MILLS & BOON

Vintage *Cherish*

Reform of the Rake

CATHERINE GEORGE

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Аннотация

BABY BOOMA daddy for Christmas…Sensible Lowri had no intention of succumbing to Adam Hawkridge's careless charm. But Adam persisted, Lowri resisted–and gave in.Loving Adam had its price–soon Lowri was expecting his baby. He proposed marriage but Lowri knew his heart just wasn't in it. So she jilted him at the altar, pretending her pregnancy was a false alarm.Two years later, and Lowri was looking forward to spending Christmas with her pride and joy–little Rhosyn. But the festive season would bring with it a series of surprises and shocks–not least that Adam Hawkridge was about to discover the existence of his daughter!BABY BOOM. Because two's company and three's a family!

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“I intend both to have this baby, and keep it.”

Adam stared down at her, his eyes oddly blank. “I see. It’s ultimatum time.” He shrugged. “All right. You leave me with no choice. We get married.”

“Oh, *please,*” she said scathingly. “Right from the beginning you made it clear that marriage and a family are the last things you want. Besides, shotgun weddings are a bit out-of-date, Adam. Please don’t trouble yourself. I’ll manage on my own.”

Adam’s mouth tightened. “You’re being stupid again, Lowri. There’s nothing else for it. I’ll arrange a quiet wedding as quickly as possible.”

Dear Reader,

A special delivery—our bouncing baby series. Every month we’ve been bringing you your very own bundle of joy—a cute and delightful romance by one of your favorite authors. This series is all about the true labor of love— parenthood and how to survive it! Because, as our heroes and heroines have been discovering, two’s company and three (or four…or five) is a family!

This month, with the last arrival in our series, comes a triple (or should that be triplet) helping of pleasure—a baby, a miracle for Christmas *and* a new story set in Pennington, Catherine

George's delightful English town.

Season's Greetings!

The Editors

Harlequin Romance

BABYBOOM

Reform of the Rake
Catherine George

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CHAPTER ONE

LOWRI gave her distinguished, grey-haired male customer a friendly, courteous smile, her amusement well hidden as she gift-wrapped expensive scraps of sexy underwear so very obviously intended for someone other than his wife. When he'd gone she exchanged a grin with her nearest colleague.

'End of the lunchtime rush?' She cast a hopeful eye round the suddenly deserted underwear department.

'Give it five minutes, then it'll be the afternoon surge of mothers and daughters.'

'Plain cotton for school,' agreed Lowri, tidying a rack of lacy silk teddies. 'I wish I hadn't taken early lunch— I'm starving already.'

'Then you'd better have tea with me later,' said a voice with a familiar, attractive lilt, and Lowri looked up in astonishment to meet a pair of blue eyes bright with accusation.

'Sarah!'

'In person. And I hope that blush is guilt, Lowri Morgan,' said her cousin, plainly incensed. 'What on earth are you doing here?'

'Working,' said Lowri lamely.

'I managed to puzzle that out for myself,' retorted Sarah. 'When did all this happen, may I ask? And why didn't you let me know?'

Lowri cast a hunted eye at some approaching customers. 'I

meant to soon, cross my heart. Look, I can't talk now. I get a tea-break at three. Could you meet me upstairs at the coffee-shop?'

'You bet I could—ask for extra time.' Sarah fixed her young cousin with a steely eye. 'You've got some explaining to do, young lady. In the meantime I'll take one of these in thirty-four. And I'll come back to collect you at three. Be ready.'

Lowri found the required size quickly, wrapped the purchase and took her cousin's money, promising to see her later, then dealt with a pack of skinny, black-clad girls in leather jackets, all demanding the same make of maximum-bounce, minimum-price bra. For the next hour or so Lowri sold underwear of every category from sensible cotton sports to shameless see-through numbers of the type she'd never possessed herself nor ever dared to. It was some time before she got the chance to beg an extra ten minutes to add on to her tea-break. She hurried back to her post afterwards to attend to a tall man who was contemplating a display of astronomically pricey trifles with no hint of the dogged embarrassment most male customers displayed in the same circumstances.

'May I help?' said Lowri, in her usual friendly manner.

He smiled down at her, gold-flecked hazel eyes glinting under a pair of thick, ruler-straight eyebrows. 'I'm sure you can,' he said in a deep, drawling voice which flowed over Lowri like warm honey. He waved a hand at the exquisite lace bras. 'I want two of these things, and the other bits to go with them—one set in thirty-six C, the other in thirty-two E.' He cast an assessing eye

over the display. 'The first lot in that pinkish colour, I think, and the other one black. Mmm, yes, definitely black.'

Lowri swiftly located the required sizes, riven with envy for the recipients. 'The knickers come in two styles, sir, the brief and this type.' She pointed out a sexy lace G-string.

He grinned lazily. 'The brief in pink, the non-existent one in black.' He raised one of his distinctive eyebrows. 'You approve?'

Lowri nodded, pink-cheeked. 'A popular choice, sir. Would you like them gift-wrapped?'

Her customer, as she'd expected, not only wanted them gift-wrapped, but clearly marked as to which was which, a male request familiar to her after four hectic weeks in the underwear department. And normally Lowri prided herself on deftness and speed at gift-wrapping, but under the bright, amused scrutiny her fingers changed to thumbs, a condition which worsened as Sarah bore down on them, tapping the watch on her wrist.

Lowri threw her an apologetic smile, but Sarah was staring at the man tucking his credit card back into his wallet.

'Adam!' she said in surprise. 'What are you doing here?'

The man grinned and kissed her on both cheeks. 'What do you think I'm doing, Sarah? I'm buying underwear.' He shot a look at Lowri. 'And damned expensive it is in this place.'

Sarah raised an eyebrow at the tempting packages. 'I bet I know exactly what you chose, too.'

'The same stuff Rupert buys you, I imagine,' he said, the grin wider, and looked at his watch. 'Let me ply you with tea and

sinful cakes upstairs.'

'Not today, thanks, Adam. I'm just about to feed my young cousin, Lowri, here. Lowri, this is Adam Hawkridge.'

Adam Hawkridge turned the bright gold eyes on Lowri again and held her hand rather longer than necessary as he gave her a white, mega-watt smile. 'How do you do, Lowri—a pleasure dealing with you. Let's all have tea together.'

To Lowri's intense disappointment Sarah refused briskly, telling Adam this was a girls-only bun-fight and she'd take a raincheck for another time. Wistfully, Lowri murmured something polite as Adam took his leave, then raced after him with the packages he'd forgotten.

'Your parcels, Mr Hawkridge!'

He swung round, smiling. 'Thank you. Pity about tea,' he added in an undertone. 'Another day, perhaps?'

Lowri blushed again, said something incoherent and hurried back to Sarah.

'Wow!' she said breathlessly. 'What a gorgeous man.'

Sarah shook her head emphatically. 'Not for you, love. Gorgeous he may be, but he's a notorious heartbreaker.'

'I wasn't thinking *of marrying* him,' said Lowri tartly. 'I'll just get my bag.'

Once they were settled at a corner table in the coffee-shop Sarah fixed her cousin with a commanding blue eye.

'Now,' she ordered. 'Talk! When did all this come about? Have you quarrelled with your father? Why haven't you been in touch

—where are you living?'

Lowri bit into a profiterole with enthusiasm. 'I came up here a month ago, but no quarrel with Dad, since you ask. I'm squashed in with four other girls in a flat in Shepherds Bush *pro tern,* and I intended making contact soon, Sarah, really I did, but I—I wanted to get my bearings first.'

'Which doesn't explain why someone with perfectly good secretarial skills is selling underwear to earn a crust, Lowri Morgan,' said her cousin severely. 'I thought you had a steady job in Newport.'

'So did I. But my boss took early retirement, and bingo, no place for little Lowri.'

'Surely you could have found something in the same line?'

'Not easy. Besides—' Lowri shrugged, smiling wryly.

'It gave me the ideal excuse to get away. Right away.'

Sarah poured tea, frowning. 'You said no quarrel, but *are* there problems at home?'

'Only for me. Dad's in seventh heaven.' Lowri sighed guiltily. 'I keep telling myself my father's only forty-seven and very attractive and perfectly entitled to a second wife only a few years older than me. And I adore Holly. Really I do. But sharing a house with two newlyweds who can't keep their hands off each other—particularly when one of them is your father—is pretty hard to take, Sarah. I got a nice little cheque from my old firm in Newport, Dad gave me a bit more, and one of the girls I worked with knew someone who needed another flatmate up here, so I

left the land of my fathers and managed to get this job pretty quickly, thank goodness. It's only part time, but it's financing me while I do some serious job-hunting.'

Sarah eyed her narrowly. 'And are you enjoying life more?'

Lowri pulled a face. 'I didn't at first. I was even feeble enough to feel homesick for a while. But I'm settling down now.'

'How did my favourite uncle take to the move?'

'Torn between objections to the idea, and euphoria at the prospect of privacy and solitude with Holly.'

'Are you jealous?'

Lowri thought it over. 'Not of Holly,' she said slowly. 'Only of what they've got together, I think. And Mum's been dead a long time. Dad deserves his happiness. Only I just couldn't stand playing gooseberry.' She smiled cheerfully. 'Anyway, enough about me. Tell me about Dominic and Emily—and that scrumptious husband of yours.'

'Rupert's the same, only more so.' Sarah smiled wryly. 'Up to his ears in his latest book and prone to vile moods when the flow doesn't flow, as usual. My son seems to have some of his father's brains, but a far sunnier disposition, thankfully, while Emily sails through life happy in the belief that everyone loves her.'

'Which they do!'

'Up to now,' agreed Sarah. 'But she starts proper school in the autumn, so things may change.' She gave Lowri a militant look. 'I shall expect you for the day on Sunday—no excuses.'

Lowri smiled happily and got to her feet. 'Try to keep me

away! Sundays in London can drag a bit.'

'Then why on earth didn't you get in touch before?'

'I didn't want to cadge, Sarah.'

'You, Lowri Morgan, are an idiot. But I understand—no one better,' added Sarah, and kissed her. 'I was just the same when I first came to the big city. Right, I'm off. Come any time after breakfast on Sunday—or even before, if you like.'

Lowri shook her head, chuckling. 'I'll come in time for lunch—but thanks, Sal. I'll look forward to it.'

As she fought claustrophobia in the Underground on her way home, then battled for tenancy of the bathroom later that evening, Lowri's mood remained buoyant as she thought of Sunday with the Clares in St John's Wood. Her cousin Sarah, one of the three beautiful daughters of the Reverend Glyn Morgan in Lowri's native village of Cwmderwen, near Monmouth, was the wife of Rupert Clare, a novelist bankable enough to sell film rights to his books. Sunday would be fun. And she would enjoy it all the more because she hadn't given in and invited herself as she'd longed to do ever since her arrival in London.

The Clares' house in St John's Wood was a large, light-filled house with a sizeable walled garden at the back, and a converted coach house which housed the family cars on the ground floor and provided a self-contained flat on the floor above for Rupert's constant stream of secretaries, few of whom stayed for long. After a heart-warming welcome from Dominic and Emily, Lowri looked up to see Rupert loping down the curve of the graceful

staircase, hands outstretched, Sarah close behind him.

'Who's a sly one then, little cousin?' he said, shaking his head, then gave her a hug and a smacking kiss. 'Escaped from the claws of the dragon, I hear!'

'If that's your way of saying I've left home, yes.' She grinned up at her cousin's charismatic husband. 'Hello, Rupert, nice to see you.'

'You wouldn't say that if you'd had to live with him this week,' said Sarah with feeling. 'Mrs Parks is not only the least efficient secretary Rupert's ever had but also the most timorous, which brings out the sadist in him. She's driving the great author mad. And I flatly refuse to take over from her—but you don't want to hear about that. Come into the conservatory. We'll picnic in there to enjoy the April sunshine.'

With Emily clinging to her hand, and Dominic telling her all about the new school he was going to shortly, Lowri basked in the glow of Clare hospitality as she leaned back in a comfortable wicker chair, sipping happily from a tall frosted glass decorated with mint and slices of fruit.

'Pimms for us, fruit juice for the small fry,' said Rupert, handing a beaker to his daughter. 'You, Dominic, are promoted to the dignity of a glass.'

'Gee thanks,' said his son with sarcasm. 'Couldn't I have just a sip of Pimms, Dad?'

'No fear,' said his mother, smiling to soften the blow. 'There's the doorbell. Off you go to answer it, please.'

‘Mummy says you live in London now,’ said Emily, beaming up at Lowri. ‘Why aren’t you living with us?’

‘I’ve got a flat,’ said Lowri hastily, and Rupert snorted.

‘Fifth share of one, I hear.’

‘One girl is moving out next week, thank goodness.’ Lowri pulled a face. ‘Which means my rent will rise, but at least I’ll get a room with a wardrobe, and more chance of the bathroom.’ Her eyes narrowed suddenly at the sound of voices in the hall. One of them was vaguely familiar. She threw a questioning look at her cousin.

‘We’ve got two other guests today, love,’ explained Sarah. ‘After I met Adam Hawkridge in your shop the other afternoon he rang up and invited us out to something he calls brunch today. I told him we had company and asked him here instead, which meant including the current girlfriend, as usual.’

As Dominic showed the new guests into the conservatory Lowri got to her feet politely, wishing she’d worn something smarter than jeans and a striped cotton shirt as she shook hands with a leggy, narrow-hipped blonde encased in a ribbed white cashmere dress which drew all eyes to her startlingly prominent breasts. Adam Hawkridge, Lowri was relieved to see, wore jeans older than her own, plus a sweater over an open-necked shirt. He smiled at Lowri in gratifying recognition.

‘Well, well—the little cousin!’ He clasped her hand warmly. ‘This is my friend, Fiona Childe.’

Lowri murmured something suitable, then watched, amused,

as the girl gushed over the house to Sarah, cooed at the children briefly then turned the full battery of her charms on Rupert.

'Miss Thirty-two E, black lace,' murmured a deep voice in Lowri's ear, and she stiffened, swallowing a giggle.

'Not today,' she couldn't help whispering. 'It would show through.'

'Really?' Adam grinned down at her as he accepted a drink from Rupert. 'How very interesting.'

'What's interesting?' demanded Emily.

'You are,' said Adam promptly and sat down with Emily on his knee, stretching out a hand to Dominic at the same time. 'Right then, you two, tell me what you've been up to.'

This man is preposterously attractive, thought Lowri as she watched him charm the children. Taken feature by feature, his heavy eyebrows and wide, slightly crooked mouth had no pretensions to good looks, and his forceful nose had suffered a dent at some time, but somehow the sum of it all added up to something irresistible. And quite apart from his looks Adam Hawkridge possessed effortless charm all the more powerful for the hint of steel under it all. Rake he might be, but a potently attractive one in every way, thought Lowri as she listened to the inanities Fiona was burbling about her hairdresser.

'That's a frightfully clever cut—where do you have yours done?' she asked, eyeing Lowri's boyish crop with interest. 'Is the colour natural or do you have it tinted?'

'Sloe-black, crow-black Welsh hair like Sarah's,' Rupert

informed her.

'There's a man in the hair salon where I work,' explained Lowri. 'He did it half-price for me.'

'You're a hairdresser?' exclaimed Fiona, flabbergasted.

'No, I sell underwear.'

'In the West End, not door to door,' added Rupert, poker-faced.

'How fascinating,' said Fiona blankly, losing all interest in Lowri on the spot.

Adam Hawkridge, however, more than made up for the deficit. During the meal he installed himself next to Lowri, asking her all kinds of questions about herself in between telling Dominic and Emily about his recent trip to Japan.

'How's your father?' asked Rupert later, refilling wineglasses.

'Retiring soon,' said Adam, sobering a little.

'Does that mean you'll be in charge of the company?' asked Sarah.

'Afraid so. All good things come to an end, so no more globe-trotting for yours truly. I'll be a desk-bound sober citizen at last.' He grinned challengingly. 'Did I hear someone say "about time"?'

Fiona tossed back her hair, pouting. 'Does that mean no more Ascot and Henley and so on?'

'Afraid so—to the first two, anyway.' The hazel eyes gleamed suggestively. 'I might be able to fit in a bit of so-on now and again, perhaps.'

Fiona gave a little scream of laughter. 'O-o-o-h, Adam!'

Sarah and Lowri sprang up simultaneously to clear away, avoiding each other's eyes. They refused offers of help from the men, who went out into the garden with the children to play cricket, while Fiona remained firmly where she was, reclining on a wicker chaise with a pile of magazines,

'What does he see in her?' said Sarah in disapproval as she loaded the dishwasher.

'Oh come on, Sal, two reasons hit you in the eye! She's the black lace thirty-two E I sold him that day. Adam told me.' Lowri grinned as she stored salad in a plastic container. 'Mind you he's got someone else on the go, too. He bought the same things in angel blush, thirty-six C.'

'Typical! Next week he'll probably be back for more of the same in two quite different sizes.'

'Why do men go unfailingly for sexy underwear, I wonder? Does Rupert?'

Sarah nodded. 'Pretty pointless, really.'

Lowri eyed her cousin curiously. 'Why?'

'Because the minute a man sees you decked out in that stuff he wants to take it off, of course!'

Lowri blushed to the roots of her hair.

Sarah eyed her narrowly. 'Ah! You've already discovered that for yourself.'

'Only once.'

'Not a happy experience?'

'No. My social life was pretty uncomplicated up to then, just

enjoying dates with blokes I'd been to school with, and one or two men I'd met through my job. Then disaster struck. I got emotionally involved.'

'What happened?'

'Not a lot. The object of my affections forgot to mention he was married, the pig. It put me off men for a while. And since I've come up to London I haven't met anyone at all.' Lowri smiled ruefully. 'I hoped I would, to be honest. But so far the streets of London aren't exactly paved with eligible males eager to buy me romantic dinners.'

'Oh, dear, oh, dear, we'll have to do something about you,' said Sarah, the light of battle in her eye. 'I'll ask Rupert—'

'No, you won't,' interrupted Lowri promptly, 'I came up to London to manage my own life, remember. Let me have a go at it for a bit on my own, please, Sal.'

Sarah patted her cheek. 'Sorry—interfering again. Come on, let's drag Miss Thirty-two E into the garden for some cricket.'

But Fiona refused to budge, too careful of her hairdo to set foot outside the conservatory. Sarah and Lowri left her to her magazines and went to join in some energetic fielding while the menfolk batted, bowled and kept wicket in turn.

'How about you, Lowri?' asked Adam, offering the bat to her. 'Fancy your chances?'

'I don't mind having a try,' she said demurely, and let him show her how to grip the handle correctly. She winked at Dominic, who grinned from ear to ear as Adam jogged down the

lawn ready to deliver a nice, easy ball to the beginner. Rupert, hunkered down behind her to keep wicket, smothered a laugh as Lowri danced down the wicket to the tame delivery, smashing it away into the shrubbery with a perfect forward drive.

Adam stared, open-mouthed as Dominic raced to retrieve it. 'I see, I see,' he said ominously, scowling at Lowri. 'Having me on, were you?' He put up a hand to catch the ball then came sprinting down the wicket in earnest, letting fly a full toss which Lowri swiped over his head with ease to wild applause from the four Clares. She dealt with his three successive deliveries with equal disrespect, until she grew careless and lofted a ball which Dominic sprang up and took spectacularly with one hand, winning concerted applause all round, loudest of all from the bowler.

Adam came sprinting towards Lowri, his eyes hot with accusation. 'Don't tell me that was beginner's luck!'

'Nah!' said Dominic scornfully. 'Her Dad's captain of the village cricket team where Lowri comes from. He taught her to play cricket when she was littler than Emily.'

'No son, you see,' said Lowri apologetically. 'Dad had to teach his skills to me. Not,' she added, 'that I get to use them much.'

Adam grinned. 'Did he teach you to bowl, too?'

'Only tame medium pace stuff.'

He handed her the ball. 'Right. Come on, then.'

'It's my turn to bat,' pointed out Rupert, aggrieved, as Adam took his stance in front of the wicket.

‘Later—I want my revenge first!’

But Adam, swiping mightily at the third ball Lowri delivered, sent it straight through the window in the coach house office in a hail of broken glass, bringing the match to an early close.

Astonished by the howls of laughter from her hosts, Fiona burst from the conservatory to hurl recriminations at Adam, winning her deep disapproval from Emily, who slid a small comforting hand into his large one in consolation as he apologised profusely.

‘Don’t worry—Mrs Parks can type in the conservatory tomorrow,’ said Rupert, clapping him on the shoulder.

With promises to settle the bill for the damage, Adam took reluctant leave, prompted by a petulant reminder from Fiona that they were expected for dinner elsewhere that night. Despite her urgings he took his time in parting from Dominic and Emily, even contriving a private word with Lowri while Fiona went upstairs to make unnecessary repairs to her face.

‘For a pint-sized lady,’ he said, his eyes glinting, ‘you pack an almighty wallop, Lowri Morgan.’

‘It comes in useful from time to time,’ she admitted demurely.

‘For beating off importunate lovers?’

‘Not too many of those around,’ she said candidly.

Adam Hawkridge shook his shiny brown hair back, frowning. ‘Why not?’

‘I wish I knew,’ she said without thinking, then regretted it as she saw the gleam in his eyes.

‘It’s not personal preference, then? You don’t have anything deep-seated against my sex?’

‘Not too deep-seated, no,’ she said warily.

‘Splendid.’ He smiled and shook her hand. ‘I’m very glad Sarah invited me here today. Goodbye, little cousin.’

Lowri, pressed to stay for supper once the others had left, accepted with alacrity. She helped Emily get ready for bed, read her a story, then gave Sarah a hand with the meal, which Dominic was allowed to share before he too went off to bed and left the other three alone. Lowri found herself listening with shameless avidity when Sarah and Rupert discussed Adam Hawkridge’s future destiny as they lingered over coffee round the kitchen table.

‘A bit of a playboy, our Adam,’ mused Rupert, ‘but a brilliant electronics engineer just the same, with a definite flair for marketing. He’ll fill his father’s shoes very ably—far more than his brother would have done.’

‘Rupert was in school with Peter Hawkridge,’ explained Sarah.

‘I often spent part of the holidays with his family,’ added Rupert. ‘Adam was only a kid in those days, of course. Can’t be much more than early thirties even now. He’s packed such a lot in his life that one tends to forget his youth.’

‘Why isn’t his brother taking over the business?’ asked Lowri.

‘He’s dead, pet. Smashed himself up in his car when his wife went off with another man. Adam was at Harvard Business School at the time.’

‘Gosh, how tragic. What sort of business is it?’ added Lowri, trying not to sound too interested.

‘Hawke Electronics rents software to a worldwide clientele. Adam’s father built the company from scratch, and believes in ploughing back a fair percentage on research and development.’ Rupert held out his cup for more coffee. ‘And since Adam’s return from the States the number of software programmes they provide has tripled. He’s one bright cookie, our Adam. Dan Hawkridge is damn lucky to have such an able son to follow in his footsteps.’

‘Adam switched off a bit at the prospect at lunch, though, wouldn’t you say?’ said Sarah, joining her husband on the sofa.

Rupert put his arm round her. ‘The weight of future responsibility, I suppose. Once Adam’s in charge, Dan’s taking his wife off on the world cruise he’s promised her.’

‘In the meantime Adam will work his way through as many Fiona types as possible, I suppose, before he knuckles down,’ said Sarah acidly.

‘Does his taste always run to brainless blondes?’ asked Lowri, chuckling.

‘I don’t think our Adam specifies hair colour, precisely. His women do tend to be leggy and well endowed in the bosom department, now I come to think of it. Why?’ added Sarah in alarm. ‘You’re not thinking—?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Lowri promptly. ‘I’m neither leggy nor blonde, remember. I like Adam, that’s all. Dominic and Emily

like him, too.'

'They dote on him,' agreed their mother. 'Adam will make a good father when he's ready. Retired rakes always do.' She smiled up at Rupert. 'As I know from experience!'

CHAPTER TWO

LOWRI had very little time for daydreams about Adam Hawkridge next day. The department was short-staffed due to influenza, and she was run off her feet during working hours. When she got back to the flat, weary and footsore, she forced herself to do a thorough cleaning job on the room vacated that day by the outgoing occupant, spent the evening arranging her things, then took a much needed shower before allowing herself the luxury of something to eat.

As Lowri emerged from the bathroom, Barbara, the owner of the flat, told her she was wanted on the phone. 'Man. Very attractive voice.'

Lowrie flew to the telephone, blushing unseen at her own disappointment when she heard her father's resonant tones. She assured him she was fine, told him about her day with Sarah, promised to ring more often and sent her love to Holly, at which Geraint Morgan coughed, hummed and hawed and finally blurted out the reason for his telephone call. Holly was pregnant. Lowri would soon have a little brother or sister.

Lowri congratulated her father enthusiastically, assured him she was overjoyed, then put the receiver down feeling rather odd. Deciding it was lack of food, she made herself scrambled eggs in the poky, chaotic kitchen, added a pot of tea and took her tray back to her room, in no mood now to join the others in the

communal sitting-room. Later she rang Sarah to share the news.

'You sound shattered,' said Sarah bluntly.

'I am, a bit. I'm really very happy for Dad, but it was a bit of a body-blow, just the same.'

'Only natural. You two were so close after your mother died. Not your usual father/daughter arrangement.'

'Sorry to moan at you, but I had to talk to someone.'

'I'm glad you did—I can moan at you in exchange. Rupert's Mrs Parks threw a wobbly today.'

'Why?'

'It started with the broken window in the office and the move into the conservatory while it was mended. Then Rupert topped it off with twice as much work as usual this morning because he was struck with inspiration last night and dictated into his machine into the small hours—'

'Sarah, can't you think of a way to keep him in bed?' gurgled Lowri. 'I'll get you a sexy nightie at cost, if you like.'

'Don't be rude!' Sarah retorted, then sighed heavily. 'Anyway, Mrs Parks has taken herself off, vowing never to darken our door again, and I'm saddled with the typing, heaven help me. I don't know how I ever coped with working for Rupert in the old days before we got married—too besotted with him to mind all the fireworks, I suppose.'

'Can I help? I get Friday and Saturday off this week. I could lend a hand then, if you like.'

'Oh, Lowri, *would* you? Rupert pays well—'

‘I don’t need money!’

‘Of course you need money. Don’t be a goose. Anyway we’ll sort that out when you come.’

In the end Sarah insisted Lowri come for a meal on the Thursday evening and stay the night, fresh for work in the morning. Lowri needed little persuasion. A couple of days’ typing for Rupert was a small price to pay for a stay in the airy, comfortable house in St John’s Wood.

The coach house window was intact, and the comfortable little office behind it in perfect order when Lowri settled down to start work on Rupert Clare’s current novel a few days later.

‘First of all,’ advised Rupert, ‘read through the draft so far. Sarah’s printed the disks Mrs Parks typed, so spend this morning familiarising yourself with the characters and the plot. There’s a kettle and coffee and so on in the other room when you take a break, but come over to the house for lunch before you start on any typing.’

Lowri, long one of his most ardent fans, smiled happily. ‘Right, boss. I’m looking forward to a sneak preview of the latest Rupert Clare bestseller—nice work if you can get it!’

‘It may not be a bestseller,’ he said gloomily. ‘I’m tackling a new period for me in this one: dark deeds in fog-bound Victorian London.’

Lowri breathed in a sigh of pleasure. ‘Sounds great to me.’ She rustled the sheaf of papers on the desk. ‘Right then, eyes down and looking for the next hour or so.’

The story gripped her so completely from the first paragraph that Lowri hardly noticed Rupert leave, and looked up at Sarah blankly when her cousin appeared a couple of hours later to announce that lunch was ready.

'Lunch?'

'Yes, you know—soup, sandwiches, stuff like that,' said Sarah, laughing, then frowned. 'No cups? Didn't Rupert tell you to make yourself some coffee?'

Lowri bit her lip guiltily. 'He did, but I forgot. I was so absorbed I didn't notice the time.'

'That's a novelty! Mrs Parks could never work for more than half an hour at a time without a dose of caffeine to keep her going.'

Lowri stood up, stretching. 'Sounds as though the lady's no loss.'

'She will be to me if I have to stand in for her,' said Sarah with emphasis. 'Come on. Dominic's in school, Emily's gone off to spend the afternoon with her chum, and Rupert's having lunch with his agent so it's just the two of us.'

It was pleasant to gossip with Sarah over the meal but Lowri was adamant about returning to the office after half an hour, eager to finish the first portion of the draft so she could start on the real work of typing up Rupert's next tapes. The novel, which bore all the hallmarks of Rupert's style in the vivid characterisation and complex, convoluted plot, was an atmospheric story of revenge.

‘It’s riveting,’ said Lowri, as she finished her coffee. ‘All that underworld vice simmering away behind a façade of rigid Victorian respectability. I can’t wait to find out Jonah Haldane’s secret!’

Lowri’s enthusiasm resulted in more progress in one afternoon than the less industrious Mrs Parks had achieved in the two previous working days. When Rupert came to blow the whistle at six that evening he was deeply impressed, and obviously found Lowri’s reluctance to call a halt deeply gratifying.

‘Enough’s enough for one day, nevertheless, little cousin,’ he said firmly. ‘Sarah says you’re to pack it in, have a bath, then if you can bear it, read a story to Emily. We had to promise her that to keep her from storming your citadel hours ago.’

‘Of course I will,’ said Lowri, stretching. ‘Though something a bit different from yours, Rupert.’ She shivered pleasurably. ‘It’s a bit terrifying in places.’

‘Sarah says you like it.’

‘Like it! I can’t wait to see what happens next.’

‘You’re very good for my ego, Lowri,’ said Rupert as he walked with her across the garden. ‘A little sincere encouragement does wonders. Writers get bloody depressed some days.’

‘You needn’t,’ returned Lowri with certainty. ‘This is your best ever, Rupert. And I should know. I’ve read every book you’ve written.’

He gave her a friendly hug and pushed her into the kitchen,

where Emily and Dominic were eating supper while Sarah clattered saucepans on hobs set into an island which gave her a view of the large kitchen while she worked. At the triple welcome showered on her Lowri felt suddenly enveloped in something missing in her life since her father had married again: a sense of belonging. 'About time you knocked off,' said Sarah, waving a wooden spoon. 'The idea was to help Rupert out a bit, not work yourself to death, Lowri Morgan.'

When Lowri was packed and ready to return to Shepherds Bush, Rupert fixed Lowri with a commanding green eye.

'Sarah and I have a suggestion to make. Feel free to refuse if you want, but hear me out.'

Lowri looked from one to the other, her dark eyes questioning. 'I'm all ears.'

'It's about the work you've been doing for me—'

'Something wrong?'

'Wrong!' snorted Sarah. 'The exact opposite, Lowri. I'm the only one who's ever worked so well with Rupert. Though you haven't seen him in a tantrum yet,' she warned.

'Tantrum?' said Rupert, incensed. 'I may be subject to the odd mood—'

'Your moods are not odd, they're horrible,' corrected his wife flatly. 'Anyway, Lowri, the gist of all this is that if you're not totally dedicated to selling knickers Rupert wondered if you'd fancy working for him full time.'

Lowri's eyes lit up like stars. 'You mean it?'

‘You bet your sweet life I do,’ said Rupert emphatically. ‘And what’s more, you can pack in that flat and come and live here with us.’

‘But I couldn’t impose on you like that,’ said Lowri swiftly.

‘Not even in the coach house flat?’ said Sarah, smiling. ‘You can be as private as you like over there, live entirely your own life as much as you want, or be part of ours whenever the fancy takes you. We’d even take a small rent for the flat if it would make you feel any better.’

‘Are you doing this because you feel sorry for me?’ asked Lowri suspiciously.

‘Don’t talk rubbish!’ Rupert patted her shoulder. ‘It’s you who’d be taking pity on me. I’m offering you the job, Lowri, because you do it so well. Better than anyone since the reign of my lady wife here. *And* you won’t have hysterics if—when—I shout at you. Because shout I will when things go wrong, believe me. So before you answer you’d better think that bit over. But if you can stand my moods, and you fancy the job, how about it?’

From the day she moved her possessions into the Clares’ coach house life was transformed for Lowri. The bedsitting-room adjoining her little office was a comfortable little apartment, complete with bathroom and a minuscule kitchen just large enough for Lowri to cook a meal for one occasionally. After the flat in Shepherds Bush the privacy was wonderful, unmarred by the slightest tinge of loneliness, since at any time Lowri knew she could stroll down the long, beautiful garden to a warm welcome

in the house. This, however, was a privilege Lowri rationed herself strictly from the start.

But there were definite advantages for the Clares in the situation, nevertheless, since Lowri was happy to act as baby-sitter when the busy social life of the Clares demanded it. Since the retirement of Mrs Dobson, Rupert's original treasure of a housekeeper, Sarah had taken on Brenda, who came in daily to help with the house. But Brenda enjoyed a hectic social life, and wasn't keen on baby-sitting too often in the evenings, which left a gap Lowri was only too glad to fill.

As the horse-chestnuts came into bloom and a green smell of spring came floating through her open office window, Lowri felt that fate had been very kind to her indeed. She sniffed at the heady vanilla scent of trees in blossom and heaved a contented sigh as she applied herself to the work which grew more absorbing by the day. The novel was now in its third quarter and working up suspensefully to the climax which Rupert flatly refused to reveal to Lowri in advance. Not even Sarah was any wiser, which apparently was nothing unusual. Rupert liked to keep his plot to himself until the very last sentence was recorded on tape.

Then one weekend Lowri's presence as a guest was commanded at one of Sarah's parties. And the tempo of life quickened again.

Lowri had helped out during the day, mainly by taking charge of Emily while Sarah concocted delicious cold dishes for the

party meal, but once Dominic and Emily had eaten supper and the latter was settled in bed with a story Lowri dashed back to her flat to get ready, tingling with anticipation. She had a new, flattering black dress to wear, bought with her first cheque from Rupert, but, most important of all, Adam Hawkridge would be one of the guests.

The party, as always at the Clare home, was a lively, entertaining occasion from the start, and Lowri, circulating with platters of canapés, no longer felt shy as she mingled because so many of the guests were already well known to her by this time. Sarah, stunning in a plain white dress with turquoise and diamond hoops in her ears, her black hair coiled high on her head, was in her element at Rupert's side as they welcomed their guests, most of whom had some literary connection. But the guest who had none was nowhere in sight. Adam Hawkridge was late. Lowri found it hard to stop watching the door, but when he finally put in an appearance her heart sank at the sight of his tall, blonde companion. When he noticed Lowri his face lit with the familiar, blazing smile, and he threaded his across the crowded room towards her, leaving the voluptuous blonde with Rupert and Sarah, and another man new to Lowri.

'Hello, Lowri!' He squeezed her hand and took the silver dish from her, dumping it unceremoniously on the nearest table. 'How's the little cousin? Are you enjoying the new job? Is Rupert a despot to work for?'

'Hello—Adam,' responded Lowri shyly. 'I'm fine, the work is

fascinating, and so far Rupert's very kind.'

'And so he should be.' He kept hold of her hand to take her across the room. 'Come and meet Caroline.'

'Where's Fiona?'

'Haven't the foggiest,' he returned carelessly. 'Out partying with some other guy, at a guess.'

When they joined the others Adam barely had time to make introductions before the man with Caroline moved in on Lowri with practiced expertise.

'I'm Guy Seton, Caroline's brother,' he announced, and took Lowri by the hand. 'Afraid I'm a gate-crasher. The delightful Mrs Clare assures me she doesn't mind.'

Lowri gazed into a pair of narrow, hot dark eyes under hair almost as fair as the sexy Caroline's, and felt an odd pang of apprehension. Guy Seton exuded such restless energy that he made her feel uneasy.

Rupert, who obviously did object to the gatecrasher, smiled warmly at Lowri. 'So there you are, little cousin,' he said, with emphasis on the relationship. 'Having a good time?'

'Too busy handing round food for that,' said Sarah, and flapped a hand at Lowri. 'Leave all that now. Brenda will help with supper.'

To her annoyance Lowri found herself neatly separated from the rest by Guy Seton. Adam, who had momentarily deserted Caroline for a delighted redhead on the far side of the room, spared a disapproving frown for Guy's manoeuvre, Lowri noted

wistfully, as the latter hurried her through the open French windows on to the terrace outside. The slim, restless man perched on the stone balustrade, one leg swinging as he patted the place beside him.

'Come. Tell me your life story, little Welsh cousin. Was your father a fan of matchstick men—is that how you got your name?'

Lowri perched uneasily beside him, not at all happy about finding a constricting arm round her waist. 'No. Mine's spelt with a final "i"—Welsh for Laura, nothing to do with Lowry the artist. And my life-story isn't interesting in the slightest.'

'You interest me a bloody sight more than the so-called literati in there.' His arm tightened. 'What's a nice little Welsh maiden like you doing in the big city, Lowri with an "i"?'

She sat rigid in his clasp, disliking the innuendo he managed to inject into the word 'maiden'. 'I work for Rupert.'

'Lucky Rupert.'

Lowri shifted uncomfortably, but Guy Seton held her fast. 'Don't be frightened, poppet,' he said, chuckling. 'I shan't eat you.'

'Which reminds me—there's a perfectly good supper waiting inside,' she said firmly, and disengaged herself. 'Shall we go and sample some of it?'

Guy Seton possessed a thick skin, she found, quite impervious to her unsubtle hints that his monopoly of her company wasn't welcome. He stuck to her side like glue, and short of causing a scene there was nothing she could do about it. Something

about his hectic, almost feverish attentions filled her with unease. Lowri had no illusions about her looks. She was more rounded than she would have liked for her lack of inches, and regarded her large, dark eyes as her only redeeming feature. Besides, she had good reason to distrust a sudden rush of attention like Guy Seton's, wary of men who came at the gallop after only one glance. And by staying so close all the time Guy was destroying her hopes of a chat with Adam at some stage. Not, she noted, depressed, that there was much chance of that. Adam had now returned his attentions to the sultry Caroline, who was smouldering up at him in a way which made it obvious she wanted him to round off the evening in her bed.

'Are you a friend of Adam's?' she asked Guy, her eyes on the absorbed couple across the room.

'Not a friend, precisely,' said Guy. His mouth thinned as he followed her gaze. 'I was in school with him. He's Caroline's "friend". She's crazy about him. Women flock round Hawkridge in droves. Can't think why. He's no oil painting.'

'No,' agreed Lowri. 'He's not.' But he's twice as attractive as you, Guy Seton, she added silently, because he's got warmth. You're a cold fish, I think, for all the burning glances and febrile charm.

'Caro's so blatantly panting to share Hawkridge's bed I'm amazed she insisted I came with them tonight. But I'm glad I did.' Guy gave her a smile of confident intimacy. 'Instead of playing gooseberry to those two, I can take you home instead.'

Lowri's answering smile was frosty. 'No need. I live here.'

'Hell.' He scowled. 'That's a blow.' He eyed her up and down, his eyes undressing her. 'Rupert Clare's bloody lucky, having two gorgeous women at his disposal under the same roof.'

Enough was enough. Lowri glared at him. 'I'm very fond of Rupert, but I live in the coach house to be precise, not under his roof. Nor am I at *anyone's* disposal.' She thrust her empty glass in his hand. 'Goodnight, Mr Seton.' And without another word she hurried through the hall to the kitchen and slammed the door shut behind her.

'What's up?' Brenda looked up from loading the dishwasher in surprise. 'Someone ruffle your feathers out there?'

'Someone certainly did,' said Lowri, seething. 'Any coffee going, Brenda? I'll give you a hand to clear away.'

'Coming up, love,' said Brenda, filling the kettle. 'Won't say no to a bit of help. Terry's coming for me in half an hour—mustn't keep him waiting.'

'Terry?' said Lowri, laughing. 'What happened to Wayne?'

Brenda winked, thrusting a hand through her spiky blonde hair. 'What he doesn't know about he won't grieve over, eh?'

A few minutes later Lowri stole along the pergola lining the path which led to the coach house. She gained her little sanctum with a sigh, partly of relief for eluding the disturbing Mr Seton, but mostly of regret for having so little opportunity to talk to Adam. Which was stupid, she told herself as she hung up the black dress. Any time he'd had to spare from Caroline had

been spent on the redhead with the cleavage. She cleaned off her make-up irritably, rubbed some moisturiser into her olive skin, gave her lengthening hair a good brush and got into a nightshirt and the vividly embroidered black silk kimona her father and Holly had given her for Christmas, by which time she felt ominously wide awake. She slid into bed and reached for a well-thumbed copy of *Northanger Abbey*. Jane Austen's dry wit rarely failed to soothe, and with a sigh Lowri banked up her pillows, settled herself comfortably and put thoughts of Adam and the annoying Mr Seton firmly from her as she settled down to read.

She was halfway through the first chapter when a knock on the outer door brought Lowri bolt upright. She sprang off the bed, startled, and went out through the office, certain it must be Sarah or Rupert with some emergency. She unlocked the door then screeched in fright as Guy Seton pushed her back inside the office, slammed the door shut and stood with his back to it, a wild look about him which scared her rigid.

'Now, now, Lowri,' he said menacingly. 'This isn't at all friendly, is it? I need some comfort, some tender loving care, sweetheart.'

'Well, you won't get it from me!' she snapped. 'You shouldn't be here.'

'Why not? I asked if I could see you home. And here you are, and so am I. Let's party!' He stalked towards her, the restless, feverish aura about him now so pronounced that Lowri could

have kicked herself for not recognising the cause sooner. Her unwanted visitor was obviously high on something a lot more dangerous than champagne.

'Guy, please,' she said, backing away. She tried to smile. 'It's late and I'm tired—'

'Then come to bed,' he said hoarsely, and reached for her.

Lowri fought him off savagely, but despite his slim build Guy Seton was strong; deceptively so. He managed to drag her, kicking and struggling, into the bedroom and on to her bed. Beside herself with rage, Lowri twisted and turned like an eel, her nails raking down his face, her teeth sinking into the mouth crushing hers, and Guy let out a howl and drew back, face contorted, clenched fist raised. Then suddenly he was flat out on the floor, felled by a savage blow from Adam Hawkridge, who stepped over the unconscious man without a second look, and hauled Lowri into his arms.

'Are you all right? Did that bastard hurt you?' he barked.

Her teeth were chattering so much Lowri found it hard to reassure him that apart from the odd bruise and the fright of her life she was fine.

'How—how did you know—?' she gasped.

'Caroline was ready to go home and insisted her blasted brother go with us. When I couldn't find him I made an educated guess. Thank the lord I did,' he added harshly, and tipped her face up to his. 'Were you saying the truth? He didn't—harm you?'

Lowri's face flamed. 'If you mean did he rape me, *no!* And

I didn't lead him on, either—I swear I didn't.' Tears of reaction slid down her face. 'I just don't understand it. He stuck to me like glue all evening. In the end I got so fed up I escaped and came back here.

But—' she gulped. 'He followed me. That's it, you know the rest.'

Adam held her close, patting her as though she were Emily. 'There, there, it's all over now. Shall I fetch Sarah?'

'No! And for heaven's sake don't say a word to Rupert, either.' She grimaced at the thought. 'His explosion threshold's a bit low, as you know. Let them finish the party in peace.' A convulsive shudder ran through her. She swallowed a sob and Adam's arms tightened.

He cursed under his breath and turned her face up to his. 'Don't, little one,' he said urgently, 'you're safe now.'

As her tear-wet eyes met his Lowri's heart gave a sudden thump and she breathed in sharply. For a moment they were utterly still, then Adam bent his head involuntarily to kiss her, the inflammatory effect of the contact so unexpected it took both of them by surprise. Lowri's lips parted to the sudden seeking of his tongue and Adam's arm tightened, his free hand cupping her head to hold her still as he kissed her with a fierce heat quite different from the comfort she knew was all he'd intended.

When he let her go, several earth-shattering moments later, Lowri almost staggered.

'Hell and damnation!' he said bitterly. 'I'm no better than

Seton.'

Lowri blinked, dazed, trying to smile. 'Don't say that. You—you were just comforting me.'

Adam's eyebrows rose. 'Was I, Lowri?'

She flushed, and looked away, biting her lip in sudden disgust as she caught sight of Guy Seton, still out to the world on her bedroom floor. 'Ugh! What shall we do about—about that?'

For answer Adam bent down and slung the unconscious man over his shoulder with negligent ease. 'I'll just dump him in the back of the car and collect Caroline. I'll have to put her in the picture, I'm afraid, but no one else need know.' He manoeuvred Guy Seton's body through into the office, motioning Lowri to open the outer door. 'Is the coast clear?'

She peered around outside, nodded, then smiled up at him ruefully. 'I'm deeply grateful to you, Adam. I rather fancy you saved me from a fate worse than death.'

Adam gave her a sombre look. 'I feel responsible. I brought the bastard here tonight, after all. I'm very sorry, Lowri. For everything.' He paused a moment, a sudden, irrepressible gleam in his eyes. 'Well perhaps not *quite* everything,' he amended, grinning, and hefted his unconscious burden more securely, waved his free hand, then made his way down the outer stair and disappeared through the gate in the wall.

When he was out of sight Lowri locked her door and shot the bolts into place, then stripped her bed and put clean sheets on it, thrusting thoughts of Adam's kisses from her mind by

concentrating fiercely on the debt she owed him. Without his timely appearance there could have been a great deal more to put right in her life than a mere change of bedlinen.

CHAPTER THREE

AFTER a restless night Lowri slept late next morning, and awoke at last to loud knocking on the office door. She jumped out of bed, pulling on her kimono.

'Coming!' she called, wincing at the pounding in her head, and went to the door to admit Dominic.

'Mum says will you come over? You've had a telephone call.' He eyed her in surprise. 'Gosh, Lowri, what a shiner! How did you get that?'

Since Lowri could barely see out of one eye, the question came as no surprise. 'I bumped into something,' she said with perfect truth. Guy Seton's elbow had rammed her eye while she was fighting him off. She smiled at Dominic. 'Tell Mum I'll be there as soon as I've dressed. I've been lazy this morning.'

One look in the bathroom mirror told her that trying to keep last night's events from Sarah would be a complete waste of time. The truth, Lowri thought, resigned, will out whether I want it to or not. She frowned, realising she'd forgotten to ask Dominic who'd rung her.

Later, dressed in jeans and an old checked shirt, Lowri put on dark glasses to shield her eye from the bright sunshine and crossed the garden to join Sarah and Rupert in the kitchen.

'Good morning,' she said, smiling brightly. 'Where's Emily?'

'Dominic's keeping her amused until you've told us about the

black eye,' said Sarah promptly, pouring coffee.

Rupert plucked the glasses from Lowri and whistled. 'Hell's bells!' his eyes narrowed dangerously. 'Right. Tell me who did that, Lowri—now!'

'First tell me who rang,' she said quickly to divert him.

'It was Adam,' said Sarah, 'He's coming round later to take you out to lunch.' She eyed Lowri militantly. 'But never mind that—how on earth did you get that shiner?'

Lowri, trying to appear unaffected by the news that Adam intended taking her out, drank some coffee and gave a terse account of the encounter with Guy Seton. 'So you don't have to do battle for me,' she told an incensed Rupert at the end of it. 'Adam knocked Guy Seton cold last night on the spot. The man probably looks—and feels—far worse than I do this morning.'

'I should bloody well hope he does,' said Rupert savagely.

'Is the eye the only damage?' demanded Sarah urgently.

'Yes. Adam arrived on the scene before Guy could have his wicked way with me.' Lowri held out her cup for more coffee. 'But it beats me why the wretched man should have been so intent on getting it. I'm not the type who drives men wild, now am I!'

'You obviously appealed to Seton.' Rupert scowled. 'He took one look and kept sniffing round you all night. I would have done something about it, but he's quite attractive, I suppose. You might have wanted it that way.'

'I told you she wouldn't,' said Sarah with scorn. 'Guy Seton's bad news where women are concerned.'

‘Another heartbreaker, like Adam Hawkridge?’ asked Lowri slyly.

‘Adam would never be so crass as to assault anyone,’ said Sarah indignantly. ‘Guy was in school with Adam, I admit, but otherwise he’s not in the same class.’

‘Beats me what he was doing here at all.’ Rupert’s jaw set. ‘I’ll have a word with Adam, find out why the devil he brought the chap along in the first place.’

‘Caroline’s idea, probably—Adam seems fairly smitten in that direction from what I could see,’ said Sarah, and pushed a toast-rack towards Lowri. ‘Eat something.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Possibly not, but if you drink any more black coffee on an empty stomach you’ll rattle like a castanet.’

Lowri gave in, and felt a little better afterwards, though angry with a fate which gave her a black eye for her lunch date with Adam Hawkridge. Any other time she’d have been on Cloud Nine at the mere thought of it. Even if he was smitten with Caroline.

‘Go and change your clothes, slap on some lipstick,’ advised Sarah, reading her mind. ‘You’ll soon feel more enthusiastic.’

Duly attired in a newish pair of cream denims, long pink cable sweater and dark glasses Lowri both looked and felt a great deal better by the time Adam arrived. She opened the office door to his knock, her smile wobbling slightly at the sudden, vivid memory of his kisses the night before.

‘Hello, Lowri,’ he said, smiling, and took her hand. ‘I’ve rather press-ganged you into this, I’m afraid, but I wanted time alone with you to explain the drama last night.’

‘It’s very kind of you to take the trouble,’ she said sedately, and took her time in locking the door to the flat.

‘I’ve had a swift word with Sarah and Rupert to put them in the picture.’ He ran down the stairs in front of her then turned at the bottom to hold out a steadying hand. ‘Not unnaturally, Rupert feels responsible for you. He came down on me like a ton of bricks about my part in the affair.’

‘But I told him you came to my rescue,’ Lowri assured him as they left the garden by the side door.

‘Rupert pointed out that if I hadn’t brought Guy Seton no rescue would have been necessary. And he’s right.’ Adam’s wide mouth twisted in disgust, then he smiled at her. ‘Let’s say goodbye then make for the open spaces. I’ve brought a picnic.’

Lowri gave him a delighted smile. ‘What a brilliant idea!’

Adam suggested Runnymede, and a quiet spot near the river for their picnic lunch.

‘The “banks of the sweetest river in the world” according to John Evelyn,’ he told her later. He spread a rug for her, then opened a picnic basket to serve her with smoked trout pâté, cold chicken savoury with rosemary and garlic, a small bowl of green salad and crusty fresh rolls to eat with fierce farmhouse cheese.

‘How did you manage all this on a Sunday morning?’ asked Lowri, impressed. ‘I bet King John didn’t do nearly as well the

day he signed the Magna Carta here.'

Adam's eyes danced beneath the heavy, straight eyebrows. 'My mother saw to it. I told her I needed to feed a very charming young lady from Wales. When she'd expressed her surprised approval—my usual female company tends more to smart nightspots than riverside picnics—she gave me some of the goodies intended for my father's lunch. Don't worry,' he added, as she gave him a startled look. 'There was more than enough left over—for them and several others. My mother's catering is generous.'

'Please thank her warmly on my behalf, and tell her how much it was appreciated,' said Lowri, surprised to find her appetite alive and well after all. 'This is lovely. All of it,' she added.

Adam leaned forward and gently removed the sunglasses, his eyes hot with sudden anger as he examined her eye. 'Exactly how did that happen?' he asked harshly, giving her back the glasses. 'If the swine hit you I'll go back and break his jaw this time.'

Lowri hastily explained her accidental contact with Guy Seton's elbow. 'He was obviously high on something. Wouldn't take no. Heaven knows why—I never gave him the slightest encouragement,' she added irritably.

Adam looked grim. 'He didn't need any. The girl he lives with gave him the push yesterday. She delivered an ultimatum. He was to see sense about his cocaine habit or she was leaving. Seton objected. She could take him with all faults or not at all, since, I quote, he could pull any woman he wanted any time, and would

prove it.' Adam's jaw tightened. 'He stormed round in a state to Caroline, who's always adored him. She was terrified to leave him on his own, and, knowing I'd refuse if she told me why, she insisted we take him with us to the party. You were the obvious choice for Seton to make good his boast. I'm sorry. I should never have let the bastard anywhere near you, Lowri.'

'It wasn't your fault,' she assured him, and smiled. 'Now let's forget about Guy and just enjoy the sunshine. We don't get enough to waste it, and tomorrow I'll be back at my desk. Not that I mind,' she added happily, 'I can't wait to find out what happens next in Rupert's novel. We're approaching the climax of the story.'

'He's a master of his craft, I agree.' Adam smiled. 'And damn lucky to find someone willing to work so hard for him.'

Lowri shook her head. 'The luck's all mine. When I left home I never dreamed I'd find something so interesting to do, especially with a flat thrown in. I owe such a lot to Sarah and Rupert.'

He eyed her curiously. 'Why were you in such a hurry to leave this home of yours?'

Lowri looked away. 'Dad and I have been closer than most, but now he's got Holly it's only fair to leave him to his new life without me in the way. Especially now Holly's pregnant.'

'Ah. Do you mind that?'

'No—at least not now. It was a bit of a shock at first. Though I should have expected it; pretty obvious really from the way—' She stopped, flushing.

‘I take it your father’s very much in love with his new wife,’ said Adam quietly.

‘Exactly. And she with him.’ Lowri turned away to investigate an insulated jug. ‘Mmm, wonderful—coffee. Want some?’

They fell silent as they drank the dark, fragrant brew provided by Mrs Hawkridge. After a while Adam leaned over and took her hand.

‘Never mind, Lowri. One day you’ll marry and have a baby of your own, and no more regrets about your new little stepbrother—or sister.’

She withdrew her hand swiftly. ‘My regrets were very short-lived, Adam.’

‘Sorry.’ He lay flat on his back, hands linked behind his head. ‘Nevertheless I meant what I said. You’re exactly the type for marriage and babies, Lowri Morgan.’

‘Because I’m not blonde and voluptuous and a frequenter of fashionable haunts—like Caroline Seton and Miss Thirty-two E?’

Adam opened a disapproving hazel eye. ‘That’s not what I said. Those two are just to play with. You’re the sort men marry.’

Lowri grinned impudently. ‘Whereas you blench at the mere thought of marriage, I suppose!’

‘How right you are. I’ve got too much to do to get married. When Dad retires, Hawke Electronics will be wife, mistress and family rolled into one. I’ll have no time left over for the normal kind. All my energies will be concentrated on the company.’

Such a waste, thought Lowri, her eyes on the powerful, sprawled figure.

'Besides,' said Adam, his eyes closed, 'I've good reason to be allergic to the sanctity of marriage.'

Lowri sat very still. 'I heard what happened to your brother, if that's what you mean.'

'I do. I keep thinking I could have prevented what happened if I'd been home. Stupid really. Peter was always a highly strung, sensitive sort of chap—nothing like me. But to end it all just because his wife walked out on him! Damned if I would—but enough of that.' Adam leapt suddenly to his feet, holding out his hand. 'Come on, let's pack this stuff back in the car and go for a walk.'

As Lowri strolled with Adam Hawkridge through the sunlit afternoon, it suddenly occurred to her that she was finally living out the fantasies she'd indulged in before coming to live in London. She was actually wandering over watermeadows with a tall, devastatingly attractive man, a thought which added such sparkle to her mood Adam showed gratifying signs of reluctance when he parted with her in Hamilton Terrace.

'I won't come in, Lowri,' he said, as he stopped the car. 'I should have been somewhere else half an hour ago, so give my best to Sarah and Rupert and tell them I took great care of their little cousin.'

'It was a lovely day. Thank you, Adam.'

He smiled at her and patted her hand affectionately. 'My

pleasure too, Lowri. You're very sweet—take good care of yourself.'

Lowri hesitated, then gave him a funny little smile. 'Can I ask you a very personal question, Adam?'

He grinned. 'Feel free.'

'Is Caroline the thirty-six C angel blush?'

Adam threw back his head and roared with laughter, then squeezed her hand, winking at her. 'Actually, no. You haven't met Miss Thirty-Six.'

Lowri shook her head, laughing, waved him off then reported in to Rupert and Sarah. She took herself off to her own little domain later to reflect on the day and wish, rather irritably, that Adam thought of her as something more exciting than the Clares' nice little cousin. She'd hoped against hope that he'd kiss her again, so she could show him she was all woman as well as just 'sweet'. Sarah was right, she thought moodily, as she lay in a hot bath. Adam Hawkridge was a heartbreaker of the most dangerous type of all—totally unaware of his own power.

Lowri buckled down to work with a will next morning, determined to put Adam Hawkridge firmly from her mind. Rupert had almost finished dictating his novel. In a day or two he would have given her all the tapes and by the end of the week Lowri hoped to finish typing the first draft.

'Then you'll have to type the whole thing all over again, and not just once but several times, probably,' warned Sarah. 'Rupert's rarely satisfied with it until about the fourth or fifth draft. Do

you think you'll cope?'

'Of course I will,' said Lowri cheerfully, then raised an eyebrow. 'What happens when it's finally finished? Does that mean I'm out of a job?'

'Of course not! Rupert's already got the next book in mind. You'll be needed to research for ages before he actually starts on it. Which, I warn you, means long hours shut up in libraries, or lugging home weighty tomes to search for some obscure detail Rupert can't do without.'

Lowri beamed, delighted. 'Sounds great to me. History was my best subject at school.'

Rupert finished dictating his novel by mid-week and Lowri finished typing it late on the Saturday evening, ignoring all protests from the Clares about working on a weekend.

'I just have to know how it ends,' she said firmly, and refused to budge from her desk until the last line was typed. She sat back with a sigh at last, her mind buzzing with Jonah Haldane and his triumphant victory over his adversaries.

'Well?' demanded Rupert, when she went over to the house later to say she'd finished. 'What do you think?'

Lowri heaved a great sigh. 'It's utterly magnificent, Rupert.'

'Not recycled Dickens, then,' said Sarah with satisfaction.

'Sarah! What a horrible thing to say.'

'Rupert's description, not mine. I haven't even read it yet.'

Lowri turned on Rupert in fury. 'Don't you dare say that, Rupert Clare! I've never dared admit it because I seemed to be in

a minority of one, but Dickens always bored me rigid. Whereas your book—' She waved her hands, searching for the right word. 'I can't express myself like you, Rupert, but what I'm trying to say is that when I came to the last line I wished desperately that I hadn't finished it, that I was starting at the beginning again. And this is just the draft—think of the impact when you're finally satisfied with it!'

Rupert threw his arms round her, laughing. 'All right, you little spitfire. Every novelist should have a champion like you. How long will it take you to print the last bit?'

'By Tuesday, I should think—Monday if I work tomorrow.'

'Definitely not,' said Sarah firmly. 'Rupert's giving you a treat tomorrow. At least I hope it's a treat-Dominic's sure you'll be thrilled.'

'Would you like to watch some Sunday cricket at Lord's?' said Rupert. 'Sarah's taking Emily to some birthday party, so how about coming to see Middlesex play your beloved Glamorgan with Dominic and me?'

Lowri was just as thrilled as Dominic had predicted. Lord's cricket ground was within such easy walking distance of the house she'd been longing to get to a match there ever since moving to St Johns Wood.

'Dad will be green with envy,' she said with a sigh of pleasure.

Sarah smiled affectionately. 'Not every girl's idea of a fun day!'

'But then,' mocked Rupert, 'Lowri's a Morgan like you, by no

means a run-of-the-mill type of female.'

After her week of gruelling work it was an enormous pleasure to Lowri to sit between Dominic and Rupert at the famous cricket ground, applauding with partisan enthusiasm as she watched the Glamorgan eleven pull out all the stops against Middlesex.

'This is my second picnic in the space of a week,' she commented happily as they shared the picnic she'd helped Sarah pack earlier. 'Only this time I've got cricket as well and I adore one day-games. Dad's such a purist that he looks down on Sunday cricket, but I think it's exciting. Thank you so much for bringing me, Rupert.'

'I want to be a professional cricketer,' said Dominic indistinctly, wolfing a pork pie. 'I hope I'll be picked for the first eleven when I get to Shrewsbury.'

'Of course you will,' said a familiar voice, and all three turned round to see Adam Hawkridge laughing down at them. 'Make a few more catches like the one you saw Lowri off with and you can't fail. Greetings, everyone. May I join you?'

Rupert sprang to his feet to welcome the newcomer, Dominic beaming as he made room for Adam between himself and Lowri.

'You were lucky to find us in this crowd,' said Rupert, offering him a sandwich.

'I rang Sarah—she told me roughly where you'd be.' Adam smiled down at a suddenly shy Lowri. 'I gather this is your reward for working so hard.'

'Not every girl's idea of a treat,' said Rupert indulgently.

‘Actually I rang up to see if you were free tonight,’ said Adam, accepting a second sandwich.

‘Me?’ enquired Rupert blandly.

‘No, thanks, you’re not my type!’ Adam grinned, then turned to Lowri. ‘It was this lady I was after. I realise it’s short notice, but I wondered if you’d care for a meal tonight somewhere and a film afterwards?’

Lowri bolted an unchewed morsel of sandwich whole, eyes watering. There was nothing in the whole wide world she’d have liked better, but that was hardly the point. Caroline, or Fiona, or Miss Thirty-Six C or one of probably a dozen others must have let him down at the last minute, leaving him at a loose end. She smiled politely. ‘How very kind. But I’m afraid I’m tied up tonight.’

Adam stared in surprise, the wind very obviously taken out of his sails. He pulled himself together, smiling rather stiffly. ‘My bad luck. I suppose it was a bit optimistic to expect you to be free. Another time, maybe?’

Lowri returned the smile non-committally, then rummaged in the picnic basket, conscious of the narrowed look Rupert turned on her. ‘Anyone for an apple?’

When they got back to the house Lowri listened to a spirited account of the birthday party from an excited Emily, volunteered to put her to bed and read a story, declined supper on the excuse of the large picnic tea, and took herself off to mope in her own quarters.

An hour or so later Sarah knocked on her door and asked if she could come in for a while.

'Of course.' Lowri, glad of relief from her own morose company, went to put the kettle on for coffee.

'You can tell me to go away, if you like.'

'Of course I don't mind.' When Lowri returned with a tray she eyed her cousin sheepishly. 'I suppose Rupert told you Adam asked me out tonight.'

'He did, indeed.' Sarah ran a hand through her long dark hair thoughtfully. 'His account of the afternoon was very interesting. Adam obviously expected you to consent with maidenly—but prompt—gratitude and, I am told, seemed a bit put out when you refused. And since I know perfectly well you had no plans for this evening, unless you count washing your hair, or a date with a good book, I'm agog to know why you turned Adam down.'

'I thought you'd have worked that one out for yourself.' Lowri smiled ruefully. 'He was so confident I'd say yes, you know! Besides, he's dangerous—he frightens me.'

'You're not worried he'd behave like that beastly Seton man!'

'Of course not. But you were the one who warned me, remember. The first time I laid eyes on Adam Hawkridge you told me he was a heartbreaker. You were right. I could like him a lot—far too much for safety. If I see too much of him I could get my fingers burnt a second time. So I refused. Besides,' added Lowri tartly, 'I objected to the way he breezed up at the cricket match, expecting me to accept with humble gratitude because

somebody else stood him up tonight.'

'How do you know that?'

'What other reason could there be? I've got my pride, Sarah. It was pretty obvious he expected me to drop everything and run.' She sniffed. 'No chance.'

'Rupert was deeply impressed,' said Sarah, smiling. 'Adam's such a charmer that at a guess I'd say no woman's ever said no to him in his life before, unless it was his mother, who's absolutely lovely, by the way. A nice polite little no from you probably did him the world of good.'

'I hope it did—because it didn't do *me* any good at all,' sighed Lowri despondently. 'It quite spoiled my afternoon—and to cap it all Glamorgan lost by one measly run!'

CHAPTER FOUR

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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