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MORTIMER

MILLS & BOON™



**Point of
No Return**

Carole Mortimer

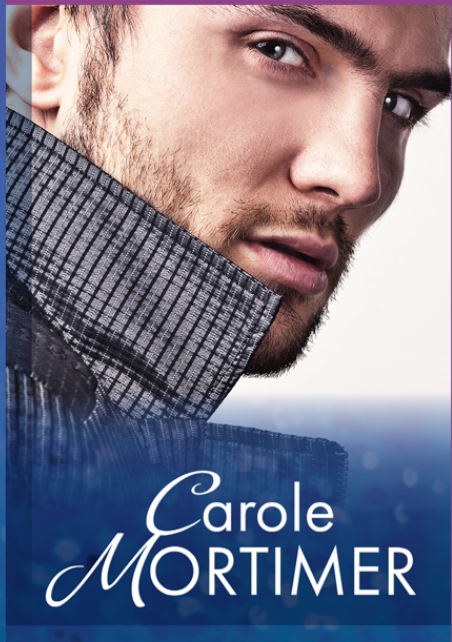
Point Of No Return

Аннотация

Carole Mortimer is one of Mills & Boon's best loved Modern Romance authors. With nearly 200 books published and a career spanning 35 years, Mills & Boon are thrilled to present her complete works available to download for the very first time! Rediscover old favourites - and find new ones! - in this fabulous collection...Falling for the enemy...Even before she knew him personally, Megan Finch disliked Jerome Towers, the wealthy landowner plotting to buy out her family's farm. And when she eventually meets him, he is as arrogant as she expected! And yet Megan can't help but be deeply captivated by Jerome's charm and magnetism...Now she'll do anything to avoid Jerome discovering that she has been accused of a scandalous relationship with his half-brother! An accusation that has destroyed her career... Will Jerome turn out to be her saviour or her downfall?

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MILLS & BOON



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CHAPTER ONE

‘It’s no good, Megan, I have to go.’

Megan tucked the bedclothes more firmly about her mother.

‘You aren’t going anywhere, not with a cold like that.’

‘But I have to,’ her mother insisted nasally. ‘We need the money, you know that.’

Oh yes, she knew they needed the money. She had heard of nothing but how badly they needed money since her return yesterday. But she would not sell her share of the farm, not for any amount Jerome Towers cared to offer. This farm could be made to work for them if they tried hard enough, and now that she had been dismissed from the hospital she could help her brother Brian with some of the work. Finch Farm wouldn’t even be noticed in the amount of land the Towers estate already had, but to them it meant a livelihood. At least it would, when they could make it work.

‘They won’t miss you up at the house for one morning,’ she told her mother firmly. ‘Besides, we wouldn’t want the new owner to catch your cold from you, now would we? With all that wheeling and dealing he does each day he needs all his strength.’

‘He doesn’t wheel and deal, dear,’ Emily Finch collapsed back on the pillows, her face pale. ‘He’s a business man.’

‘And he makes a huge profit doing it, which means someone else suffers for his gain. Look how much his lawyer offered us

for this place—peanuts!’ Megan dismissed disgustedly. ‘And all the time you’re working in his house as a kitchenmaid!’

‘It isn’t as bad as it sounds, Megan. The housekeeper, Mrs Reece, is a very nice woman, and as for Freda, the cook....!’ She gave a husky laugh, unwittingly increasing the irritation in her throat and sending her into a spasm of coughing. ‘Oh dear,’ she sighed, ‘I really don’t feel very well.’

‘Of course you don’t, Megan said impatiently. ‘Now you just lie there and I’ll get you a nice cup of tea.’

‘But what about my work at The Towers?’ her mother frowned worriedly.

‘What about it? Let someone else peel the man’s potatoes for lunch,’ said Megan almost angrily.

‘There isn’t anyone else—and he doesn’t eat potatoes.’ Her mother gave a wan smile.

‘Trying not to get a middle-aged paunch, I suppose,’ Megan muttered on her way out of the bedroom.

‘What did you say, dear?’ her mother called after her.

She appeared back at the bedroom doorway. ‘Nothing of importance. Now just try and get some rest.’

Her mother frowned. ‘But what about Brian’s breakfast? And feeding the hens? And then there’s Bertha to see to.’

‘Bertha?’ Megan cut in with a laugh. ‘I’d forgotten we still have old Bertha.’

‘Of course we have,’ her mother said indignantly. ‘She’s in the nature of a family pet.’

‘A cow, a family pet?’ Megan teased.

‘She isn’t just any cow, Megan. She was the first one we were able to buy when we moved here ten years ago. When your father died last year we sold the rest of the herd—we had to—but I refused to part with Bertha. She’s more like a friend.’

Megan shook her head. ‘I never thought of you as a sentimentalist, Mum.’ But she was secretly glad that Bertha was still with them, she was a favourite with her too, although she wasn’t going to admit it.

‘I’m not a sentimentalist,’ her mother said sharply. ‘I’ve never had to be, with the burden of this farm around our necks. But that cow is just something special.’

‘Okay, Mum,’ Megan grinned. ‘I’ll see to Bertha and the hens, and then I’ll cook Brian’s breakfast.’

‘And The Towers?’ her mother still persisted.

Megan frowned. ‘You aren’t expecting me to do that too?’

‘Well, if you don’t I shall have to get up and do it. If I don’t work I don’t get paid. And at the moment, with you out of work, we need that money badly.’

She knew her mother’s words weren’t intended as a rebuke, nevertheless she knew she had put an added burden on her mother and brother. Until she had left the hospital she had sent money home every month, but now that she was out of a job, things were going to be even more strained monetarily.

‘All right, Mum,’ she sighed, ‘I’ll do that too.’

Her mother’s worried frown disappeared. ‘Oh, thank you,

love! I usually start at ten o'clock.'

'Yes, Mum. But it's only eight o'clock at the moment. Don't worry, I won't let you down and be late. I have plenty of time to do all those little jobs you consider essential before going to The Towers.'

'I should get Brian's breakfast first,' her mother advised sleepily. 'He'll be in in a minute.'

Megan yawned. 'What time did he leave?'

'Five-thirty, as usual.'

'My God!' she groaned. 'And I thought getting up at seven o'clock at the hospital was bad enough. How does he do it?' The thought of getting out of bed at that unearthly hour horrified her.

'Because he has to.' Her mother lay back with her eyes closed. 'He works much too hard for a boy of twenty-two.'

Megan had noticed last night how tired her brother was looking—and no wonder, if he was getting up at that time of morning. 'Does he need to do so much?'

'Well, there's no one else to do it. We're just starting to get back on our feet, just starting to make the land pay for itself. It wasn't easy to turn from a livestock farm to growing vegetables, but as you know, we couldn't afford to restock.' They heard the back door slam. 'That will be Brian now.'

'Then I'd better get a move on. I'll bring your cup of tea to you in a minute.'

Brian still looked tired. Three years older than herself, he bore the worry of the farm without complaint. He was no more eager

to sell his share of the farm than Megan was, but their mother was all for getting rid of it.

Their father had died of an incurable disease the year before, and during the last months of his life he had run up many debts because of his inability to do the necessary work about the farm. Brian had managed as best he could, but in the end they had been forced to sell the livestock to pay the debts. Megan had just started her nursing training at the local hospital twelve miles away at the time, and her mother had insisted she carry on with her career. And now she had been thrown out through no fault of her own!

‘Hello, Sis.’ Brian sat down wearily. ‘Where’s Mum?’

‘She isn’t feeling well this morning, so she’s having a lie down.’

His brown eyes, so like their mother’s, looked worried. In fact he was very like their mother to look at, stocky and short like her, with her brown hair and eyes. Megan took after their father, her long fair hair almost silver, her eyes green splashes of colour in her thin pale face.

‘It isn’t anything serious, is it?’ He took the mug of tea she held out to him.

‘Just a cold.’ Megan put a slice of toast on the tray with her mother’s tea. ‘But I don’t think she should neglect it. I’ll just take this in to her and then I’ll cook your breakfast.’

‘Don’t rush on my account,’ he said morosely. ‘I can’t do much, the damned tractor’s broken down again.’

Megan took the tray through to her mother, coming back to

put Brian's bacon and eggs on to cook. 'Any idea what's wrong with it?' she referred to the tractor.

'No. You know mechanics aren't my line. I rang The Towers and asked Jeff to come over and have a look at it.'

'Jeff?'

'The new manager.'

Megan frowned. 'I didn't know they had one. What happened to Ralph Coates?'

'Jerome Towers sacked him. But Jeff's a nice bloke, and he knows a lot about mechanics.'

'I suppose he has to,' she grimaced, sitting opposite him as he tucked hungrily into his breakfast. 'Jerome Towers only knows how to sit behind a desk all day and make money.'

'What have you got against the man?' he chuckled. 'I know he made an offer for the farm, but that's no reason to hate his guts. Jeff says he's a really great bloke, very fair.'

'Well, Jeff would say that.' She sipped her coffee, which was all the breakfast she ever had. The thought of eating the type of breakfast Brian was enjoying made her feel heartily sick. She had never been able to face food this early in the morning. 'He's his employer. And I would hardly call the offer he made for this farm fair.'

'But it was, Megan, very fair. He was offering well over its real value.'

'Why?'

He frowned. 'What do you mean, why?'

‘Why was he offering more?’ she asked suspiciously. ‘Does he know something we don’t?’

‘Like what?’ Brian laughed.

‘Well ... like maybe someone else is buying this land up for development, and he wants to buy it cheap and sell for an astronomical price. Or maybe he—’

Brian shook his head, still smiling. ‘You watch too much television, young lady. Mr Towers wants to buy this farm and land because it’s right in the middle of his estate. Dad bought this land off the old Squire when he was selling off plots to give him money to run the rest of the estate. Mr Towers has managed to buy most of the other smallholdings back, and he would like this one to complete it.’

‘We aren’t selling!’ Megan said stubbornly. ‘Just because he has pots of money he thinks he can buy anything. Well, this is our home, and we’re staying put.’

‘Are you sure you want to after that trouble at the hospital? Rumours are bound to start when people realise you’re back, and it won’t take long for the truth to filter back from Redford.’

Colour flooded her cheeks. ‘It wasn’t my fault, and you know it!’

‘Of course *I* know it. But other people are going to believe the evidence, Megan. It didn’t just happen once, it happened twice, and as far as a lot of people are concerned, especially in this close-knit community, that’s just once too many.’

‘I’ve already explained to you, Brian, the time on the ward he

just pulled me into his room and wouldn't let me out—and he actually broke into my room at the nursing home.'

'There wasn't any forced entry.'

'I was down in the kitchen making myself a cup of coffee, and when I got back—well, he was there waiting for me.' Megan blushed at the memory of it.

'You could have screamed for help,' Brian pointed out reasonably.

'I was just about to. But he'd always seemed so nice until then, always polite and friendly, and I thought I could reason with him.'

'Even after the attack he made on you on the ward?' her brother derided.

'I managed to get free that time, and he hadn't made a move like that since.'

'I don't suppose he needed to, not when one of the doctors had seen you lying on the bed with him, the front of your uniform unbuttoned.'

'He was in a fever and had the strength of ten men. Dr Freeman and Sister Miles believed me when I explained what had happened,' Megan defended.

'Until he was found in your bedroom at midnight. Didn't either of you realise the night staff would miss him from his room? A hospital isn't like a hotel, you know, not even if you are a private patient. You can't just go in and out as you please.'

'I do know, Brian,' she said indignantly. 'And I told you, he wasn't there at my invitation.'

‘Oh, I believe you. But I doubt many other people will around here. You’ll be the scandal of the neighbourhood.’

‘As long as you and Mum believe me I don’t care about anyone else.’

‘You will. Village life can be very uncomfortable if you’re the subject of the gossip,’ he warned seriously.

‘They may not find out about it, there’s always that chance. I don’t intend telling anyone, and he’ll go back to London. He wouldn’t even have been in Redford if he hadn’t been visiting someone in the area when he was taken ill.’

‘Appendicitis, wasn’t it?’

‘Mm,’ she grimaced. ‘But he was a private patient. And sometimes he acted like it.’

‘I thought you said he was friendly and nice.’

‘He was, most of the time, but that didn’t stop him being aware of the fact that he was paying for his treatment.’

Brian stood up. ‘Well, I hope for your sake that none of this filters back. And don’t forget Jeff will be over later to look at the tractor.’

‘Before ten, I hope.’ She cleared the table. ‘I have to take over for Mum at The Towers,’ she explained. ‘I wouldn’t want Jeff to come to the house while I’m out and disturb Mum.’

‘I don’t suppose he’ll be too late, he has his own work to do. The tractor’s out in the yard, I managed to get it back this far. Tell Jeff it keeps cutting out, something to do with the flow of petrol, I think. I’ll be up in the top field if he needs me.’

‘What about the keys?’ she called out as he reached the door. ‘In the lock.’ He smiled. ‘I doubt anyone would want to steal it.’

Megan mentally agreed with him as she stood at the sink washing the dishes. The tractor could be clearly seen from the kitchen window, and like the rest of the farm was badly in need of attention. Its red paint was badly rusted, showing its age. Megan had noticed yesterday that the farmhouse was badly in need of a coat of paint, the white paint having gone grey and was flaking in places.

It was curiously relaxing feeding the chickens. They were such uncomplicated creatures, pecking away at their feed all day, occasionally at each other, seemingly in fun, laying a few eggs if they felt like it, and then sleeping in their nice warm roost at night. What a life! And what Megan wouldn’t give for their simple happiness.

Now she just had to see to Bertha, make sure her mother was comfortable and had everything she needed, and then she could get over to The Towers. The trouble was actually finding Bertha. She looked everywhere for her, in the shed, in the neighbouring fields, but Bertha wasn’t to be found.

And then she saw her! She was being led back into the dusty dry yard by the man Megan presumed to be Jeff from The Towers. He was very handsome, extremely so, and she was made to feel conscious of her grubby denims and tee-shirt. Then she dismissed the feeling of inadequacy, no one could look bandbox-fresh working on a farm, and Jeff would appreciate that fact.

The only trouble was, this man managed to look reasonably smart, the beige corduroys and black sweatshirt he wore emphasising the muscled perfection of his body. He was tall, almost six and a half feet she would have said, at least ten years her senior, with thick black hair brushed back from his face, a strong tanned face with a deep cleft in the chin. She couldn't see what colour his eyes were from this distance, but she would take a bet on them being blue. They had to be, in every other respect this man was her ideal, his eyes had to be blue to complete that ideal.

She stood and watched him as he led the cow over to where she stood, the docile Bertha looking perfectly happy to be taking this morning stroll. The man at her side moved with the grace of a cat, lightfooted and very sure, making Bertha look more ungainly than usual.

Megan was wrong, his eyes weren't blue, they were brown, a deep velvety brown that on reflection she thought she preferred. But they didn't look very friendly at the moment, appearing to look down disdainfully at both her and poor Bertha. And Brian had said he was a 'nice bloke'! Still, maybe he was when you got to know him. After all, by the look of things Bertha had been wandering again. Megan couldn't remember a time when she hadn't done it, but maybe being a newcomer to the district Jeff hadn't heard of Bertha's wanderlust.

'The absent Megan, I presume,' he drawled, his voice husky, with no trace of an East Anglian accent, pointing to him not being

a local of Norfolk. Megan wondered what had made him decide to work in an area that was flat and lacking in outward beauty, although she had always thought it had a certain charm of its own.

‘Yes—I mean, no. What I really mean,’ she blushed at her confusion, ‘is that yes, I’m Megan, and no, I’m not absent any longer.’

He frowned. ‘I thought you were training to be a nurse?’

‘I was,’ again she blushed, ‘but I—I’ve been ill. They thought I wasn’t strong enough to carry on such arduous work,’ she invented, her fingers crossed behind her back as she told the lie.

‘They?’ He raised one dark eyebrow.

‘Er—yes, they. The senior nursing officials.’

‘I see.’ He was watching her closely with narrowed brown eyes. ‘And are you back to stay?’

‘Oh yes,’ she smiled. ‘I’m going to help Brian on the farm.’

‘And won’t that prove rather—arduous too?’ he queried mockingly.

Megan gave him a sharp glance. Surely he hadn’t heard of her dismissal and the reason for it? No, he couldn’t have done. It had only happened two days ago, hardly time for her to have realised it herself. Her one consolation in the whole affair had been the fact that they had asked Roddy Meyers to leave the hospital too. Of course he was recovered from his illness, but it had still afforded her some satisfaction to know she hadn’t taken the blame alone.

‘Oh, I’ll only do the light jobs to start with.’ That one little lie

was taking her deeper and deeper into a web of deception. She just hoped Brian wasn't friendly enough with the man to tell him the truth. 'And the fresh air will do me good,' she added for good measure.

'Yes, you are a little pale.'

She was naturally pale, but she wasn't going to tell him that. She blushed at the intentness of his arrogant gaze, feeling as if he stripped the clothes from her back and explored every curve of her body. It was extraordinary to feel this way with a total stranger—even if he was so attractive.

'I see you brought Bertha back,' she patted the cow affectionately on the neck. 'Where did she go this time? Not the Towers?'

He nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

'Well, well, Bertha, you can't be as old as we thought you were.' The Towers was at least a mile away, and much too far for the aged cow to have walked, she would have thought. 'I hope she didn't trample on the snooty Mr Towers' flowerbeds or anything?'

Was it her imagination or did he seem to stiffen? 'I beg your pardon?' he said in a stilted voice.

'Sorry,' Megan blushed, 'I shouldn't have spoken like that about your employer.' She gave an involuntary jerk as their hands touched as she took Bertha's rope out of his grasp and tied the cow to a post. This man had nice hands, long and hard, and very confident. It was the hand of a man who wasn't afraid of hard

work, and seemed to go with the rest of his rugged appearance. ‘But don’t you find him snooty?’ she asked interestedly.

‘I can’t say that I have. Did someone say that he was?’

She shrugged. ‘It was just the impression I got. Still, it isn’t important. The tractor is over there,’ she pointed to the stationary vehicle.

‘Yes?’ He appeared puzzled.

‘The tractor Brian called you about this morning.’ Surely this man couldn’t have these looks and body, and be a fool? That just wouldn’t be fair. But he didn’t look a fool, far from it. There was a shrewd hardness to his eyes, a determination to the firm mouth and jaw. No, this man looked far from being a fool. There had to be some misunderstanding. She frowned. ‘Didn’t you take the message yourself?’

‘I couldn’t have done,’ he told her abruptly, ‘or I would have known what you’re talking about.’

She tried to ignore the sharpness of his tone. He had had to walk back here with Bertha, and knowing the speed the cow walked it must have taken him ages, so she could make excuses for his shortness of temper. ‘Brian called The Towers this morning and asked if you could look at our tractor. I was under the impression that you had agreed to come over.’

‘I see. Well, perhaps you could put—Bertha?—into a shed, and I’ll take a look at it.’ He began striding towards the tractor. ‘Any idea what the trouble is?’ he shot the question over his shoulder.

Megan came back from settling the cow into her stall. ‘Something to do with the fuel getting through,’ she told him vaguely, no more familiar with the workings of this machine than Brian was. She knew nothing about mechanics; she had tried to learn how to drive once, but much to the relief of her driving-instructor she had given up after a couple of lessons. She had turned out to be one of those people whose personality changed as soon as they got behind the wheel, becoming aggressive and unmanageable.

‘Thanks,’ he taunted her lack of knowledge, ‘that will be a great help.’ He lifted up the side covering of the engine before getting up behind the wheel and attempting to start it. The engine gave a couple of stutters, roared into life, and then stopped. ‘Fuel starvation,’ he muttered as he came back to look inside it.

‘Do you have any idea why?’ asked Megan.

‘Not yet,’ he derided. ‘The fuel not getting through can be due to any number of things.’

‘Oh.’ So he really did know a lot about engines. She watched him as he worked, offering him her handkerchief when he got oil on his hands.

‘No thanks,’ he refused the snowy white square. ‘I can quite easily clean up when I get back.’ He put up a hand to his brow, wiping away the fine film of perspiration that had appeared in the heat of the day.

‘Now look what you’ve done!’ Megan exclaimed. ‘You have oil all over your face,’ she explained at his querying look.

He moved to stand just in front of her. 'Wipe it off,' he ordered huskily.

Although made as a request it took the form of a challenge, the nearness of him, the utterly male earthy smell of him making her tremble. He looked down at her from his great height, seeming to know of her reaction to him, to the unhidden warmth of his brown eyes. She stared fixedly at his mouth. He had such a nice mouth, the lower lip fuller than the top, pointing to a latent sensuality. She had never met a man like him before, challenging and infinitely male.

'Well?' His gaze on her mouth was almost like a caress.

Megan had heard of men like him, men with the charisma to captivate and hold at a glance. And she was very much afraid she had been more than captivated. 'Yes?' she asked breathlessly, unable to look away from the magnetism of his face.

'The oil,' he reminded her with amusement.

'Oh—oh yes,' she blushed at her stupidity. 'Could you bend down a little? You're so tall I can't reach,' she explained.

'Certainly.' His head bent and he put his mouth against hers, holding her with just the touch of his lips, like a trapped butterfly. He made no effort to touch her in any other way, their bodies only inches apart, but still not touching.

When he finally stepped back Megan stood like one in a trance. She had been kissed before, plenty of times, but not like that, never like that. It had taken her breath away, her strength, her very will. That he was a master at the gentle art of seduction

she had no doubt. And he knew exactly what he had done to her—his teasing brown eyes told her so.

‘Well, Megan,’ he said softly, his breath stirring her hair, ‘it appears that you now have oil on your face too.’

‘I do?’ she breathed, completely mesmerised.

‘You do.’ He took the handkerchief out of her hand and gently wiped her cheek. ‘Have dinner with me tonight?’ he asked huskily.

‘I—I beg your pardon?’

‘Have dinner with me,’ he repeated, smoothing back her hair from her face.

‘I—I can’t,’ she refused reluctantly. She wanted to go out with him, very much, but she could hardly leave her mother on her own when she wasn’t well.

He straightened, his hands falling away from her hair, those beautiful brown eyes narrowing. ‘Boy-friend?’

She blinked her bewilderment. ‘Boy——? Oh no,’ she smiled. ‘My mother, actually.’

‘Your mother?’ He raised dark eyebrows. ‘Aren’t you old enough to choose for yourself who you go out with?’

Megan laughed. ‘Of course I am. That wasn’t what I meant. My mother isn’t feeling well. Just a cold, I think——’

‘In your expert opinion,’ he cut in mockingly.

She flushed. ‘A year’s training hardly qualifies me for anything.’ Unwittingly her bitterness showed. She had been a good nurse, had enjoyed her work and it had all been taken away

from her by Roddy Meyers. If she ever met him again ...! But that wasn't likely to happen, he had already left the hospital on his way home before Megan herself had left. 'But I think I can diagnose a cold,' she added dryly.

'How about later in the week?'

'Well, I—I don't know,' she said reluctantly. 'I'll be working up at The Towers this week and—'

'*You* will?' he frowned darkly.

'Mm. Mum works in the kitchen, you see. And—well, we need the money. So if I'm working up at the house perhaps we could have lunch together one day. I think Mum usually finishes about one.'

He seemed to withdraw from her, moving to shut the hood of the tractor. 'Maybe we could,' he agreed noncommittally. 'I think your brother will have to get someone out to look at this. I can't pinpoint the trouble. He can borrow one of The Towers' tractors until this one is on the go again.' He turned to leave.

Megan watched him go, a frown on her face. 'Jeff?' she called after him, watching as he slowly turned, his hair appearing almost black in the strong sunlight. 'I can call you Jeff, can't I?' she asked uncertainly.

He shrugged. 'Why not?'

Why not, indeed? From his suddenly cold manner she must have done something to upset him. But what? 'I wasn't refusing to go out with you,' she said hastily. 'It's just that it's a bit awkward this week.'

He nodded. 'Next week, perhaps.'

'Or lunch ...' she trailed off as he strode away without turning.

What on earth was the matter with the man? He couldn't just walk out of her life like this, not when he had suddenly become so important to her. And yet he was walking away, was even now turning the corner at the end of their dirt driveway. He'd gone!

And she would have to go too if she was to get to The Towers in time for work. They could have walked down together if he hadn't disappeared so quickly. Oh well, perhaps he was just the moody type. She just hoped he was in a more friendly mood the next time she saw him.

She took her mother another cup of tea before leaving, assuring her that all the jobs around the farm had been taken care of.

'No one told me how good-looking Jeff is.' She plumped her mother's pillows for her.

Her mother frowned. 'Jeff Robbins?'

'Mm. He's really gorgeous!'

'If you like that type. Has he just been down, then?'

'Mm. He says the tractor needs expert attention. And tell Brian he said he could have one of The Towers' tractors. Although what Snooty Mr Towers will say to that I don't know.'

Her mother gave her a disapproving look. 'I hope you didn't talk about him like that to Jeff. He's very loyal to Mr Towers.'

'Mm,' Megan sighed. 'He didn't seem to like it when I made a comment about his employer.'

‘What sort of comment?’ her mother asked worriedly. ‘You didn’t say anything insulting, did you, Megan? Jeff’s a friend of Brian’s, and——’

‘Don’t worry so, Mum,’ she soothed. ‘Whatever I said it didn’t seem to bother him. He asked me out to dinner a little while later.’

‘Jeff did? But I thought he was taking out Rachel Saunders.’

That wouldn’t surprise her; he looked the sort of man who would already have a girl-friend, and Rachel Saunders was very beautiful. She and Megan had been at school together, although the two of them had never been friends, as Rachel was three years her senior. Megan remembered she had had a crush on Trevor Dunn, the boy Rachel had become engaged to. The engagement had later been broken, but the dislike had stuck.

‘Well, I’m not going, so it doesn’t really matter. Now I’m off to The Towers. Don’t forget to tell Brian about the tractor.’

‘I won’t, dear. And tell Mrs Reece I’ll try and be in tomorrow.’

‘I’ll tell her no such thing,’ Megan said firmly. ‘You’re going to stay right here until you’re completely better. I don’t mind going to The Towers.’ Especially if she got the chance of seeing Jeff Robbins again.

The Towers was a grey stone building, a massive place with at least fifteen bedrooms. It had belonged to Henry Towers until his death last year, and now it belonged to his nephew Jerome. Old Squire Towers, as Henry had been called, had run into debt over the estate, refusing to ask his nephew for help, claiming he was a

pompous snob who would gloat over his uncle's misfortune, and instead the Squire had resorted to selling off parts of the estate.

Of course the nephew had bought back all these smallholdings—except theirs!—and so old Squire Towers might just as well have asked him for the help in the first place. But at least this way he had been spared the humiliation of approaching his nephew with a begging bowl. The fact that Jerome Towers was a millionaire, and his uncle was scraping together every penny he could, should have told the former that unless he offered his help it would never be asked for. Obviously by the sale of the land he had never offered.

Megan walked up the long gravel driveway, admiring the rambling beauty of the house and accompanying stables, and walked around the back of the house to knock nervously on the kitchen door. It wouldn't do for her to knock on the front door, not when she was just hired help!

A short, plump, red-faced woman opened the door, her ample frame covered by a paisley patterned overall. This just had to be Freda, the cook.

‘Yes, love?’ she smiled.

Megan smiled back shyly, and explained about her mother's illness and the fact that she had come as her replacement.

Freda was suitably sympathetic about Emily Finch's illness, although she looked rather harassed. ‘Thank goodness you're here, love, that's all I can say,’ she sighed. ‘Patsy's not come in today either, and I've just cooked Mr Towers' brother's breakfast

and there's no one to take it up but me. I don't like showing myself in the main part of the house. I'm a cook,' she smiled happily, her three chins wobbling, 'and a cook's place is in the kitchen.'

And if this woman was any advert for the success of her own cooking it must indeed be first class!

'Isn't it a bit late for breakfast?' Megan asked, hanging her jacket up behind the door. She had changed into a tan wool blouse and deep brown skirt, as her denims were hardly suitable for working here. Especially if she had to run all over the house with breakfast trays!

'That it is. But he's been having a bit of a rest. He only arrived yesterday.'

'Well, so had she, but that didn't mean she could laze about in bed all morning. In fact, she had been up earlier this morning than she usually was. 'I didn't know Mr Towers had a brother,' she said interestedly, having thought him an only child.

'Neither did we.' Freda put a rack of toast on the tray with the plate of sausages, eggs and tomatoes. 'Not until he arrived.'

He sounded exactly like his brother, thoughtless and selfish. 'Shall I take the tray through now?' Megan offered.

'I'll just put this pot of tea on, he likes tea in the morning. There!' she looked down at her handiwork, 'that ought to keep body and soul together until lunchtime.'

As it was almost that now, Megan wouldn't be at all surprised. 'Which way is the dining-room?' she asked,

'Oh, he isn't in the dining-room, love,' Freda smiled. 'He's

upstairs in his bedroom.'

'Oh,' After her recent experience at the hospital she wasn't sure she dared risk going to any man's bedroom.

'At the top of the stairs, fourth door on the right,' Freda directed, not noticing her reluctance. 'It's very good of you to stand in for your mum, Megan. A good worker, is your mum.'

Megan knew that. Her mother had never been able to sit idle while there was work waiting to be done, and as there was usually plenty of work to do on the farm ... 'The rest will do her good,' she smiled. 'And I'll do my best to take her place.'

'I'm sure you will, love. I didn't mean—'

'I know you didn't,' Megan laughed, knowing very well that this friendly lady had meant it as a compliment to her mother. 'I'll try not to be long with this,' she promised.

She had the impression of unobtrusive luxury as she walked through the house, The Towers having been completely redecorated and refurnished before the new owner had moved in. The workmen had been working on the place for weeks before Jerome Towers moved in. Megan didn't pause over her admiration of the new colour schemes, not wanting to arrive at the bedroom with a cold breakfast.

Not that she didn't think the man deserved it. It was typical of Jerome Towers' brother to arrive on the doorstep unannounced and then want to be waited on hand and foot. Breakfast in bed at ten-thirty in the morning, indeed! Brian had already put in five hours' work by this time! It just didn't seem fair.

She knocked on the wood-panelled door, hearing the mumble of some sort of answer. She knocked again, just in case it had been an instruction to wait and not to come in.

She heard another mumble inside, a crash as something hit the floor, and then the door swung open.

‘You!’ she exclaimed in horror, the tray almost falling out of her hands.

Standing in front of her, his blond hair tousled from sleep, his eyes bleary, his only garment a pair of blue silk pyjama trousers resting low down on his hips, the beginning of his recent appendectomy in evidence, was Roddy Meyers!

CHAPTER TWO

THE sleepy look left his eyes and he leant casually back against the doorjamb. ‘Well, well, well,’ he drawled mockingly, ‘if it isn’t Little Megan Finch!’

She had recovered from some of the shock by now—but not all of it! And she had thought she would never see him again, had *hoped* she would never see him again. ‘What are you doing here?’ she demanded accusingly. She must have the wrong bedroom, must have turned left instead of right, but that still didn’t explain this man being here.

The last time she had seen him had been when he had been pulled off her as she lay helpless on her bed, helpless because he had just pushed her there before attempting to make love to her. They had been discovered by a senior nursing officer as she did her rounds of the nurses’ home, and although Megan had claimed her innocence her story hadn’t been believed, because this man, Roddy Meyers, had claimed she had invited him there, had said she had been attracted to him from the first. Then of course the first incident in his private room had been brought up.

She couldn’t blame the people in charge for thinking the worst, not on the evidence they had. But she would never forgive this man for the lies he had told about her. He was despicable, and she hated him more than she had ever hated anyone in her life.

She pushed past him to put the laden tray down on the

dressing-table. Damn Jerome Towers' brother, he would have to wait for his breakfast, be it cold or not. She had something much more serious to deal with at the moment.

'I asked you a question.' She turned on Roddy Meyers, her green eyes sparkling angrily. 'What are you doing at The Towers?'

'I would have thought it was obvious,' he taunted, obviously not realising how close he was to being struck. 'I'm staying here.'

'What is this?' she snapped. 'A hotel?'

He raised blond eyebrows. 'Not as far as I know. What do you mean?'

Megan sighed, wondering why it was that she had resisted this young man's advances so relentlessly that he had had to resort to force. He was good-looking in a youthful sort of way, twenty-five years of age, blond hair that was worn much too long, blue eyes, a handsome face, and yet she just hadn't been attracted to him. That he hadn't felt the same indifference had been obvious from the first moment they met; he had asked her every chance he got if she would go out with him. That her constant refusals had been responsible for her downfall she had no doubt.

'I mean that Jerome Towers seems to have more guests here than the staff can cope with,' she said rudely.

Roddy frowned. 'Rome does?'

'Rome?'

'I've always called him that,' he dismissed.

'Bully for you,' she taunted.

‘You don’t like him?’ he guessed shrewdly.

‘I’ve never met him,’ she didn’t directly answer the question. ‘Just why are you staying here?’

‘Have you forgotten, I was politely requested to leave the hospital?’ His sarcasm was unmistakable.

‘Well, at least it was politely done. I was *thrown* out,’ she remembered vehemently.

‘Mm, it was a shame about that, but——’

‘A shame!’ she echoed shrilly. ‘It was more than that to me. You’ve ruined my career, you know. I’ll never get another job in a hospital. I’ll never know how you knew which room was mine, I certainly never told it to you.’

He grinned. ‘I asked your friend Tracy.’

Megan’s eyes widened in amazement. ‘And she told you, just like that?’ She had always thought Tracy her best friend at the hospital, had even promised to keep in touch, and now it turned out that Tracy had helped this man get her sacked. Somehow that didn’t sound like Tracy.

Roddy sat down on the bed, pushing his long hair back from his face. ‘Not just like that, no. I told her you’d invited me to your room, that you were expecting me, and that I’d forgotten your room number.’

‘And she believed you?’ Megan groaned. She knew a lot of the other girls sneaked boys into their room, although this was expressly forbidden in the hospital rules, but she had never been fond enough of anyone to take the risk of getting caught.

He shrugged. 'She had no reason not to. I tell a very convincing story.'

'Oh, I know that!' to her cost!

'Mm,' he grinned. 'What a coincidence us both being in the same area.'

'I happen to live here,' she snapped.

'At least now I know I won't be bored.'

Megan glared at him. 'Don't count on me to alleviate your boredom.' She picked up the tray again. The food would be cold now, she would have to go down for a fresh lot.

Roddy was watching her. 'Where are you going with that?'

'To get fresh food and then take it to its rightful owner.'

'Leave it,' he ordered.

'I—'

'It's my breakfast, Megan,' he said patiently.

'But Jerome Towers' brother—'

'Me,' he nodded.

She nearly dropped the tray for the second time. '*You* are his brother?' She just couldn't be that unlucky.

'That's right,' he smiled at her horror. 'Half-brother actually, but that's never counted for much.'

Just her luck! If anyone should ever find out that he was the man involved in her dismissal, and that he was staying so close to her home, they would never believe her innocence. 'Does he know why you were asked to leave?' she asked almost reluctantly.

Roddy laughed, taking the tray out of her hands and pouring

himself a cup of tea. 'He doesn't even know I was asked to leave,' he informed her calmly, 'let alone why.'

'He doesn't?' She almost sighed her relief. Maybe if Roddy Meyers was no more eager than she was to have their past meeting made public knowledge they could keep the scandal to themselves.

'No,' he bit into a piece of buttered toast, 'I just told him I'd been discharged.'

'And he believed you?'

'He had no reason not to. So now you're working for my brother?' He eyed her speculatively.

'No, I'm not, I'm just helping out. And now I know you're here I don't intend helping out any longer,' she told him angrily. 'I'm leaving, and right now!'

He moved in front of the doorway to stop her exit, his hands on her upper arms. 'Don't be like that, Megan. You've been against me from the first—why don't you like me?'

She wished she knew that herself. 'Maybe you try too hard,' she evaded. 'Whatever the reason, I want you to take your hands off me.'

'Oh, come on, Megan, I still want to go out with you,' he said coaxingly. 'And now there's no patient/nurse relationship to stop us we can——'

'I don't remember that stopping you before!'

'No, well——' he smiled, 'you're beautiful, very desirable. You can't blame a man for being persistent.'

'That persistent I can,' she said indignantly. *'I should hate you for what you did to me.'*

'But you don't,' he murmured softly, his gaze fixed on her parted lips. *'Oh, Megan, I——'*

'Roddy, are you going to get up to——' the voice trailed off as the man came to stand in the open doorway, his brown-eyed gaze levelled on them as they stood close together.

Megan wrenched away from Roddy Meyers' embrace to face Jeff Robbins, and the censure in those deep brown eyes made her squirm with embarrassment. She had wanted to see him again, had intended making sure she did, but not when she was in Roddy Meyers' arms.

'I see you're already awake, Roddy,' Jeff Robbins drawled, his gaze flickering over Megan almost insolently before passing back to Roddy. *'And being entertained too, by the look of things.'*

The younger man grinned. *'I was just getting to know the new maid.'*

'I am not the new maid!' Megan denied vehemently.

'No, she isn't,' Jeff Robbins agreed. *'Miss Finch is deputising for her mother,'* he explained abruptly.

'I was just trying to persuade Megan to go out for a drive with me this afternoon,' Roddy lied, knowing he had her trapped.

'Really?' Again brown eyes raked over her. *'And did you manage to persuade her?'*

'She's a bit hard to pin down to anything definite,' Roddy grinned. *'But I live in hope.'*

‘Don’t we all?’ Jeff drawled.

All humour left Roddy’s face. ‘Have you been after her too?’ he queried resentfully.

‘No one has been “after” me!’ Megan cut in on their conversation, wishing Roddy Meyers would shut up, and that she could persuade Jeff Robbins that this situation wasn’t like it looked. But he didn’t look any more ready to believe her than they had at the hospital two days ago.

‘Haven’t they?’ Jeff asked, eyes narrowed.

‘No! I——’

‘Hey, Rome, I think she’s embarrassed,’ Roddy mused.

Rome? This was Jerome Towers? But it couldn’t be—could it? But what other explanation could there be for him to be walking about the house? The estate manager would have no need to do that. Why hadn’t he told her this morning who he was? No wonder he hadn’t known about the tractor he was supposed to mend!

Why hadn’t he corrected her mistake? Had he enjoyed listening to her make a fool of herself? The reason he had changed his mind about taking her out became obvious; he would hardly want to date someone who was working as kitchen help in his own house. Everything the old Squire had ever said about this man suddenly seemed true—he *was* a pompous snob.

He was still watching her with narrowed eyes, obviously knowing of her surprise. ‘Maybe you should get some clothes on, then she wouldn’t feel that way.’

'Megan's used to seeing men without their clothes on,' his brother dismissed.

Jerome Towers' contempt seemed to increase. 'Is she now?' he grated.

'Of course she is—she's a nurse, isn't she?'

'How do you know that? Did you know Megan before today?' Jerome queried suspiciously.

'She was on my ward, weren't you, love?' Roddy looked at her for confirmation.

Megan blushed, the look in her eyes willing him not to reveal any more about their previous meeting. 'Yes,' she nodded, her gaze still on Roddy.

'Before she was ill, of course?' Jerome Towers enquired coolly. 'If she had you for a patient, Roddy, I can quite understand her not being strong enough to carry on,' he added mockingly.

Roddy looked at Megan with amusement. 'I didn't realise.... I wondered why you suddenly disappeared,' he taunted.

Megan gave him a resentful glare. 'Well, now you know,' she snapped.

'Yes,' he grinned, 'now I know.'

'Shouldn't you be getting back to the kitchen, Miss Finch?' Jerome Towers asked harshly. 'I'm sure Freda could do with your help.'

Colour flooded her cheeks at his intended rebuke. 'Yes, of course. If you'll excuse me.'

'Gladly,' he drawled.

‘Megan?’ Roddy Meyers stopped her at the door. ‘Can I take it that our drive is on for this afternoon?’

Her eyes flashed. ‘You——’

‘Maybe then you could tell me about your illness,’ he added mockingly.

Megan gave Jerome Towers a sharp look, biting her lip as she read the contempt in his gaze. What gave him the right to be so high and mighty? ‘Yes, all right,’ she agreed to Roddy’s blackmail—for that surely was what it was. But she would tell him a few home truths this afternoon! ‘What time?’ She couldn’t look at either of them in her anger, but stared down at her hands.

‘About two-thirty?’

‘Okay. I’ll meet you downstairs.’ She didn’t want her mother and Brian getting to know of the meeting, especially Brian. If he found out their connection he was likely to seek the younger man out and challenge him to a fight. Then there would be no possibility of hiding the past.

‘I’ll pick you up at your home,’ he insisted.

‘No! No,’ she said less sharply, knowing that Roddy could be deliberately troublemaking if he knew how much she wanted to keep him away from her home. ‘I’ll enjoy the walk over.’

‘All right,’ he shrugged. ‘She knows her own mind,’ he told his brother laughingly.

Jerome Towers’ expression remained grim. ‘So I’ve noticed.’

Megan shot him a resentful glare before leaving the room, running down the wide flight of stairs as if the devil himself were

after her. Seconds later she felt as if he were!

‘Miss Finch!’ Jerome Towers stood at her side as she reached the bottom step.

It took all her courage to turn and face him, to face the disapproval that she knew would be in his face. Why should he be so disapproving? He was the one who had lied and deceived her. She felt an absolute fool now when she thought of the way she had acted with him, the things she had said. And she had let him kiss her! No!—she had let *Jeff Robbins* kiss her, not this arrogant stranger.

‘Yes, Mr Towers?’ she asked in a stilted voice, looking steadily into those censorious brown eyes.

‘Freda said you took Roddy’s breakfast up fifteen minutes ago,’ he said curtly.

Whatever she had been expecting him to say it hadn’t been this. She frowned her puzzlement. ‘Yes?’

‘If you are to continue deputising for your mother until she is well enough to return I would advise you not to spend too much time in my brother’s bedroom, no matter what your relationship may have been with him before you came here.’

Megan gasped. ‘What has Roddy been saying?’

‘He’s hardly had time to say anything,’ Jerome Towers said dryly. ‘But your own response points to my assumption being a correct one. And the other staff will draw their own conclusions if you take fifteen minutes to deliver his breakfast every morning.’

‘Why, you——’

‘I’m only telling you this for your own good,’ he interrupted her angry outburst. ‘It’s up to you whether or not you take my advice.’ He walked past her, turning when he reached what she assumed to be his study, or office, door. ‘And, Miss Finch,’ he paused when he had her attention, ‘I think I can take having a date turned down without the girl having to resort to her mother’s illness as an excuse. You had only to say you had something going with Roddy. Unless of course you were trying to decide whether the richer brother might be a better bet.’ He went into the room and closed the door firmly behind him.

Megan didn’t give herself time to think, marching angrily across the marble tiled hallway and bursting into what turned out to be a study. ‘Now you just listen to me, Mr Towers!’ she stormed at the man standing just inside the room. Almost as if he had expected her ... ‘I——’

Her words were cut off in mid-flow as she was pulled against the rigidity of a male body, her mouth captured and parted as Jerome Towers bent his head and kissed her.

‘Oh!’ she gasped as he released her, still held in the firm grip of his hands.

He looked down at her. ‘I knew that would get you in here.’

Her eyes were wide. ‘Is that why you ...?’

‘Mm,’ he nodded, his warm gaze on her parted lips.

Megan pushed hard against him, struggling to be free. ‘You obnoxious, overbearing——’

He let her go, moving to sit in the leather chair behind the desk. 'I could hardly kiss you out there in the hallway. Anyone could have come along and seen us.'

'You didn't have to kiss me at all!' she snapped, still breathless from the touch of those firm lips on hers.

'But I did,' he said calmly. 'Now, what *is* your relationship to Roddy?'

'I'm not telling you!' her eyes flamed with feeling. 'And just in case you haven't heard about it, the Squire no longer gets the first night of love with the local maidens!'

He raised dark eyebrows. 'Are you a maiden?'

'Mind your own damned business!' She slammed out of the room, the sound of his mocking laughter following her.

Freda was busy preparing lunch when Megan entered the kitchen a few minutes later, so she took over the peeling of the potatoes.

'Are you all right?' the cook asked. 'You're looking a bit flushed,' she explained her query.

'I'm fine,' Megan mumbled.

'Young Roddy hasn't been making passes at you, has he?' Freda tutted. 'He is a lad!' She shook her head, a smile on her lips.

'Is he in the habit of making passes?' Megan couldn't help her curiosity.

'Well, he made a couple of advances towards Patsy when he stayed here last. In fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if that isn't the reason she's off sick today—you know how her Donald

can be. Roddy wouldn't leave the poor girl alone, that's why I wondered if he'd——'

'Nothing I can't handle,' Megan cut in briskly, wondering what Freda would say if she knew she was in more danger from Jerome Towers than from his young brother.

'That's all right, then.' Freda was obviously relieved. 'Would you get some mint in from the herb garden out the back?' she asked, the makings of pastry in her mixing bowl. 'I do like my potatoes to have a bit of mint in them.'

'But I thought Mr Towers didn't eat potatoes.' Megan blushed at Freda's questioning look. 'Just someting Mum said,' she mumbled.

Freda nodded understanding. 'Mr Towers doesn't bother with much food at all. I'm always telling him he doesn't eat enough, but he says he doesn't see the point of over-indulging.'

Megan wondered if he had the same attitude to all life's appetites. From the way he had kissed her, twice, she didn't think he did. His mouth against hers had been frankly sensual, pointing to an experience that hadn't been gained by abstinence.

But he had no right to kiss her whenever he felt like it, as if it were his due or something. If he ever tried to kiss her again she would—she would—She sighed; she would kiss him right back, she knew she would. Much as she tried to keep up her prejudiced dislike of him, the truth of the matter was that on acquaintance she found him all too disturbing for comfort.

'Maybe he's afraid of middle-aged spread,' she made the same

bitchy comment to Freda that she had made to her mother only that morning, although now she knew it to be untrue. Jerome Towers wasn't thin, not unpleasantly so, his shoulders wide and powerful, tapering down to a slim waist and forceful thighs, his stomach flat and firmly muscled. No, he was a man at the peak of physical fitness, and the closeness of his lithe body against hers had had an arousing effect.

‘At thirty-two?’ Freda scoffed. ‘Go on with you!’

Megan laughingly let herself out into the herb garden, finding the mint with no trouble. She might have lived the first nine years of her life in a town, but she had soon picked up the country ways and knowledge. She and Brian had been much happier here, having room to play, clean air to breathe. It was for the clean air they had come here if they had but known it, their father's illness being irritated by the town smog.

As she stood up she saw Roddy Meyers looking out at her from one of the upstairs windows, turning angrily away as he dared to grin at her. She would wipe that smile off his face when she met him this afternoon!

Her mother was looking slightly better when she got home at lunchtime, although Megan insisted she stay in bed.

‘How did you get on, love?’ her mother asked worriedly.

‘Just fine. They're a bit short-staffed today, so I offered to stay on, but Mrs Reece said they would be able to manage.’ Much to her chagrin. If she could have worked this afternoon she would have had a good excuse not to meet Roddy.

‘That was nice of you, dear,’ she smiled. ‘How did you get on with Freda and Mrs Reece?’

Megan shrugged. ‘Freda’s nice, but I hardly saw Mrs Reece, she was busy organising the cleaning of the house.’

‘It’s lovely now, isn’t it? Now that everywhere has been cleaned up and redecorated.’

‘It’s all right,’ Megan agreed grudgingly, aware that Jerome Towers had been responsible for the improvements. ‘Although old Squire Towers always made it seem homely.’

‘It’s homely now, Megan. And it will be even more so when they get a couple of children running around.’

This conjured up pictures of two small children, tall for their age, a boy and a girl, with their father’s dark hair and eyes. They would be lovely children, they would have to be if they looked anything like Jerome Towers.

‘Is Mr Towers thinking of getting married?’ she asked casually. Being away at the hospital she had missed out on a lot of the local gossip this last year, most of it history by the time she came home for a couple of days, and so not related to her.

‘Well, he does have a girl-friend in London. She’s been to The Towers for a couple of weekends—a beautiful little thing, very friendly, with red hair.’

‘Little thing’ rankled. Being five feet eight in her stockinged feet Megan often found herself towering over other women. She would certainly never be the sort of girl men felt protective towards. ‘Did Brian borrow the tractor from The Towers?’ she

changed the subject.

‘I think so, dear,’ her mother said vaguely. ‘I passed the message on anyway. He’s called Taylor out from the garage to look at it.’

‘Right,’ Megan stood up. ‘I’ll get you some lunch. I—er—I have to go out later. I shouldn’t be long,’ she added hastily. Just long enough to tell Roddy Meyers that she wouldn’t agree to his blackmail a second time.

‘Are you going out with one of your friends?’ her mother asked interestedly.

‘Er—yes.’ Although she would hardly call Roddy Meyers a friend—a few other choice names, but certainly not friend.

‘That’s good, dear.’ Mrs Finch closed her eyes. ‘I was feeling rather guilty about lying here and leaving you so much on your own.’

‘I’m not here to be entertained, Mum,’ Megan chided. ‘I’m here to work now.’

‘You’re sure there’s no chance of them taking you back at the hospital?’

‘Not unless that boy tells them the truth. And as he’s already left the hospital I don’t think there’s any likelihood of that.’ Besides, Roddy’s attitude this morning to her dismissal had pointed to him not giving a damn.

‘It’s such a shame,’ her mother frowned. ‘You’ve wanted to be a nurse ever since you were a little girl.’

‘Yes,’ Megan agreed grimly. ‘Still,’ she added brightly, ‘we

can't have everything we want in life. And maybe now that I'm home I can be of some help to Brian.'

'Field work isn't for a girl, Megan. What we need is another man.'

'Well, you'll just have to take what you can get,' Megan told her lightly, 'and that's me!'

'You haven't thought any more about selling to Mr Towers?'

Her mouth tightened. 'I don't need to think about it. I wouldn't sell to him if I were destitute.'

'We aren't far off that,' sighed her mother.

'Don't be silly,' Megan said briskly. 'All it needs is hard work and——'

'And don't you think Brian has been working hard?' her usually even-tempered mother became angry. 'Do you think we both haven't? But it isn't enough. We can't manage any more.'

'But if I——'

'It isn't enough, Megan,' her mother repeated firmly. 'Your father left the farm and land between the three of us, but I don't think he intended for it to be a millstone around our necks. He knew I'd always have a home with your Aunt Rose, as soon as I'd got you two children off my hands, of course, and——'

'Thanks!' Megan said dryly.

'Well, I expect you'll get married one day.'

'I expect.'

Her mother gave her an impatient look. 'Well, you will, you're a beautiful girl—even if I do say so myself.'

‘Dad always said I got my beauty from you,’ Megan smiled mischievously.

Her mother blushed. ‘So he did,’ she agreed in a choked voice. ‘Anyway, I’m sure your father intended for us to sell the farm back to Mr Towers, in fact he said as much before he died. He wanted us to use the money as we wanted. Oh, I know Brian wanted to give it a year’s trial, see how he managed.’ She sighed. ‘I think it’s pretty obvious that he can’t manage at all.’

‘So you want to sell?’ Megan asked dully.

‘I do,’ her mother nodded. ‘And I think Brian would too if he could find himself a job in this area. Joyce wouldn’t want to move too far away from her parents.’

Joyce was Brian’s girl-friend of two years, and they were planning to marry soon. As far as Megan knew it could be the financial state of the farm that was holding up those plans.

‘I think you should talk this over with Brian, Megan,’ her mother advised.

‘Maybe I will, Mum. Later, perhaps.’ If Brian really wanted to sell she would have no choice but to agree. But to sell out to Rome—*Jerome* Towers, that she wouldn’t like.

She was still thoughtful when she met Roddy Meyers later that afternoon, although his triumphant smile made her burn with anger and her eyes glow a deep sparkling green. ‘You needn’t look so pleased with yourself,’ she snapped as he handed her into the low dark green sports car. ‘I’m not here through choice,’ she added moodily, resisting the impulse to turn and look at The

Towers, telling herself she didn't really want to catch a glimpse of Jerome Towers.

Roddy turned to grin at her. 'But you are here.'

'Yes!' Megan snapped.

He accelerated the car out on to the narrow, winding road. 'Where shall we go?'

'Here is far enough, I think,' she told him rigidly. 'I only agreed to meet you so that I can tell you I won't be forced into meeting you again.'

'Forced, Megan?' He raised one blond eyebrow.

'Yes, forced! You knew I wouldn't want your brother to hear about the trouble I had at the hospital, that I wouldn't want anyone to know,' she added hastily as she saw the speculative look in his eyes.

'But you specifically mentioned Rome,' he said thoughtfully. 'Why him especially?'

'I only mentioned him because he happened to be the witness to your blackmail,' she said awkwardly. 'I like your brother even less than I like you—and we both know my feelings towards you.'

They were still driving, the high hedges making it impossible for them to see anything but the road in front of them. It gave them an intimacy Megan found irksome.

'You looked like another of the fatalities to Rome's charm to me,' Roddy scorned. 'You hated him seeing you in my arms.'

'I hated *being* in your arms,' she corrected forcefully. 'Your brother's presence there was irrelevant.'

‘You’re a liar, Megan Finch,’ Roddy told her harshly. ‘I don’t know what it is about Rome, but the women go down like ninepins whenever he’s around.’

‘My mother tells me he has a girl-friend in London.’ In which case he had no right to have asked *her* out—even if he had changed his mind.

‘She must mean Stella,’ Roddy said knowingly. ‘She’s been Rome’s woman for over a year now.’

‘His *woman*!’ Megan spluttered. ‘My God, what a charming description,’ she said disgustedly.

‘But a true one. Stella wouldn’t mind, she likes being his woman. She would probably like to be his wife too, but Rome doesn’t go in for permanent relationships.’

‘A year sounds pretty permanent to me.’

‘And me,’ Roddy grinned. ‘But one day Stella will wake up and find Rome has just eliminated her from his life. She’ll keep calling him, crying all over the place, pleading for him to come back to her, and he’ll just ignore her as if he never knew her. I’ve seen it all before, many times. I’ve even got myself a couple of girl-friends that way.’

‘He sounds a right swine,’ and she was well out of the situation! thought Megan.

‘I’m his one weak spot,’ Roddy told her with satisfaction. ‘Rome can see no wrong in his little brother.’

‘Meaning?’ her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

‘Meaning that even if you told him the truth about what had

happened at the hospital he wouldn't believe you. Rome's opinion of women isn't too hot.'

'You mean he's never caught you in a compromising situation, never caught you trying to force some other poor girl into bed with you?' Megan scorned him, angry with both men. 'Not even Patsy?' she asked softly.

Hot colour stained his cheeks. 'What do you know about her?'

'I know that she's newly married, that she's frightened to work at the house while you're there. What did you do to the poor girl?'

'Nothing,' he said moodily. 'And I don't see that it's any of your business anyway.'

Megan shook her head. 'Why don't you choose a woman who's attracted to you in return?'

'Who says she isn't?' he asked sneeringly.

'I do. Patsy's only been married six months, I doubt she's interested in extra-marital affairs just yet.'

Roddy gave an unpleasant smile. 'Every woman is interested in an affair, married or not.'

'The trouble with you, Roddy,' Megan taunted, 'is that you think every girl is playing hard to get. Well, I wasn't, and I'm still not interested. Now I won't tell your brother anything about you, Roddy, if you don't tell him anything about me. I think it's a case of mutual silence.'

'Maybe,' he agreed consideringly. 'Does that mean you aren't going to go out with me?'

'It means,' she controlled her anger with difficulty, 'that I want

you to stay away from me. You've already ruined my career, I don't want you to do any more damage to my life. No one knows, not my family or anyone, that you're the man involved in my dismissal. I'd like it to stay that way. Will it?"

'I suppose so,' he gave a grudging nod.

Megan heaved an inward sigh of relief; one of her problems was solved at least. 'Right, well you can take me back now.'

Roddy gave her a sulky look. 'You could at least go out with me now you're here.'

'I've said what I want to say—No, perhaps I haven't said it all. If you dare to tell anyone about those incidents at the hospital I'll make sure your brother knows the truth—about myself and Patsy. We can't both be lying.'

'God, you're a hard little bitch!'

'You get that way when your reputation is in shreds, when even your own family isn't quite sure you're telling the truth,' she recalled bitterly. It had taken some time to convince Brian, although her mother had instantly believed her.

'For God's sake,' Roddy snapped, 'I've said I'm sorry!'

'No, you haven't,' she contradicted. 'But even if you had it wouldn't make things any different, only telling the hospital authorities could do that.'

'Which I'm certainly not going to do,' Roddy scorned. 'Rome would be sure to find out, and he would stop my allowance—among other things,' he grimaced.

'At your age you should be out at work earning your own

money, not sponging on your brother.'

'God, what a nag you are!'

'Aren't you glad I refused to go out with you?' she taunted. 'You can take me back to The Towers. I have to see Mrs Reece. The housekeeper,' she added.

'I know who she is,' he said moodily.

The drive back was completed in silence. After dropping Megan off outside the house Roddy accelerated the car back out of the driveway at such speed that some of the small stones flew high into the air.

Megan found Mrs Reece in the kitchen taking her afternoon tea. And if this afternoon had been as hectic as this morning had been then the poor woman was much in need of it. Megan had promised the housekeeper she would pop in to see whether or not Patsy would be in tomorrow. She had offered to come in all day herself if the other girl was to be absent again.

'She isn't coming back at all,' Mrs Reece told her with a sigh. 'Apparently her Donald has decided he doesn't want her to work any more.'

Roddy had done a good job of frightening the other girl away. Donald Jones was a possessive boy, and the slightest sign of interest in Patsy from another man would be enough for him to stop her coming here any more.

'Well, I could come in for a few days full-time,' Megan offered. 'Just until you get someone else.'

'Could you?' Mrs Reece accepted gratefully. She was a

middle-aged woman of perhaps fifty, her hair already snow-white, her figure neat and trim, her energy boundless.

‘Just for a while,’ Megan nodded. ‘I——’

The door leading to the main part of the house was suddenly thrown open, and the new owner stood looking at them. Megan jumped almost guiltily to her feet, although Mrs Reece and Freda seemed unconcerned.

Velvety brown eyes passed insolently over Megan’s denim-clad figure, over the way the green sweater hugged her breasts and the flatness of her stomach. Megan felt as if he were mentally undressing her—and liking what he saw! She looked sharply at the other two women in the room, but they seemed unaware of her boss’s appraisal.

‘Roddy told me I would find you in here,’ Jerome Towers spoke to her.

So he was back already! ‘I called in to see Mrs Reece,’ she answered resentfully.

‘He told me that too,’ he drawled. ‘I just wanted you to pass on a message to your brother. Tell him I’ll call in this evening. I have some things I want to discuss with him.’

Megan bristled angrily at his autocratic tone. ‘If it’s anything to do with the farm you can discuss it with me.’

His gaze ran over her coldly, contemptuously. ‘Women have their uses,’ he told her insultingly. ‘And being in business isn’t one of them. Tell Brian I’ll be there about eight-thirty.’ He left as abruptly as he had entered.

CHAPTER THREE

SHE relayed the message to her brother, watching the worried frown that marred his brow.

‘I wonder what he wants,’ Brian said thoughtfully.

‘I have no idea,’ Megan told him crossly. ‘He wouldn’t tell me.’

‘Did you ask him?’

‘Yes.’

Brian grinned at her anger. ‘By the way, Jeff said he hadn’t had time this morning to come out and look at our tractor, but that Mr Towers told him to let us borrow one of theirs. How did Mr Towers know about it?’

Megan explained her mistake, although she omitted the fact that Jerome Towers had invited her out to dinner, and also that he had changed his mind when he realised she was his own hired help. ‘It was a natural mistake to make,’ she added moodily.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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