last* thing I want to do is to hurt her, but I love Ry so much…. I just wish there was some way we could all be together, but it's a bit like it was when you and Ma told me that you were going to divorce, isn't it? Sometimes you just *can't* have all the people you love with you.

'Ryland's family, his *work*, are in Boston. He's always known that it's expected that he'll go back to take his place in the family firm and it's what he wants to do. You and Ma will be able to come over for holidays. I've already told Ma that … and we'll be able to come over here, and besides, nothing is settled yet. I've still got to go through the grilling process,' Tara went on mock-humorously. 'And according to Ry, a full investigation by the FBI is nothing to what his aunt is going to put me through. She's going to want to see family trees, proof of a clean bill of health and a total lack of any inherited disruptive genes before she'll even call me by my first name, never mind accept that Ry wants to marry me, according to him. Not that Ry cares whether or not she does approve, but he says that won't matter to her. Once she realises how we feel about one another, she'll set the full investigative process into motion whether we agree to it or not.

'She's the main shareholder in the family business—her late husband, Ry's father's brother, was the elder son. When Ry's uncle died, naturally his controlling share of the business passed on to her. Ry's father has some shares and like Ry he works for the business. From what Ry has told me about her, she's terribly starchy. Apparently she's going to want to know all about my own family background. Not that I'm worried, really. It will be easy peasy. Gramps and Nan go way back and the Brig knows the name and address and how many fillings every single member of the clan has ever had. Daddy, are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm still here,' Garth confirmed quietly.

'You *will* speak to Ma for me, won't you?' Tara coaxed. 'I know that secretly she was hoping I'd marry a nice local boy and settle down within pram walking distance of Ivy House and I'd have liked that, too, but … I really do love Ry.'

'Have you applied for your visa yet?' Tara heard her father asking her sombrely.

'I've filled in the forms, but Ry says there won't be any problems putting down that this is a holiday and we can sort the rest out over there. That's funny. Ma asked me exactly the same question.'

After he had finished speaking with Tara, Garth tried Claudia's number again even though it was almost midnight.

Once more there was no reply. Where was she? Tara had told him she was going out. Out where and with whom? The man in the newspaper, Luke Palliser, whose expression and body language had made it so plain that he wanted far more than a mere business relationship? Was she even now in his arms … in his bed? Stop it, Garth warned himself as he paced the floor. What the hell was happening to him? Surely he knew Claudia better than that. The last thing that would be on her mind right now would be sex, as he ought to know. The *only* thing, the only *person*, on her mind right now would be Tara. Even when Tara was a baby, he had once half-jokingly told Claudia he felt she loved her more than she had ever loved him or could ever love him.

'Yes, I think I do,' Claudia had agreed seriously, 'but it's a very different kind of love. The love that perhaps only a woman who has already lost one child can know. It doesn't take away from my love for you, Garth. It's simply different … very different.'

After the taxi had dropped her off outside her apartment block, Estelle made sure it was well out of sight before punching a number into her mobile phone. Perhaps she *was* being overcautious but she had made it a rule never to mix her private and public personae, and Blade was very much part of the intensely private side of her life.

'But that's close to incest,' a friend had gasped in shock when as a young teenager Estelle had boasted in lavish detail about just what kind of relationship she actually enjoyed with her stepbrother. The other girl had been shocked, but Estelle enjoyed knowing that what she and Blade did together would have been forbidden by their parents. It was all the more exciting and exhilarating knowing what secrecy and deceit they had to employ.

When she had told Blade what she had boasted to a friend, they had had an argument during which he had hit her once very hard across the mouth before forcing her to go down on him thirstily with her mouth as he swore at her and not stopping until he had finally come, his semen spilling from her mouth and running down over her naked body.

Estelle had found it one of the most thrilling, erotic things they had ever done and had her own orgasms without his even touching her, long before he had come himself. She had been thirteen then and Blade had been eighteen. They had continued their sexual relationship all through Blade's years at university as well as her own—frantic, heated, obsessively driven sado-masochistic sex sessions interspersed with long time periods when they neither spoke nor even saw one another.

Estelle could remember one particular occasion when they hadn't seen one another from the time Blade had returned to university at the end of the summer until his arrival at home just before Christmas. She had been out with friends when he arrived—a deliberate ploy—knowing how infuriated he would be when she wasn't there waiting for him. But the party she had gone to had turned out to be rather wilder than she had expected. The school friend who was giving it had an older brother who had turned up with his friends.

Estelle hadn't had sex with them; she had grown wary and wiser since the days when she had enjoyed confiding all her secrets to her friends. The outside world knew and saw one Estelle; she and Blade knew quite another. But she had enjoyed some pretty heavy snogging sessions and when she arrived home at one o'clock in the morning, very much on a sexually driven high, fuelled in reality far more by the knowledge of what potentially lay ahead of her with Blade than what had already happened, the thrill that had shot through her body as Blade unlocked the front door to her was almost orgasmic in itself.

He didn't speak; neither of them did. Instead, he simply stood at the bottom of the stairs watching her while she walked up. By the time she reached the top, her nipples ached as though they were already raw, she felt wetter than she had ever felt in her whole life and her clitoris felt so swollen she could hardly walk.

Her bedroom with its own *en suite* bathroom was at the opposite end of the house from that of her mother and father. Her mother was fond of saying that she believed that teenage girls needed their privacy, but what Estelle knew she meant in reality was that she simply didn't want to be bothered with her.

Estelle had learned long ago that her mother neither liked nor loved her—and she certainly hadn't wanted her. It was no secret to Estelle that her conception had been an accident since her mother had never wanted children.

'I'll kill myself,' Estelle had once threatened dramatically as a girl. 'You just want to get rid of me!'

As she turned away from her, Estelle had heard her mother saying grimly, 'Isn't that the truth!' But it had been another few years before Lorraine had bluntly told her that she had tried to abort Estelle in the early days of her pregnancy.

'I believe a girl Estelle's age is old enough to be trusted to make her own rules,' Lorraine responded with a dismissive toss of her head when people commented on the amount of freedom

she allowed Estelle. As if one difficult child weren't enough, Ethian Morton, her second husband and Blade's father, had been less than pleased when his first wife's partner had declared that Blade was beyond their control thanks to the poor quality of the fathering he had received during his parents' marriage and that they were passing the responsibility for the boy back to his natural father.

Despite being expelled from three boarding schools for inappropriate behaviour, much to Ethian's relief Blade had managed to scrape through enough A levels to get into an admittedly second-rate university. Both parents were also relieved when neither of their offspring had wanted to join them on the skiing holiday they were due to take, starting just as soon after the Christmas festivities had ended as they had decently been able to arrange it, which meant, in fact, that they were flying out to Colorado on Boxing Day.

'You're leaving Blade and Estelle at home on their own?' one neighbour had asked, unable to conceal her feelings.

'Blade's an adult,' Lorraine had reminded her, affronted, 'and he and Estelle get on wonderfully well together. In point of fact, they're closer in many ways than if they were actually brother and sister. He's very protective of her. It's quite sweet, really.

'Nosy cow,' she had said angrily to Ethian later. 'Just because *she* runs around those noisy brats of hers all day long and enjoys playing earth mother and martyr.'

Estelle's bathroom was mirrored all along one wall. Blade's suggestion and her fifteenth-birthday present from her parents. When she walked into it, she didn't bother closing the door. She tugged off the skimpy dress she had been wearing, let it fall to the floor and then stood in front of the mirror staring at her reflection. Her mouth was swollen, the bright red lipstick she favoured smeared. She was tall and slim, her breasts firm and high enough for her not to need to bother wearing a bra, and besides, she liked the feel of her nipples rubbing against the fabric of her clothes and she liked even more the looks she got from men when they saw their taut outline.

Eyes half-closed, she licked the swollen flesh of her mouth, sliding her hand inside her knickers so that she could feel her own wetness. A familiar clutching sensation seized her lower belly. Closing her eyes, she wriggled out of her knickers.

She heard the bathroom door close and slowly opened her eyes, one hand still on her body, teasing the quivering piece of flesh her clitoris had become, the other still holding her wet knickers, her gaze locking with Blade's as she returned his silently intense scrutiny.

'What have you been doing?' he demanded expressionlessly as he came towards her, the question almost a mild, uncritical whisper, but Estelle knew better. Her heart started to pound as she felt the onset of a familiar feverish excitement and fear.

'Smell,' she taunted, holding out her knickers to him. As she knew he would, he took them, smoothing them out very gently before inhaling the scent of her sex from them. *Her* sex and no one else's.

'Come here,' he ordered, still using the same soft, gentle voice, but Estelle wasn't deceived. Trembling from head to foot with the sensation that to her was almost more pleasurable than the release from it that lay ahead, she did as he instructed.

As she approached him, Blade unzipped his jeans, and as she had expected, he wasn't wearing anything underneath them. His penis was stiff and rigidly erect, rising from its bed of thick, coarse, tangled dark hair. In the early days of their intimacy, his sexual organ had fascinated her and as a punishment for her 'transgressions' he had ordered her to wash his penis for him, sometimes by lapping it with her tongue, sometimes with soap and water.

Walking past her now, he lay down on the floor and commanded, 'Come here.' Estelle's whole body convulsed, quivering with sexual urgency. 'Sit on it,' he demanded, drawing her towards his erect penis.

Willingly she complied, straddling him and lowering herself eagerly onto him. As she did so, he started to thrust upwards so forcefully that the sensation of him inside her was almost more pain than pleasure and at the same time he reached down between her legs and used his fingers on her clitoris.

It was too much for her self-control. Within seconds she had started to climax.

They spent what was left of the night in her bathroom and after he had finally spent himself and had his orgasm, Estelle knew that she was going to be sore, but she didn't care. She had loved every moment with Blade, *every* moment.

The memory of that high still had the power to make her smile and to make her wet, very, very wet indeed. She was smiling now, her hand automatically reaching between her legs, her body turned into the protection of Blade's doorway as she heard him answer her phone call.

'Blade, it's me, Estelle,' she told him softly. 'Are you in?' That question was their private code and meant 'I want sex.'

She could almost feel the dark, triumphant smile slicing his face as he told her softly, 'No, I'm afraid I'm not. It's all right, darling,' she heard him saying as he half covered the receiver. 'It's only my sister.' Then his voice dropped to a whiplash sting of mocking sound as he told her, 'If you're really desperate for it, Estelle, I could always talk you through it. You've always enjoyed that, haven't you? Or, of course, you could come round and watch … even join in.'

Furious, Estelle cut the connection. She was more than well aware of Blade's predilection for voyeurism and three in a bed, but right now she wasn't in the mood for playing games or sharing. Right now she wanted him to herself. All to herself.

Angrily, she turned on her heel and started to walk towards her own apartment building. There was a man standing on the pavement several feet away from her, waiting to cross the road.

Hungrily, Estelle studied him, her eyes gleaming with predatory sexual urgency. He wasn't her type, though, thin and pallid-looking, his body stance limp and docile, and no doubt his sex was the same.

Glaring at him in disgust, Estelle mentally cursed Blade, knowing how much he would be enjoying having the woman who was with him right now, all the more so because he knew Estelle was going hungry … wanting him, needing him.

3

Uneasily, Garth glanced at his watch as he replaced the receiver following yet another unanswered call to Claudia.

It was now gone one o'clock in the morning. Claudia might have been going out but … At this time of the night, with the roads almost empty, it would take him less than two hours to drive to Upper Charfont. He was sorely tempted to do so, but he knew perfectly well how Claudia would react to his unheralded arrival at *that* time of night. And someone who knew them both was almost bound to see his car there—Upper Charfont was that kind of town. Not that *he* minded, but he knew that Claudia would.

He would ring her first thing in the morning, he promised himself—if indeed she was there to be rung and not … not what?

Not with Luke Palliser.

Irritably, Garth stretched his now-tense body, wincing as he heard the tell-tale crack of his neck. Without being vain, he knew he was in damn good shape for his age. He looked after himself, ate well and sensibly, exercised moderately, regularly counted his blessings amongst which Tara had to be close to the top of the list of the most valued and precious of all the good things that life had given him. The price of having her in his life had come so high, though, that there had been times when to his own shame he had almost wished she had never come into being and times, too, when he had been acutely and ridiculously jealous of the intensity and immensity of Claudia's love for her, but then he suspected he had always been far more passionately in love with Claudia than she had been with him.

He could still remember the sense of dismay he had experienced when his then commanding officer, Claudia's father, had announced that he wished Garth to escort his daughter to the regimental ball. He had known only that the brigadier had a daughter and that she was away at university and he wasn't quite sure what he had expected.

What he had *known* was that he would much rather his partner had been the long-legged 'model' he had been introduced to at a London party and whom he had been discreetly pursuing for the previous six weeks. Not so much, he had to admit, because of her good looks and 'model' status—Garth had always preferred his women curvaceous rather than bone thin and the 'model' had had a hectic, frenzied air about her, which, coupled with the slight gauntness of her body, had even in those relatively innocent pre-anorexia-and-bulimia days hinted that the soft drugs then fashionably in vogue amongst London's trendy young set might be more than a mere fashion appendage for her—but, if he was honest, because of the hints the acquaintance who had introduced them had dropped about her sexual availability.

For Garth, a single young man with a healthy sex drive, the opportunity to escort to the ball a young woman he was pretty sure he had a strong chance of ending up in bed with afterwards was far more appealing than the prospect of an evening spent dutifully making polite conversation with the brigadier's no doubt plain and dull daughter.

Only Claudia hadn't been plain and she had certainly been far from dull, and when he went to pick her up he had realised at once that she was as pleased at the prospect of an evening spent with him as he had been with her.

Petite and blonde, with the kind of curvy feminine figure that made Garth instinctively want to wrap his hands around her waist just to test his belief that it was small enough for them to encompass it, physically she was enough and more to make him drool with longing. But there was a lot more to Claudia than her delicate physical beauty as he had quickly discovered, and by the end of the evening he had known that she was the girl he wanted to be his wife.

Claudia herself had taken rather more persuading. Not because she didn't share his feeling as she had told him seriously the first time he proposed to her—she did—but because she had seen too many army marriages founder on the rocks of misunderstanding and conflicting pressures to want to entrust the future of her children, *their* children, to a marriage that might not last.

Even then, her priority had been the security of the family she so much wanted to have, the children she so much wanted to bear.

'How can you say you love me?' she had raged at him when she found out what had happened. 'How *can* you claim that you love me when you've slept with someone else?'

He had tried to explain, make her understand, tell her that it had been a mistake … an accident almost, but she had refused to believe him, refused virtually to listen.

He had always known that beneath her outer softness and apparent vulnerability, she had unsuspected strength, but he had never imagined that that strength could be turned against him. He had tried to get her to change her mind, but she had refused to listen, and in the end he had had to accept the fact that their marriage was over, that her pride would not allow her to understand or forgive what he had done.

In the first couple of years after the divorce, he had done what all men in his position did, trying to disperse the pain and sense of loss in the arms and beds of other women.

It hadn't worked, but then he hadn't really expected it to, and at least being single and determined to stay free of any new emotional entanglements had meant that he was able during the lean years of the economic crisis to concentrate all his time and attention on his business. It had come through the recession relatively unscathed and they were, in fact, now rather unexpectedly very much to the forefront of their field.

Like Claudia, he had met and known about Tara's involvement with Ryland but like her he had been caught off guard by Tara's announcement that she and Ryland planned to marry.

An hour later, still unable to sleep, Garth looked at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Two-fifteen a.m. He *could* try Claudia again and he was sorely tempted to do so, but if she still hadn't returned home, if she was *still* perhaps with Luke Palliser, he knew he didn't want to know.

It was ten years now since they had separated and while Claudia wasn't and never had been the type of woman to want a merely sexual relationship, nor to publicly flaunt an emotional one, she was very much a woman whom men automatically found attractive and wanted to get closer to—wanted to protect, if that wasn't too politically incorrect and chauvinistic a thing to profess.

During their marriage, he had seen the admiring looks other men had given her and the envious ones they had sent him too often not to know that if Claudia was still on her own it was because that was her choice.

'Get involved with someone else … marry again? No, never,' she had told him quietly when he made the mistake of venting his bitterness on her shortly after their divorce had been finalised. 'I loved *you*, Garth,' she had told him. 'I loved you and I trusted you, I believed in you … in us, but you betrayed me.' With quiet, dignified sorrow, she had gone on to ask, 'If I can't trust you, what man can I trust?' Answering her own question, she had added, 'I can't and I don't intend to try.'

'You mean you don't *want* to try, just as you don't *want* to try to understand, to accept,' Garth had returned hotly, still half-unable to believe that she had gone through with it and that they were actually divorced. 'You've got all the emotional commitment you want, Claudia, all the emotional commitment *you* can give. You've got Tara. I wonder what would have happened if during the early days of our marriage we'd discovered that *I* couldn't father children. How strong would your adherence to our marriage and your marriage vows have been then?'

He had told himself in the bitterness of his loss that the pain he had seen burning in her eyes as she listened quietly to his angry outburst—a pain he had caused—was justified and that so were his accusations.

‘You’re not divorcing me because I’ve slept with someone else,’ he had told her angrily during one of their pre-separation quarrels. ‘You’re doing it because I’m simply surplus to requirements, because you don’t *want* me any more, because all you want, the only one you want is Tara.’

‘That’s not true,’ Claudia had denied vehemently.

‘Isn’t it?’ he had challenged her. ‘How come, then, that we haven’t had sex since Christmas, three months before you found out—’

‘I tried,’ Claudia had parried defensively, ‘but you were away so much, working late so often—’

‘And sex is something we can only have late at night in the dark? What happened to Sunday morning, Saturday afternoon, rainy evenings …?’

‘Tara was younger then. Now she’s older, she might—’

‘She might what? Realise that her parents have a natural, normal, loving sexual relationship? Only they don’t … didn’t … did we, Claudia? There’s nothing natural about the kind of sex *we* have these days, nothing warm or loving, not with you lying there practically willing me to get it over and done with.’

‘You’re wrong. It isn’t …’ Claudia had begun and then stopped.

Of course it hadn’t been the lack of sex in their marriage that had infuriated and hurt him, Garth admitted to himself now. It had been his fear that he was losing Claudia’s love, that she no longer needed or wanted him, that she and Tara formed their own perfect charm circle in which there was no place for him. That he was in his wife’s life, if not his daughter’s, superfluous to requirements.

But he had been wrong to accuse Claudia as he had done then of being sexually cold and unloving. When they had first been lovers, first been married, she had thrilled and touched him with her gentle sensuality, her total and complete giving of herself to him and to their mutual desire.

She had been a virgin when they met but had kept that fact from him, so totally ardent and responsive in his arms the first time they had made love that it was not until he had felt the unexpected resistance and tightness of her inexperienced body that he had realised the truth.

That, if anything, had made him love her even more than he did already, setting the seal on what to him had been her absolute and total perfection, not because no other man had known her so intimately but because she had loved *him* enough to give herself to him so totally and completely.

He glanced again at his alarm clock. No, he couldn’t ring her now. He would have to wait until the morning.

He could well imagine how she had reacted to Tara’s news and how she must be feeling. And how much it would have hurt her pride to have to get in touch with him.

‘Easy peasy,’ Tara had said, and he had heard the pride in her voice as she laughed off Ry’s aunt’s inquisition into her family background.

Easy peasy. If only that were the truth.

Estelle opened her eyes, the luminous numbers on her clock radio showing that it was quarter to three. Frowning, she wondered sleepily what had woken her and then she heard it—the soft creak of a door opening within her apartment.

She knew who it was, of course. Only one person besides herself had a key to her home and she was sitting up in bed waiting for him when he turned the handle of the door and walked in, soft-footed as a mountain cat, feral eyes gleaming in the half-light as he brought into the room with him the raw, pulsing intensity of his sexually driven persona and with it the scent of sex that clung to his skin—another woman’s sex, Estelle acknowledged as she felt the familiar excitement leap and crackle between them like an unseen charge of electricity.

It had always been like this with him, right from that first time when she had still been a child and he had been the older stepbrother. She had adored him from the start. She was his, he had told her. She would always be his.

‘Open your legs,’ she heard him demanding softly as he approached her bed.

Smiling luxuriously, she did so. The girl or girls whom he had had earlier had plainly not satisfied him, but she was not surprised, and although he might at times like to torment her by denying it and denying her, she was as essential to *him* as he was to her.

As she lay there on the bed, she could feel the anticipation and urgency pulsing through her; just watching him watching her was all it took. He had started to undress, but his gaze never moved from her open legs, not even when he dropped his trousers and she couldn't stop herself from giving a small, sharp moan at the sight of his erect penis.

The myth that you could tell the size of a man's sexual equipment from the size of his feet and hands was in Blade's case just that—a myth. Short and stocky, he had almost femininely small hands and feet, but his sex …

A sharp thrill of sexual energy trembled through her as she studied it. Thick, much thicker than that of any other man she had known, hard, too, and so voracious in its appetite for the deep plunging thrusting she loved. Indeed, loved so much that sometimes even when she couldn't satisfy it or him, she knew that no other man could ever make her feel the way Blade did.

'Mmm, that feels good,' Blade told her, his voice a soft, lulling coo of warmth. He stroked her with expert fingers, kneeling between her parted legs. 'So wet, so warm … so hungry, so … empty …'

Estelle wriggled in mute ecstasy as he inserted his fingers into her—just enough to make her aware of their presence, to make her feel tight and hot and achingly eager for the thick, hot shaft of flesh he was starting to rub with his free hand.

Estelle thrust her hips up, trying to draw his fingers deeper inside her, but he kept on teasing her by withdrawing them each time she surged upwards, leaving her empty and aching, her frustration turning her earlier smile to an angry glower as she tried and failed to trap his fingers inside her.

Laughing at her, he stroked the hard length of his penis, holding her off as she tried to reach for him and then forcing her hands away as she made to satisfy her frustrated need by herself. He pinned down one of her arms with his knee and held the other in a painful grip, laughing tauntingly down at her, his thick red lips drawn back against his teeth so that he did look almost dangerously vulpine as he reached out and thrust into her with his fingers again, telling her softly, 'That's right, babe, go ahead and fuck yourself on my fingers,' laughing when he heard the small explosive sound she made and demanding, 'What is it you want? More …? How much more …? This much?'

She ought to have been prepared for it. After all, he had done it to her before, yet the sharp, thrilling bite of pain he was causing her made her cry out and brought as he had known it would the first frantic convulsions of her orgasm. But he didn't let her have it, removing his hand from her body and taunting her excitedly as she reached for his erection.

'Oh, no, not yet, you can't have it yet. First you've got to stroke him a little … suck him, show him how much you want him,' he mocked as her hand and then her mouth closed hungrily over his body and she started to rock herself rhythmically to and fro, her eyes closed as she did so, still sucking deeply on him.

He waited until he was almost ready to come before removing himself from her mouth and thrusting deeply and urgently into the eagerly open wetness of her body, automatically reaching out for a pillow to hold over her mouth to silence her screams of pleasure as she climaxed, even though the days were now long gone when he had to prevent their parents from hearing the noise she made.

Estelle had never had a flatmate because she liked her privacy, and one of the earliest lessons she had learned was to distrust her own sex.

Gloatingly, just before dawn, Blade surveyed Estelle's naked body. The whole room smelled of sex and he breathed in the scent of it, of himself, with luxurious, satiated enjoyment. Then, after gathering up his clothes, he dressed and headed for the door.

He and Estelle never slept together. They didn't have that kind of relationship, and besides, the two girls he had left curled up on his bed would still be there waiting for him, or rather, waiting for the money he had promised to pay them.

'What's wrong?' Lovingly, Ryland reached out an arm and drew Tara closer against his body.

'How did you know I was awake?' she asked him, sidestepping the question.

'I knew,' Ryland told her and then prodded gently, 'You're worrying about your Mom, aren't you?'

Tara turned her head and pressed her face into his chest.

'She didn't say anything to me about our going to Boston, but I could see in her face … her eyes … I know.' She gulped back a small choking sob. 'I feel so guilty about leaving her, Ry, but I know, I just know that I couldn't bear not to be with you.'

'There's no way you are *going* to be without me even if I have to kidnap you and drag you bodily onto the plane with me,' Ryland assured her, adding more seriously, 'If there was any way I could change things, stay over here, I would, but I can't. I'm the only male of my generation. My uncle was twelve years older than my father—if he and my aunt had had a son, perhaps things might have been different. As it is, it's always been kinda understood that when my aunt retires, I'll be taking over from her and running the business.'

'Doesn't your cousin—' Tara began, referring to his aunt's and late uncle's only child, a daughter, but Ryland shook his head before she could finish explaining.

'Margot isn't interested in the business. She never has been. She isn't that kind of woman.'

'What do you mean?' Tara asked him, wrinkling her forehead. All she knew about his cousin was that she was nearly seven years Ryland's senior and unmarried.

'Margot works in the business, yes,' Ryland agreed. 'She works in the archive department where we house all the originals of everything we've published. But she has no wish to take over and run the company.'

'But she could marry and have children,' Tara pointed out.

'No,' Ryland returned, shaking his head, 'no, she won't.'

'How can you be so sure?' Tara half teased him. 'I know she's not so young any more but …'

'Margot will never marry because it's impossible for her to marry the man she wants,' Ryland told her bluntly, explaining when he saw her puzzled expression, 'Margot loves Lloyd—her mother's brother's son. They're first cousins. It's against the law in the state of Massachusetts and a number of others for them to marry and my aunt would never have condoned their getting married even in another state. Margot fell in love with him when she was fifteen and since then … It isn't something that's discussed in the family.'

'Does he … Lloyd … love her?' Tara interrupted him, her eyes full of tender compassion.

'I … Lloyd has been married and has two stepchildren. He doesn't have Margot's intense … well, she's a very driven sort of person. Lloyd lives in California. My aunt decided to set up a branch of the business out there, printing pretty much the same sort of stuff for the campus at UCLA as we do for Yale and Harvard. She put Lloyd in charge of that end of things.'

'She sent him away from Margot, you mean,' Tara said in a low voice.

'It's impossible—illegal—for them to be together,' Ryland reminded her quietly. 'She did it for the best. Except when Lloyd met someone else out there and decided to get married, well, Margot had a bit of a breakdown. They meet every summer at the island. There's an island my great-grandfather bought, just off the coast—'

'An island, your family owns an island …?' Tara began, but Ryland shook his head dismissively.

'It's nothing,' he told her, 'just an exposed piece of rocky headland, really, but …' He paused. 'It's there Margot and Lloyd see each other. Not that it's ever mentioned.'

Tara shivered and wrapped her arms tightly around her body, trying to imagine how it must feel to love a man you could never really be with, to want a man you could never truly have.

In their early days together when he had been telling her about his family background, Ryland had played down the role he knew he was ultimately going to have in the family business.

He had told Tara he had come to England to study British publishing and he had then gone on to explain to her the nature of his family's business, telling her that his great-grandfather had started a small company to publish textbooks and papers written by his friends at Yale and Harvard.

The business had grown and become extremely profitable, still maintaining its close links with the university.

After his uncle's untimely death in a sailing accident—his hobby had been racing ocean-going yachts—his wife, Ryland's aunt, had stepped into his shoes and run the business as its chief executive. Ryland's father continued with his own work, bringing in new manuscripts for them to publish and sell. Under his aunt's aegis, the company had gone from strength to strength. She had an extremely sharp financial brain and Boston's money men had a great deal of respect for her—as did Ryland himself.

Any one of Boston's first families would have been highly delighted to see their daughter marrying Martha Adams's nephew, Ryland suspected, but marriage hadn't been something he had been remotely interested in—until he had seen Tara. Within days, within hours of meeting her, he had known that she was the one—the only one.

Perhaps he was more like his cousin Margot than he had previously imagined, he acknowledged ruefully.

There was something in Tara's make-up, a streak of idealism, the result perhaps of having always and only ever known the loving, tender protection of those around her and of having known, as well, just how much she was cherished and valued, that somehow set her apart and made her special, made him love her.

'I do understand you have to return,' Tara assured him, adding, 'I just wish that Boston wasn't so far away.'

'It isn't,' Ryland murmured, tilting her face up towards his own so that he could look down into her eyes as he whispered softly a second time, 'It isn't.'

As he bent to kiss her, Tara shook her head. 'Not to us, perhaps, but it is to Ma. I could see it in her eyes. She looked almost … almost frightened … as though … I've never seen her look like that before. Not even when she and Dad … I hated it when they divorced. I don't want anything like that to ever happen to us, Ry.'

'It won't,' he reassured her gently. 'It won't. Your mother probably just needs a little time to get used to the idea of our living in Boston,' he added comfortingly. 'After all, she's got her own life. She's still a very active and attractive woman … a very, very attractive woman,' he noted appreciatively, causing Tara to give him an indignant pinch. 'Perhaps we could give ourselves a week or so to settle in and then get her to come over for a visit,' Ryland suggested as he removed Tara's fingers from his arm and then bent his head to slowly suck them one by one.

'Mmm …' Tara moaned responsively.

'Mmm …' Ryland agreed as he eased her down against the bed and transferred the moist heat of his mouth from her fingers to her nipple.

Tara closed her eyes and gave herself up voluptuously to the pleasure of his lovemaking.

Ryland had teased her shortly after they had revealed their love for one another and celebrated that revelation with a romantic and very sensual weekend away at a discreet country hotel in a bedroom complete with a four-poster, a huge open fire and, even better, a bed-sized open space in front of it that there was a delicious wantonness, a wildness almost, about the way she lost herself in their lovemaking that was intriguingly at odds with the mild-mannered and restrained day-to-day image she presented to the outside world.

'That's because I'm in love with you,' Tara had told him seriously and meant it, because it was true.

Her emotions had always been close to the surface, easily stirred and fired, and it had taken the gentle influence of her mother to help her learn how to harness the impetuous, impulsive side of her

nature and to look beyond its immediacy to the eventual consequences. Tara felt privileged that in her the passionate intensity she felt, an inheritance from her father's side of the family, was tempered and strengthened by the quiet wisdom that was her mother's. Passion and sensitivity—they could, for someone without the loving parenting she had received, have been uncomfortable bedfellows, but Tara loved and valued both sides of her personality because they were her emotional inheritance from her parents.

She *liked* knowing that in her individuality she was still a part of them, just as the children she and Ryland produced would be a part of them. Like her, she hoped that they, too, would one day listen with the same rapt attention as she had while their grandparents told them stories of their own youth and that they, as she had done, would absorb from those stories a sense of family and continuity, a sense of security and safety, of warmth and belonging.

It still sometimes brought quick emotional tears to her eyes to visit her grandparents and to see the love and pride in their eyes, to see and touch the familiar things that she had known from babyhood: the Sèvres dinner service that a member of her mother's mother's family had brought back from France; the medals her maternal grandfather had received on the death of his uncle, a veteran of the Somme; the linen sheets both of her grandmothers had been presented with on their respective marriages and that both of them had ruefully admitted they never used, much preferring the easier laundering of modern bedclothes.

Despite her totally modern outlook on life, Tara was a girl who was very much in touch with, very much in *tune* with, her family's past. Ryland, who had already recognised that about her, hoped it might incline his aunt to look favourably on Tara and approve of their marriage.

He might neither need nor particularly want that approval and the inheritance that would ultimately go with it, but as he had already told Tara, he felt it was his duty to accept the role in the family business for which he had been groomed. There were certain things about his family and that role that he had not as yet told Tara, but they did not affect his love for her, and who knew, if his cousin Margot changed her mind about remaining single …

He smiled in the darkness as Tara fell asleep in his arms. How could his family *not* love her? How could they possibly find fault with a person as instantly lovable and totally adorable, so perfect in every way, as his Tara?

'Ryland's coming home and he's bringing a girl with him.'

'A girl? Who?'

Lloyd propped himself up on one elbow as he looked down into the face of his lover—and cousin.

Margot shrugged dismissively. 'I don't know, some English girl.'

'Is it serious?'

'No relationships are allowed to be serious in this family until mother's sanctioned it. You know that.'

The expression on her face echoed the bitterness and resentment in her voice as she sat up in bed and reached for the packet of cigarettes on the bedside table, lighting one and drawing fiercely on it.

In the clear light of the island morning, the sharp angularity of the bones both of her body and her face was almost cruelly revealed. What had, on the girl, been extreme slimness had become, on the woman she was now, an almost bony thinness, the outward expression of her inner frustration and bitterness, as though these deep-rooted feelings that had distorted her life had eaten away at her flesh as thoroughly and destructively as any bodily illness.

'My God, if only things were different,' she burst out intensely, her dark eyes flashing as she turned to look at the man lying beside her.

Three years separated them in age—three thousand miles in distance, apart from the brief days and hours they occasionally managed to snatch together, those and the six weeks they shared annually here on the island that belonged to Margot's mother and his aunt.

Every summer for over twenty years, both of them had come here to be together, away from prying eyes. As first cousins, certain states considered their blood relationship too close for them to marry and legalise their love for each other as Margot so passionately wished they might. Margot wasn't sure which was the stronger feeling she had for these weeks in the summer—hatred or longing. Longing when they were apart from one another and hatred when she was here because being here meant being aware of the fact that she could never ever have her heart's desire; that she could never be with Lloyd as she ached and wanted to be with him. As they both wanted her to be with him, she amended hastily. After all, he suffered just as much as she did, yearned just as much as she did … ached, needed, wanted, loved just as much as she did.

They had both known, of course, even before they had fallen in love that such a love was forbidden.

'But what will happen if I get pregnant?' Margot had asked Lloyd tremulously the first time they had made love, lying uncomfortably together in the sandy earth amongst the trees, hidden out of sight of the house.

'You won't,' Lloyd had assured her, showing her the condom he had bought.

That had been the beginning of it, the beginning of what to her was a continuous rack of pain from which there was no relief, no cessation, no, not even sometimes in his arms, because always at the back of her mind was the knowledge that their togetherness was only temporary, that ultimately they would have to part and go back to their separate lives.

'Stay with me,' she had begged frantically one summer a number of years ago.

'I can't. You know that,' he had told her. 'I think Carole-Ann might be beginning to suspect something. In fact, I think we might have to—'

'No!' Margot had burst out explosively before he could finish. 'If she *does* suspect, then we'll just have to find some way of … She can't stop us being together, Lloyd. She has you all the time. Does she know how lucky she is to be your wife?' she had demanded passionately. 'How much I wish …'

Lloyd had turned and taken her in his arms. 'You know that can't be,' he told her.

'Oh, Lloyd,' she cried. 'God, *why* does it have to be like this? *Why* can't we be together? Go away somewhere—abroad?'

'You know we can't do that. How would we live? Both of us are dependent on the business.'

'The summer's passing quickly.' Margot shivered now. 'Another three weeks and you'll be going back. Oh, Lloyd, I don't know how I can bear it.'

Helplessly, she started to cry.

Tiredly, Lloyd closed his eyes. They weren't young any more. The UCLA branch of their business, which his aunt had originally set up as much to put some distance between him and Margot as anything else, had proved to be extremely profitable and certainly no sinecure. He loved Margot, of course he did, and he always would, but sometimes the intensity of her passion for him, her need, her *dependency* on him, wore him down.

These six weeks he spent on the island every summer, technically updating his aunt on everything that had been happening with his side of the business, were, for Margot, the pivot of her whole existence.

'If we didn't have this, there'd be no point in my going on living,' she had told him more than once. Increasingly, though, he was guiltily aware that while Margot was so emotionally dependent on him, *he* was not free to live his own life.

It had been different when they were young. Then he had shared her passion, been as overwhelmed by his feelings for her as she was by hers for him. But now!

He was approaching forty and what did he have to show for it?

In material terms and so far as others were concerned, no doubt he seemed as though he was doing all right. He had a good job, money in the bank, a nice apartment, a new car.

But what about in other terms? What about those aspects of his life that could not be assessed in dollars or possessions?

He was divorced now with two stepdaughters whom he rarely saw, a few friends and Margot….

‘Lloyd, tell me everything’s going to be all right, that we’ll always be together,’ Margot was demanding passionately.

Tiredly, he reassured her but he knew his voice lacked conviction.

4

What was that noise? Groggily, Claudia tried to focus on the high-pitched ringing sound that had broken into her heavy drugged sleep, the doubled effect of the two pills she had taken so deadening that it was several seconds before she realised that the noise was the telephone and another several more before she came to enough to reach for the receiver.

'Claudia, it's Maxine,' she heard her assistant announcing herself. 'Is everything OK? I was a bit concerned when you didn't arrive this morning.'

Guiltily, Claudia started to open her eyes and then widened them quickly in disbelief as she caught sight of her alarm clock. It was gone eleven in the morning. No wonder Maxine had been concerned.

'Er … I'm sorry, Maxine,' she apologised hastily. 'I … I meant to ring you last night to warn you that I'd decided to work at home this morning. I've got some paperwork here I need to catch up on.'

It wasn't completely untrue; she *did* have paperwork to attend to, Claudia comforted herself several minutes later after she had replaced the receiver.

Paperwork to *do*, maybe, but she certainly wasn't in any fit state to accomplish very much, she admitted wearily.

She had slept so deeply that if she had had any bad dreams she certainly couldn't remember them, but even so, the drugged oblivion of her night's sleep was just as exhausting as though she *had* lain sleepless and tormented. The numbing lethargy that still gripped her made her feel both guilty and angry. Quickly, she got out of bed, collected fresh underwear and headed for the shower.

But as she stood beneath its stinging, reviving spray, she acknowledged that at least her sleeping tablets had been able to keep last night's nightmares at bay.

She stopped soaping herself and stood motionless beneath the water, shuddering as she recalled the eager happiness in Tara's voice when she told her excitedly about her plans. And she, what had *she* done to prepare and protect her precious, much-loved daughter from what she now feared and dreaded lay ahead of her?

Slow, painful tears seeped from beneath her closed eyelids as Claudia acknowledged what she had done, or rather, not done. When faced with a crisis, the need to be strong and independent, to take control and confront the danger facing her, she had retreated to the security of the kind of behaviour more appropriate to her mother's generation by asking, 'Have you told your father yet?'

And then she had compounded her irresponsibility by escaping into a drug-induced sleep that had achieved nothing other than to worry her loyal and hard-working assistant.

But what could she do, what could she say? Maybe, after all, she was over-reacting, over-worrying.

If only. If only.

As she stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel, Claudia caught sight of her reflection in the bathroom mirror. The anguish she was feeling was clearly revealed in the drawn, drained tension of her expression. The last time she had seen that particular look on her face had been during the early days when she and Garth had agreed to divorce.

Garth …

It had been foolish of her to react so emotionally last night and try to ring him. She knew from Tara that he had been dating on a casual basis for the past few months. Tara had complained to her that she didn't think the thirty-odd-year-old woman he had apparently been seeing was good enough for her father.

Like her, Garth hadn't had anyone serious in his life since their marriage had ended, but hardly for the same reasons. Garth was an extremely attractive and very sensual man, the kind of man who, in the early days of their marriage, had been so emotionally as well as openly physically loving with

her in public that her friends had often commented enviously to her on the depth and intensity of his love for her.

Perhaps unusually so for a man of his generation and upbringing, Garth was a highly tactile man, both as a lover and a father, and Tara was like him in that respect. She, too, was very much given to loving hugs and kisses while Claudia, as she was the first to acknowledge, tended to wait for the other person to make the first move, to hold herself back a little.

Even now, she disliked being reminded of how much she had missed Garth's physical warmth in the early days after she had found out the truth, how often she had woken from the wretchedness of her merciless dreams and turned instinctively towards his side of the bed expecting him to be there to reach out for her and hold her close, only to remember that the emotional agony of her waking hours was even greater than that of her nightmares.

She was over that now, of course. Well over it, and as a woman of forty-five, the mother of a grown-up daughter, as well, she did not think it appropriate to allow herself to yearn helplessly like some lovesick teenager for the physical and emotional contact, the closeness of a lover, a someone of her own that her life now denied her. Divorcing Garth had been the right decision, the only decision she could have made in the circumstances. He had, after all, betrayed her and betrayed her in such a way, deceiving her, lying to her so comprehensively and for so long, that there had been no way the damage he had done to their relationship could ever be repaired. So yesterday, why had she turned, yearning so instinctively, to him for help?

Because he was Tara's *father*. *That* was why and that was the *only* reason why, she assured herself sternly as she went back to her bedroom, securing the towel around her still-damp body, then reaching for the hair-dryer.

Since the break-up of her marriage, she had become fiercely protective, even defensive, about her independence and her ability to face the world alone, to manage whatever problems she might have alone. She had no need of anyone, any man, to lean on, to provide her with emotional support; she had proved that.

Last night, she had panicked, over-reacted unthinkingly with that silly and fortunately unanswered telephone call to Garth. This morning, she thankfully was much more in control of herself … much more herself, she decided firmly.

The hand holding the hair-dryer had started to tremble. Slowly, Claudia put the dryer down and took a deep breath, purposefully counting silently as she released it.

Now, she commanded herself sternly, let's start again. Today is Thursday. It is nearly twelve noon. You have wasted a whole morning, so what are you going to do with the rest of your day?

Mentally, she reviewed her commitments.

She had an informal arrangement for lunch, following which she had a planning meeting at three and then, finally, her treat for the day, which was her first discussion with the man who she was hoping would design her garden for her. She had first heard about him earlier in the year when she had attended the Chelsea Flower Show as the guest of one of her corporate clients and had immediately fallen in love with his work, only to discover that he was extremely selective about whom he accepted as a client and that, in addition, he had a waiting list of people wanting to consult him over a yard long. Eventually, however, her determination had paid off and it was planned that she should have initial talks then meet with him in the very near future.

Her thoughts on the garden, she walked over to the bedroom window that looked out over it. The house had had a large rear garden when they bought it, to which they had added a couple of good-sized paddocks. When they first moved in, this garden had consisted of a shabby lawn framed by overgrown herbaceous borders and separated from the kitchen garden and greenhouse that lay beyond it by an unruly hedge.

Just before Tara's sixth birthday, a space had been cleared on the lawn for the pretty chaletstyle Wendy house they had bought as a birthday present. Claudia had spent the whole of the previous

month sewing pretty gingham curtains for it, complete with tie-backs and matching appliquéd gingham cushions for the child-sized furniture.

In time, at Tara's insistence, a small 'garden' area had been fenced off around her 'house', taking the place of the slide and swing whose scuff marks had made bald patches in the lawn over the years. They had planted a rambling rose against the house, Garth insisting that she hold the rose straight while he dug and then filled in the hole he had made for it. It now virtually covered the small wooden building, but Tara had steadfastly refused to allow her to do anything to change her now-outgrown childhood retreat until last Christmas when she had suddenly announced that she was going to 'clear her stuff' out of the Wendy house and that it was high time that it was passed on to someone who could enjoy it.

Perhaps she should have guessed then, Claudia reflected. Perhaps that instinct that all mothers had, were supposed to possess and that she had believed she did possess, should have told her that it wasn't just the Wendy house that Tara had now outgrown and was ready to leave behind, but it hadn't fully sunk in. Perhaps she had been too engrossed with the adrenalin-spiked sense of urgency that Christmas, with its unique blend of planning and chaos, always brought her or it could be that she simply hadn't wanted to face the truth. And even if she had, what could she have done? Prevented Tara from seeing Ryland, stopped her from loving him?

The garden, she reminded herself fiercely. Think about the garden. You were so excited about it … remember?

Remember! Of course she did. After all, for the past few months, she had spent virtually every spare moment she had poring over gardening books, her mouth watering as she studied the temptation of their photographs depicting formal yew hedges—the perfect green backdrop for a profusion of artlessly and deliciously blowsy massed plantings of cottage garden–type flowers, their softness relieving the architectural sternness of their supporting hedges—pergolaed walkways dripping with wisteria and soft pink roses, the picturesque tranquillity of a formal pond … She wanted them all like a child let loose in a sweet shop.

Yes, far better to think about her garden than to allow herself to fall back into the quicksand of panic and fear that recalling Tara's visit brought, she decided quickly.

A friend had warned her against introducing koi carp to her as yet non-existent pond.

'They might be beautiful, but they are also the most dreadful scavengers. I've watched them push my poor lilies from one end of our pond to the other,' she had complained, 'and then they've got the cheek to come up to the surface demanding food every time I walk past.'

Claudia pictured a pond, a double row of neatly clipped yew hedges bisecting her immaculate new lawn and framing the kind of borders that would be filled with a profusion of traditional perennials like delphiniums, poppies, alliums and lupins. A path would lead through them to a small, secluded, secret inner garden, perhaps with a weeping pear and a bed of pure white flowers, she decided frantically, attempting to visualise the garden plan she was hastily trying to construct but that kept on being obscured by the far clearer image of her daughter and the news she had brought her last night.

Sharply, Claudia warned herself not to give in to her panic. What good would it do? She looked away from the window, pushing her fingers into her hair.

She needed time. Time to think, time to …

5

Garth had left London later than he had planned due to an urgent phone call from a client. To compound things, he had been caught up in a series of roadworks that had delayed him by over another hour, so that it was gone eleven o'clock before he finally drove into Upper Charfont.

His own three-storey town house with its long narrow garden and neat Georgian sash windows backed onto the river and was part of a civic conservation area. The architect and the builder who had been responsible for the renovation and rebuilding of the original neglected Georgian terrace and its surrounding environs were both clients, and a little bit of old-style country bargaining had led to Garth's getting the house at a very advantageous price.

In recent years he hadn't spent as much time in it as he would have liked. During the recession the business had demanded his full attention, which had necessitated his living in London virtually full time, though he had always made sure that he could work from Upper Charfont during Tara's school holidays.

As in everything else appertaining to their divorce, Claudia had been meticulous about ensuring that Tara was encouraged to spend time with him; there had been no set-down and rigidly enforced 'visiting rights'.

'Tara is, after all, your daughter,' Claudia had told him, her back stiff, her face averted from him, her voice low and so calm that if he hadn't known better, he would never have guessed that while she spoke to him she was crying, 'and she loves and needs you in her life *as* her father.'

For once, the weather had lived up to its early-morning promise with clear blue skies and sunshine. It was market day and the town was thronged with sightseers and locals alike, dressed casually in shorts and T-shirts. This was one of the times when he regretted the uncharacteristic impulse that had led to his following the Prince of Wales's example by driving a highly visible and highly enviable Aston Martin, he acknowledged as he saw the looks not just of envy but also of recognition greeting him as he drove through the town.

As he found a parking space close to the offices from which Claudia ran her business, he reflected wryly that knowing the town and its people, news of his arrival would probably reach her office before he did. Although he knew she would have argued to the contrary, pointing out with that chilly, distancing manner she almost always adopted towards him these days that since she was no longer a part of his life, nor he of hers, there was no reason or purpose to have him hold any views about anything she did, he was quite extraordinarily proud of her and all that she had achieved, not just in establishing her business and turning it into such a successful venture, but he was proud of her and for her in many other ways, as well.

She was a kind counsellor, a good friend, a loving daughter and daughter-in-law, and as a mother …

A female tourist in the town watching him as he climbed out of his car would have wondered who or what it was that could have brought such a pensive look of pain, mingled with compassion, to the face of so sexy a man. Whoever or whatever it was, she didn't doubt for one moment that there would be plenty of female volunteers to help him banish it.

Maxine Jarvis, Claudia's assistant, was in the reception area of the offices when he walked in. Recognising him, she told him quickly, 'I'm afraid Claudia isn't here. She's working at home today.'

'That's no problem,' Garth assured her, but Maxine noticed that he was frowning as he turned to leave.

After he had gone, she wondered if she ought to ring Claudia and warn her that her ex-husband had been in looking for her, and then, remembering the shuttered look with which Claudia tended to react to any comments about her ex-husband or her marriage, she decided that she might be better off simply saying and doing nothing.

Like everyone else who knew Claudia, Maxine admired the way she had handled her divorce, which, if the rumours that had gone round the town at the time were to be believed, had been brought on by Garth's infidelity, and the way she had refused to allow her own feelings to damage Tara's relationship with her father.

Not many women would be so altruistic, so determined to control their own feelings no matter what the personal cost, and to put those of their child first, but then, Claudia had always been a wonderfully devoted mother. Demanding though her work might be, there had never been a single occasion that Maxine could remember in all the years she had worked for her when Claudia had not put Tara's needs first, even if that had meant risking losing an important contract by putting a client second to her daughter. In Maxine's view, the friend who had suggested once when Claudia was out of earshot that if Claudia had more often put Garth's needs ahead of those of his daughter or even given them parity to hers, then he and Claudia might still be married, in Maxine's view, was no friend at all.

Garth frowned again as he turned into Ivy House's driveway. After parking his car, he got out and started to walk towards the front door, and then, on impulse, he changed his mind and turned on his heel to walk round to the rear of the house towards the conservatory—the conservatory they had added to celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary.

Appraisingly, he studied it. The heavy bronze frog he and Tara had chosen together as a pre-birthday present for Claudia that same year was still there standing guard to the left of the door. Quickly, he bent down and felt beneath it, his fingers curling over the familiar shape of the key he found there.

He and Claudia had not had the kind of divorce that had necessitated anything so aggressive or traumatic as changing the house's locks. And some habits, it seemed, lasted longer than others. Quietly, he unlocked the conservatory door and walked in.

It wasn't that he feared that Claudia would refuse to let him into the house; the relationship they presently shared was civil enough if coolly distant. It was just …

Just what? That he wanted to surprise her—to catch her off guard, to *see* her face before she had time to hide behind the barrier he knew she would throw up against him?

'Why?' he had asked her passionately in the early years after their divorce. 'Why the *hell* do you have to treat me with this ridiculous blanket of cold civility, Claudia, after all we've—'

'Why? Because I *have* to,' she had flung back at him bitingly. 'I *have* to because if I don't, I might start letting you see how I really feel about you, Garth, and for Tara's sake, I can't afford to do that.'

'Do you really hate me that much?' he had asked her emotively.

'Yes,' she had told him. 'Yes, I do.'

'Well, you know what they say,' he had returned. 'Hate and love are merely different sides of the same coin, and where there's hate, there must also be love.'

'Where there was love, there is now hate,' Claudia had corrected him. 'Hate for you and hate even more for myself that I was ever fool enough to love you … to trust you.'

Maxine had said that Claudia was working from home, but there was no sound of any kind of activity coming from the room where he knew she worked, and a sharp prickle of atavistic emotion jarred up his spine.

The mere fact that Claudia had actually telephoned him last night was a clear indication of just how distraught she must have been, not that he had needed any telephone call to warn him of the devastating effect Tara's news would have on her.

The house felt alien and alarmingly silent, a house he remembered being filled with the sounds of Tara's childhood. Suddenly impelled by a sharp sense of urgency, he started to take the stairs two at a time, calling her name as he did so.

Later, Claudia told herself that her instinctive automatic response to the sound of Garth's voice —a response that had her racing to her bedroom door and flinging it open, ignoring the fact that

she was still only wearing the towel she had wrapped around her naked body after her shower—was simply a reflex action and nothing more. Just in time, she realised what she was doing, and as Garth reached the landing, Claudia took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

'Garth, what are you doing here?' she demanded unsteadily, an uncomfortable colour flooding her face and then slowly spreading to her body as she recognised how betraying her presence here at home and still not being dressed must be—especially to someone who had once known her as well as Garth did.

The relief Garth had felt when he first saw her evaporated as he saw the way she was reacting to his presence, her obvious discomfort, the way her face and body had coloured, the way she was looking almost furtively back into the bedroom, as though …

'Why didn't you go into work this morning?' he demanded suspiciously.

Claudia stared at him.

'That's none of your business,' she told him crisply, turning on her heel dismissively and walking back into her bedroom.

Garth followed her.

'Isn't it?' he demanded, and then stopped. The bed was made up, no sign of an alien male presence to sully its immaculate neatness. Claudia's hair-dryer lay on a chair on top of the clean underwear she had obviously put out to wear.

'Garth, what are you doing … what are you looking for?' Claudia demanded sharply as she quickly checked the bedside table, thankful to see that there was no sign of the bottle of sleeping tablets—not that it was any business of Garth's what she did, not any more, but she knew him and knew he would fuss if he thought …

'I'm not looking for anyone … anything,' Garth denied quickly, catching himself up as he realised how much he had betrayed himself and the reason for his male aggression and hostility. Had he really expected to find someone else in Claudia's bed?

Logically, perhaps not, but emotionally, even after so many years apart, he wasn't ready for that, for another man in Claudia's life.

'You rang me last night,' he told Claudia as he felt his blood pressure and his heartbeat start to return to normal.

Claudia avoided meeting his eyes, giving a small, oddly girlish shrug as she responded, 'Did I? I …'

'Claudia, don't play games with me,' Garth warned her. 'I'm not asking you a question. I'm making a statement. *You* rang me *and* I know why. Tara's told you that she's going to marry Ryland.'

'She has told me, yes,' Claudia agreed, still refusing to look at him, 'and yes, I did ring you, but why on earth that should bring you rushing down here behaving like some character out of a bad play, I really don't know.'

'You're lying, Claudia. For God's sake, I *know* you rang *and* I know why. It's nothing to be ashamed of. If you needed—'

'I need nothing and no one, but most of all, I do *not* need *you*,' Claudia interrupted him with a fierce passion. 'I would never let myself need a man I can't trust, a man who—'

'*Let* yourself need,' Garth broke in. 'Hell, Claudia, there's no shame in being afraid … in being vulnerable … human … in turning to someone else for help.'

'I want you to leave, Garth. I want you to leave right now,' Claudia told him, then walked away from him and went to stand in front of the window. Dear God, she couldn't bear this. She simply didn't have the emotional reserves to cope with it, not right now, not after last night. She could feel her heart starting to beat furiously fast. She tried to swallow and found that she couldn't. Her palms felt damp and she knew that any minute now she was going to start to visibly betray what she was feeling—the panic, the fear, the despair—and the last person she wanted to see her doing that was Garth, the *very* last.

Didn't he *know*, couldn't he understand, that superimposed over every memory she had of him was the image she had created out of the darkest depths of her imagination of him with *her*, of him loving *her*, of his face contorted with passion and need as he possessed *her*, and that image was like a sickness buried deep inside her that surfaced through all the smothering layers of rigid self-control she had placed over it to reduce her to a pulsing, aching, dying thing of burning acid jealousy and bitterness?

'Claudia, look, I know how you must be feeling.'

Instead of leaving, he had walked up behind her, and Claudia tensed as she felt his breath against her hair.

'No, you do *not* know how I'm feeling, Garth,' she snapped. 'How can you? How can anyone know?'

Claudia could hear hysteria edging up under her voice. Damn Garth. Why had he had to do this, come here like this and undermine her previous self-control?

'Tara is my daughter, too, and I'm going to miss her as well—'

'Miss her? It isn't because I'm going to *miss* her that …' Gulping in air, Claudia shook her head, unable to go on any further. 'I don't know what brought you here, Garth,' she continued when she had finally regained control of herself. 'I've got a very busy day ahead of me and right now I'd like to get dressed.'

'Why did you ring me last night?'

Somehow or other, Claudia found the strength to turn round and face him. 'That was a *mistake*,' she told him quietly. 'I … I—'

'Dialled the wrong number?' Garth suggested harshly.

Claudia shook her head. He knew perfectly well she hadn't done that; they both did.

'It was a mistake, Garth,' she repeated.

'No, it wasn't,' Garth contradicted her. 'You rang *me* because for once your emotions, your *real* emotions got the better of you. You rang me because you were afraid, because *you needed* me.'

'No,' Claudia denied. 'I *don't* need you, Garth. I stopped needing you a long time ago, and—'

'You needed me as Tara's father,' Garth continued as though she hadn't spoken, as though she hadn't uttered those passionate words of denial and fury. 'Clo …'

The unexpected use of his old pet name for her was like a sawtooth file being used on an oversensitive raw nerve ending, and Claudia flinched, visibly unable to suppress the tears that suddenly filled her eyes. Garth reached out and caught hold of her, drawing her close.

She still smelled the same as she had always done, of vanilla and soft clean skin and something that was and always would be essentially her. She still felt the same, too, feminine, womanly, all the woman he had ever really wanted although he knew that she would never believe that.

'Clo, it's all right, it's all right,' he told her huskily. Unexpectedly, uncontrollably, he was transported back to another place, another time, another life, when he had had the right to hold her, to touch her. 'Claudia …'

Memory … instinct … could be a dangerously powerful and unmerciful force. Her eyes closed, her body taut with anger and rejection, Claudia's senses registered the tone of his voice, recognised its hunger, and like Garth, she was transported back to a time when all that it had taken to arouse her had been that particular note in his voice, that special touch of his hands caressing her body.

As he felt her body relax, Garth automatically closed the gap between them, bending his head to cover her quiescent mouth with his own.

She felt so good, so right … so *Claudia*. As his hands sensuously kneaded the warm flesh of her arms, he started to circle her lips with the tip of his tongue, waiting for her lips to part in their private sexual signal, their special shorthand message passed from him to her and back again that very soon the hungry, urgent thrust of his tongue within her mouth would be echoed by the even more hungry, urgent thrust of his body within hers.

Outside in the street, a car door slammed abruptly, bringing Claudia back to reality. Hot-faced, she tried to thrust Garth away.

She was forty-five, damn it, and even if she hadn't, even if she wasn't … even if they *didn't* … there was no way she considered the kind of openly sexual way Garth was behaving acceptable in a relationship between people of their age. It just wasn't … it just didn't …

'Let me go,' she demanded freezingly, pushing him back more defiantly. 'Let go of me, Garth! I can't bear your touching me … I loathe your touching me,' she told him vehemently, the flustered colour burning even more hotly in her face.

'No,' Garth challenged her furiously. He knew that he was deliberately feeding his own anger and using it to mask very different, far more complex emotions.

It had shaken him badly to discover just how frighteningly easy it had been to allow his emotions to work that time trick on him, that subtle but volatile and dangerous mirage that exchanged reality for fiction.

'Yes,' Claudia insisted icily.

Freezing her feelings, numbing herself, had been the only way she had of denying her pain, of escaping from it all those years ago when …

'I can't bear it when you touch me, Garth,' she reiterated quietly. 'I can't bear it because every time you do, I see *her*. I see you touching *her* and I feel sick … I am sick,' she told him expressionlessly.

'I'm sick, too,' Garth retorted bitterly. 'Sick of being treated like a leper, sick of being made to feel that I'm some kind of lowlife who doesn't … I've tried to tell you. It wasn't *like* that, Claudia. It just wasn't like that. I thought … I can't even remember touching her, never mind—'

'Really … you can't *remember*?' Claudia could hear her voice rising, cracking under the strain of trying to maintain her self-control. 'You can't remember making love to her in our home … our bed? You can't remember that you …'

She was screaming the words at him, Claudia recognised in horror, shouting them, as out of control now as she had been all those years ago when she had first realised, first acknowledged the truth.

'Claudia …' Garth protested, swearing under his breath with male impotence in the face of so much female fury.

'Get out,' Claudia demanded. 'Just go, Garth. You may have come here to gloat, to—'

'To what? Just what the hell do you think I am?' Garth demanded. 'Claudia, I didn't—'

'To remind me that you warned me that something like this might happen. How that must please you, Garth. How happy it must make you—'

'Claudia. I didn't come here to gloat. I came because I thought you might need someone to talk to … because I was concerned.'

'Concerned.' Claudia froze. 'Concerned,' she repeated, her voice metallic and sharp with disbelief. 'Concerned for whom, Garth? Certainly not for me, the woman, the wife, you betrayed so easily. Did you talk about me when you were in bed with her? Did you discuss your *concern* for me with her? Ah, but I was forgetting. If you can't remember making love to her, then you certainly won't be able to remember discussing me, will you?'

'Claudia, for God's sake … I came here to talk to you about Tara, about her …' Garth held his breath, waiting for her to retaliate, and when she didn't, he started to release it very slowly.

'But we *are* talking about her, aren't we?' she said softly now.

Across the silence that divided them, their eyes met and it was Garth's that fell first.

'Claudia,' he began rawly, but she shook her head, the tempest of the emotions that had driven her so close to the edge of her self-control safely harnessed now, and she wasn't going to allow Garth to provoke her into another demeaning outburst.

'I've got to get ready to go out, Garth, I'm already running late,' she told him crisply.

One look at her face told Garth that he would be wasting his time trying to talk to her, to reason with her. Shaking his head, he turned round and headed for the open doorway, cursing himself as he did so. He had handled things badly. Beneath her outwardly calm, gentle demeanour, Claudia had a very strong skein of the same stubborn pride and indomitable spirit that had made her father, the brigadier, the respected warrior that he was.

In Claudia, though, its inflexibility was normally tempered by her woman's awareness that life came in varying shades of grey, rather than two opposing colours of black and white—apart from where he was concerned.

As he let himself out of the house and headed for his car, he reminded himself that there was that school of belief that said the greater the love, the greater the hatred following any form of betrayal, but his betrayal …

There were always two sides to every story and she hadn't ever been prepared to listen while he told her his.

After the miscarriage of their first child, Claudia had become so depressed and withdrawn, so caught up in her own grief and sense of loss, that she had not realised that he was grieving, too, that he needed … wanted … As he started the engine, Garth shook his head. What was the point in thinking about that now? It was over. They were over; the only thing they had in common any more was their love for Tara.

Tara …

As the big car purred out of the drive, Garth realised that something was obscuring his vision. He switched on the windscreen wipers and then frowned, grimacing to himself, blinking fiercely. Men weren't supposed to cry, were they? He could remember saying that to Claudia the night she had silently put Tara into his arms for the first time. She had been pathetically small, and he had ached with the overwhelming need to protect her and to keep her safe.

Tara. She was an adult now, not a child, and he could no longer guarantee to make the world, or life, safe and secure for her.

Claudia blinked as she focused vaguely on the flashing light on the telephone, her heart beating unsteadily. She felt … she felt … She was afraid, she acknowledged as she tried to analyse her feelings. How long had she been standing here staring into space? How long was it since Garth had gone?

She felt empty, hollow, disembodied and yet so heavy. So weighed down with the burden of her pain that her feet felt leaden, unable to move.

The telephone had stopped ringing. No doubt her caller would ring back. She was, she discovered, still wrapped only in the towel she had pulled on after her shower. She started to shiver. Beyond the bedroom window, the garden still basked in the warmth of the sun, but Claudia no longer saw it with the zest of a pioneer and adventurer bent on transforming it into her own private vision of paradise. In fact, it wasn't the garden she saw at all.

She had always hated rows, arguments. They left her feeling sick, disorientated, weakened physically and emotionally, and the unexpectedness of this one with Garth had doubled its traumatic effect on her nervous system.

Like a sleepwalker, she started to get dressed, keeping her eyes focused on her dressing-table and its collection of silver-framed photographs, all of them of Tara—Tara as a baby, as a little girl, a teenager, a graduate. Her car keys lay on the dressing-table in front of one of the photographs, the one of Tara in her christening robe. Numbly, Claudia picked them up. She was dressed now, although she couldn't have said what she had on … couldn't have said and didn't care.

Tara … The agonising ache inside her became a racking physical pain.

As she walked slowly downstairs, she could hear a sharp, anxious voice inside her head scolding her, telling her that there were things she had to do, people she had to see, but she ignored it, blotting it out.

There was something else she had to do, somewhere she had to be that was far more important.

The phone on his desk was ringing. Automatically, Lloyd reached out and picked it up.

'Lloyd, Lloyd, when are you coming back to the island?' His heart sank as he recognised Margot's voice. He could tell from the sound of it that she was crying. Unwillingly, he pictured her.

She would be lying on her bed, her dark eyes burning with intensity, her thin frame curled protectively into a foetus-like ball.

Her body had developed a hard, angular edge to it and she had about her a hungry, voracious look. But as he of all people had good reason to know, her hunger wasn't for food.

'The summer is our time,' she was protesting tearfully now. 'My time with you. It's the only time we have together. Oh, Lloyd, I can't bear it here without you.'

The words made a sound like a long, tormented wail, assaulting his eardrums with their pain.

'I had to come back, Margot, but I should be through here by the weekend.'

'The weekend … That means we'll have missed a full week together. Ring me tonight, won't you? I'll be … thinking of you.'

As he replaced the receiver, Lloyd stared unseeingly across his desk. He normally closed his office during the summer vacation—after all, with the campus practically deserted, there was no need for him to keep it open. Their business in California, like that in Boston, came from the universities' professors and students whose work they published, but his assistant had sounded so excited over the telephone about the manuscript he had received in Lloyd's absence that Lloyd had agreed to fly home to meet with the author and read the manuscript.

Margot had protested, of course, pleading with him not to go.

'We have so little time together,' she had reminded him, and of course it was the truth, but these past few summers he had somehow or other found that when he was with her, the intensity of her love, her need, made him feel uncomfortably claustrophobic. It wasn't that he loved her any the less, he hastily reassured himself. How could he? She had given up so much for him, for their love, even to the extent of …

Pushing away his chair, he got up and walked across to the window.

He lived on the coast, and his apartment had wonderful views of the ocean. Whenever he had time, he enjoyed walking along the beach. When they were younger, the girls had enjoyed going with him, but they were almost grown up now, students at UCLA and with far better things to do with their time than visiting their ex-stepfather—he hadn't had any children with Carole-Ann. When the girls were younger, he had often thought that he would enjoy being a birth father. He liked children, but during the few years he had been married, he had felt that it would almost be tantamount to being unfaithful to Margot to have a sexual relationship with Carole-Ann, even though she was his wife. After all, their marriage had been more or less a business arrangement anyway. He had thought that the presence of a wife and two children in his background added the necessary *gravitas* to his professional status, and she, after a bad divorce and two failed live-in relationships, had told him quite bluntly what she wanted. It wasn't for sex so much as security, financial security and stability, for her and her daughters. And so they had married.

Margot had hated his marrying Carole-Ann; she had refused point-blank to attend the wedding or to meet with Carole-Ann and the girls.

Carole-Ann had known all about Margot. Impossible for him not to have told her.

'I love her,' he had told her quietly, 'but we can't marry and—'

'Not in some states maybe, but you could go away together, abroad …'

'No. To live apart from family and friends, in a kind of exile, that isn't what either of us wants. Margot is inclined to be a little highly strung.' He had paused, wondering how much he should tell Carole-Ann and then decided that it wasn't necessary to explain to her that the pressure of their love for one another had already brought Margot close to the edge of a nervous breakdown.

'I can't give Lloyd up … I can't. Please don't make me,' she had cried hysterically when her mother had intervened in their teenage love affair to remind them that they were by law prohibited

from sharing their lives. 'If you try to make us part, I shall kill myself,' she had threatened, and both Lloyd and her mother had known that there was a very real possibility that she would do exactly that.

Then, he had loved her just as much as she loved him. But there had always been room for other things in his life; he had played sports in those days, enjoyed sailing and socialising. But Margot had become so upset about the time they spent apart, the activities that kept them apart, that he had unwillingly dropped them to please her.

Uncharacteristically, it had originally been her idea that he should marry. Family pressure had been brought to bear on them both to make him agree to move to California, but following his departure, Margot had immediately stopped eating and made herself so ill that her mother had been forced to give in and agree that Lloyd should return to Boston and to the island every summer.

'You want me to marry, but why?' Lloyd had questioned Margot in astonishment when she had first raised the subject with him.

'Because, don't you see,' she had demanded passionately, 'that way, no one will be able to object.'

'What about my wife?'

'You're not to call her that,' Margot had immediately flashed furiously at him. 'She is not to be your wife … only I can ever really be that. She is simply to be married to you. It will be a marriage of convenience, that's all.'

Lloyd had laughed at her indulgently at the time. He had felt very indulgent towards her in those days. Since his move to UCLA and his taking on full responsibility for their business there, he felt that he had become immeasurably more mature, a man of the world, whereas Margot was still very much a cherished and protected girl.

But then he had met Carole-Ann, and Margot's suggestion had suddenly seemed to make good sense. There was a part of Lloyd that enjoyed playing the archetypal Bostonian gentleman's role … of rescuing a woman in distress. And at first Margot had seemed pleased. It was only later, after he had proposed and Carole-Ann had accepted, that she had started asking questions, telephoning him at all hours of the day and night—a habit that she had continued even after he and Carole-Ann were married.

'Look, I don't give a shit if she disturbs your sleep,' Carole-Ann had yelled at him once in the middle of a row, 'but I won't have the crazy bitch disturbing me, and waking up the kids.'

'She loves me—' Lloyd had started to protest.

But Carole-Ann had cut him short, telling him in angry disgust, 'She's mad, obsessed, possessed by what she feels for you, but as for love … I don't think she's capable of knowing what that means. If she really loved you, she'd want you to have a proper life of your own….'

That had been one of the worst summers, the worst years, of his life.

Six weeks after his return home from the island, he had received a hysterical telephone call from Margot.

'But you can't be pregnant,' he had protested in shock, his hand tightening sweatily around the receiver, his heart pounding sickly and heavily.

'I'm five weeks late,' Margot had screamed. 'Five weeks! Oh, God, Lloyd, what are we going to do?'

In the end, it had turned out to be a false alarm, but it had been after that that Margot had announced to him her decision to be sterilised.

'Margot, no,' he had protested instinctively, telling himself that the tight sensation he could feel in his throat was the anguish of his love for her rather than that of any psychological sense of a noose tightening around his neck. 'You could meet someone else, marry, have children with him …'

'No,' she had howled, the sound a primal protest. 'I shall never marry, never. The only man I want to marry is you, the only child I want is yours. You're just saying that because you don't love me any more,' she had accused him. 'You don't care. You—'

'Of course I love you,' Lloyd had protested.

At the end of the year, Carole-Ann informed him that she was filing for divorce. She had met someone else, she told him, shrugging aside his shock.

He had kept in touch with the girls although he had said nothing to Margot about doing so. She had, after his divorce, begun cross-questioning him about the places he went and the people, the women, he met. His was a lonely life; he had friends, of course, but his relationship with Margot had to be kept a secret from them. She at least had her family, their family, around her.

He glanced at his watch. Two o'clock. His meeting with Dr Jamie Friedland was at two-fifteen. Danny, his assistant, had made all the arrangements. Since the professor was apparently still looking for an apartment, having spent his first term at UCLA in someone else's spare room, it made sense for their meeting to take place at Lloyd's apartment. Normally, he preferred to see potential authors away from his own home, but Danny had been so thoroughly excited about the professor's manuscript that Lloyd hadn't had the heart to remind him of that.

Certainly his work made very interesting reading—what Lloyd could understand of it, which wasn't very much. But according to Danny, who could, it was a definitive work on its subject, breaking new ground and raising questions about established procedures other academics were going to find hard to answer.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lloyd saw a car turning into his driveway, a small European convertible sports model, driven by a redhead, her long hair mussed by the wind.

Frowning, Lloyd watched as she parked the car and got out. Tall and fashionably voluptuous, she moved with a confidence, an inherent liking of herself, that momentarily took his breath away. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen a woman so completely at peace with herself. She was, he decided, the complete antithesis of Margot. His frown deepened as he saw her look up at his window before heading for the entrance to his apartment. Ten seconds later as his intercom buzzed, he heard her announcing her arrival.

Dr Jamie Friedland to see Lloyd Kennet.

As he activated the automatic lock and let her in, Lloyd had the oddest sensation of being on the brink of something so fateful and portentous that for a moment, he almost felt half-afraid to meet her.

Irritably, he pushed it away. So he had made a mistake assuming that she was a man. Why should that matter?

6

No one paid any attention to the fashionably dressed, elegant woman parking her car on the sunny residential London street. Why should they? The BMW might have been a more expensive, more up-market model than the others of its breed parked outside their owners' smartly painted front gates, but it fitted neatly alongside the wide variety of chunky four-wheel-drive vehicles that had become the nineties' version of the more traditional Volvo estate as the favourite vehicle for the school-and-shopping run.

The large double-fronted house close to which she had parked had recently been converted into a small hotel—the kind patronised by ladies of a certain age up from the country to spend a few days shopping and catching up with old friends. It might not have the éclat or the convenience of its Knightsbridge sisters but, 'My dear, one gets … feels … so comfortable there—and safe….' and its prices were, of course, so much cheaper.

But it wasn't the hotel that was Claudia's destination even though she spent several minutes staring at it.

The street, her surroundings, once so familiar to her, had changed dramatically from the days when she and Garth had rented a flat in one of the shabby and rather run-down terraced houses that had lined it. Since then, they had been smartened up and gentrified out of all recognition, their gleaming paintwork and shiny, clean, linen-draped windows confusing and bewildering her.

The flat she and Garth had rented had been at number twelve on the top floor—or rather in the attic—up a flight of rickety stairs covered by a piece of dust-filled, ancient, dark red patterned carpet—or at least they assumed it had once been dark red.

They had found it at the end of a long week of scouring the city for somewhere suitable to live that they could afford, and with Garth having only hours of his leave left before he was due to return to his regiment, they had pounced in relief on the opportunity to rent a place that was within their budget.

'At least we'll have our own bathroom and kitchen,' Claudia had murmured when Garth shook his head over the grimy shabbiness of the small rooms, 'and decorating it will give me something to do while you're away.'

'You'll be working,' Garth had reminded her before adding protectively, 'and besides, I don't like the idea of your climbing about on ladders when I'm not here.'

They had still been very much at the honeymoon stage of their marriage then, still very protective of their love and their privacy, and Claudia had been adoringly proud of the way Garth had refused both his and her own parents' offer of financial assistance towards providing them with a better home.

'No, we must start as we mean to go on,' Garth had told her firmly while they were discussing the subject. All the protests she had been about to make melted beneath his kisses, just as her body did, when he added, whispering the words against her mouth, 'I want to look after you myself, sweet. I want to take care of you.'

It might have been the seventies, she might have had her own newly burgeoning career, but Claudia had been brought up in a household by parents who adhered to the old-fashioned values of *their* own parents, and while she would have hated Garth to be domineering or bossy, to expect her to treat him as some kind of superior simply because he was a man, she made no bones about the fact that she enjoyed being pampered by him, being shown that he loved and cared about her; that he wanted to protect her and look after her. It was, after all, exactly the way her father treated her mother, and her parents had been happily married now for over twenty-five years.

They had moved into the flat one rainy weekend, good-humouredly assisted by some of Garth's friends from the regiment, who had helped carry the sturdy pieces of furniture, given to Claudia and Garth by their parents, up to their new home.

'But, darling, why waste your money buying furniture when Daddy and I have so much,' her mother had protested when Claudia tried to object. 'This table was your great-grandmother's,' she'd added softly after she and Claudia had gone up into the attic to sort through the furniture that was stored there.

And even though the solid furnishings looked slightly incongruous in the rather down-at-heel surroundings of their new home, it was comforting to have things around them that came from both their families, Claudia had told Garth lovingly.

Only their bed was new—at Garth's masterful insistence—and Claudia had blushed slightly when they had gone to buy it and the salesman had insisted that they try it out.

'We find that many couples these days are going for the larger king-sized bed,' the salesman had told them, obviously scenting a better commission from the larger sale.

Garth had shaken his head and whispered teasingly to Claudia, 'No way. I want you just as close to me as I can get you, in bed and out of it. I don't want there to be *any* space, *any* distance, *anything* or *anyone* between us, Claudia,' he had emphasised later when they had been alone in his car. He had parked down a quiet, overgrown country track, then pulled her into his arms and kissed her passionately to reinforce the intensity of his words.

Claudia had responded to him equally passionately, if a little shyly. She might not any longer be a virgin but she was still a little hesitant, a little unsure, even a little afraid of her own sexuality. She had been startled by her physical hunger for him and wondered how uninhibited it was permissible for a woman to be.

After Garth and his friends had finished carrying the furniture up the four flights of stairs to their attic home, Claudia had cooked them all a huge meal of spaghetti Bolognese cooked on the Baby Belling stove that was part of the fitments of the flat and that Claudia and her mother had spent hours cleaning with hundreds of packs of Brillo pads.

Afterwards, they had all gone to the local pub, where the short army haircuts of the men had marked them out quite clearly as what they were among the other young men there with floppy, often shoulder-length hair.

The air in the pub had been thick with cigarette smoke and the sweet, cloying smell of hash, and Claudia had been glad when it eventually came time to leave.

She and Garth had walked home, arms around one another, and in the shadows on the corner of the street, Garth had stopped and pulled her quickly into his arms, kissing her with fierce passion.

'God, I want you, Claudia,' he told her thickly. 'Tonight, watching you …' He stopped, shaking his head, not totally sure just how she would react if he told her about the almost savage spurt of lust and love he had felt earlier on in the evening, watching her as she leaned over the sink to reach something on its far side, the action drawing the fabric of her jeans tightly across the rounded peachiness of her behind.

The temptation to walk up behind her and reach around her to caress the warm weight of her breasts while he … Perhaps it was just as well that they *hadn't* been alone and that the others had still been there at the time, he reflected wryly as he studied her face in the moonlight. She was so soft and gentle, so sweetly responsive, that he couldn't quite bring himself to demand more of her, to show her the more forceful and sensual side of his sexuality. There was something about Claudia—a combination perhaps of her own innate gentleness and her upbringing—that set her apart from her more robust peers, which was one of the reasons he had fallen in love with her in the first place, Garth freely acknowledged.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.