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Second Chance For Love

SUSANNE MCCARTHY

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*Josey sensed that people
were covertly watching her*

She could feel the curiosity of their eyes resting on her. So this was the woman who was living with Tom Quinn. However, she could hardly stand here and announce to the assembled company, “It’s not what you think.”

And Tom wasn’t exactly helping matters, standing so close behind her like that, as possessive as a dog with a bone. No one looking at them would doubt that they were lovers...

SUSANNE McCARTHY grew up in South London, England, but she always wanted to live in the country, and shortly after her marriage she moved to Shropshire with her husband. They live in a house on a hill, with lots of dogs and cats. She loves to travel—but she loves to come home. As well as her writing, she still enjoys her career as a teacher in adult education, though she only works part-time now.

Second Chance for Love

Susanne McCarthy



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CHAPTER ONE

‘MANIAC!’ The driver of the delivery-van almost had to stand on his brakes, swerving sharply to avoid a head-on collision as the white Porsche took the bend too wide, veering over towards the oncoming traffic. ‘Look where you’re damned well going,’ he advised fiercely, though the woman at the wheel would not have heard him.

In fact, Josey had barely even been aware of the near-accident. She had driven all the way from London in a kind of trance. All she had in the car were the few clothes she had thrown into a bag. Everything else she had left behind her, along with nine years of her life.

She had known for a long time that her marriage was over. But it had come as a bitter blow when Colin had announced, as coolly as you liked, that he wanted a divorce—so that he could marry his secretary. It wasn’t losing him that hurt. No, it was the fact that Paula was pregnant—and that he was delighted.

He had never wanted *her* to have children, she reminded herself, the bitterness welling up. A baby wouldn’t fit in with their lifestyle, he had said. He worked hard all day, he had said. He didn’t want to come home to a house full of toys and nappies, and be kept awake all night by a baby crying.

Maybe she should have left him years ago. But somehow there had never seemed to be quite enough reason to take such a serious

step—vague suspicions that he was having affairs, which she had never quite been able to bring herself to confront him with. She was sure Paula wasn't the first—he probably seduced all his secretaries. She ought to know—she had been his secretary herself once.

She had been just twenty-one when she had first gone to work for him—and he had been the stuff of every young girl's dreams: good-looking, urbane and dynamic. Too dynamic for the respectable, well-established firm he was in—he was keen to branch out on his own. He had exercised all his considerable charm to persuade her to take the plunge, and go with him.

It had been fun, at first, watching the small company mushroom with success. But she had always kept their relationship strictly business—she had already had a very nice boyfriend, to whom she was unofficially engaged. Ironically, it was a row with Derek about the long hours she was working that had precipitated the change. Colin had been so incredibly kind and understanding. He had taken her out to dinner to cheer her up—and somehow she had found herself in his bed.

Why, out of all his conquests, had he chosen to marry her? Probably to secure her loyalty, at a time when she would have been indispensable to the business, she mused wryly. And he had probably seen her as a social asset, too—someone to organise the vitally important social side of his life, preside over his dinner parties with grace, making intelligent conversation with all his tedious guests.

And of course she had been beautiful then. She hardly recognised herself now in the thin, pallid creature she had become. Her hair was lank and lifeless, the russet glints it had once held dimmed, and her eyes were dull. She was only thirty-one, but she looked nearer forty. Maybe she couldn't blame him for looking elsewhere.

It was hard to know when it had all started to go wrong. Maybe it was since she had given up her career. She had been overjoyed when Colin had first suggested that, since the company was prospering so well, she no longer needed to work; at last, she had believed, it was his intention that they should start a family. But she had been in for a bitter disappointment.

In the beginning she had tried to persuade him. But every time she had brought the subject up he had accused her of nagging, and eventually he had begun to get more and more annoyed. She had hated the rows, so gradually she had ceased to even try to discuss the issue.

And gradually they had grown further and further apart. She had already grown disillusioned with their shallow lifestyle, with friends who seemed as disposable as last year's fashions. If they could even have had a proper house with a garden to tend, and maybe room for a dog, she might have been a little happier. But their ultra-smart City apartment had begun to seem like a prison: she had been bored, with nothing to do but shop and go the hairdressers—and that hollow, aching longing for a baby had never gone away.

With a hand that shook slightly she reached out to the dashboard, and found the half-empty pack of cigarettes. That was something else, she mused bitterly as she fumbled for her lighter. She had only begun smoking a couple of years ago, to calm her nerves. She had tried countless times to give them up—it was a habit she hated—but she couldn't do without them.

Colin had caught her by surprise, coming home in the middle of the afternoon like that. She had been slopping around the apartment in a pair of old jeans and a faded T-shirt. Somehow that made it all so much worse—he liked a woman to be elegant, and the look of faintly veiled contempt in his eyes had undermined any hope she might have had of dealing with the situation with any kind of dignity.

If Paula hadn't been pregnant... She hadn't been able to handle that. She had cried, making her eyes ugly and red, and he had become exasperated. In the end she had fled to the bedroom, packed a bag, and told him he could have his divorce, have the apartment, have anything he wanted. Then she had just climbed into her car and driven off.

She had had no clear idea of where she was going. It wasn't until she had found herself driving around the M25, the orbital motorway around London, for the second time, that she had given that problem any consideration. And then she had thought of the cottage out in the wilds of Norfolk, left to her by her great-aunt Floss a couple of years before.

She hadn't been there since she was a child, but she

remembered that it was remote, on the edge of a tiny village, miles from anywhere. Suddenly that had seemed enormously appealing, and she had set off, with only a vague idea of how far it was to Cottisham.

Through the fine Norfolk drizzle misting the windscreen, a road-sign showed her that the next turn was to her destination, and she took it. The road was dark, but even if it had been daylight she doubted that she would have recognised it—she would have been no more than about ten years old the last time she was here.

What sort of state would the cottage be in? Aunt Floss had died...oh, it must have been three years ago. For the first time, she began to consider that the place would probably be in a bit of a mess. The electricity would probably have been turned off, and maybe even the water too. But at least she was nearly there—she could just go straight to bed tonight, and sort out any problems in the morning.

Her hand found the cigarette-lighter at last, and she flicked it into flame, bending her head to draw deeply on the tobacco...

The headlights came out of nowhere, straight towards her, and too late she realised that the road bent away sharply to the left. In an instinct of panic she snatched at the wheel, braking hard, and the tyres lost their grip on the damp road, sliding into a lazy treacherous skid. In front of her, the beam of her own headlights stabbed out into nothingness...

She wasn't dead, then—it couldn't have been as bad as she

had thought it was going to be. She had had an image, fleetingly, of the car tipping over some steep incline and rolling over and over, crushing her. But she seemed to be the right way up, though the car was tipped up at an odd angle, and the windscreen was shattered... And someone was asking her if she was all right.

Damn—how was she going to get to the cottage now? And that was blood trickling down her cheek... Suddenly she realised that she was hurt, and started to scream.

‘All right—steady. You can’t be too badly injured if you can make that sort of noise.’ The voice was calm and competent, and he had reached into the car, unfastening her seatbelt, and was running what felt like an expert hand over her body.

‘Are you a doctor?’ she whispered, looking up to find a pair of intriguing hazel eyes just a few inches above her own.

He laughed drily. ‘No, I’m a vet. You don’t seem to have done yourself too much harm—which is more than can be said for your car. Do you think you can move?’

‘I think so. But my wrist hurts.’

‘Show me.’

She held it out to him gingerly, but his examination was so gentle that she hardly felt it. Some part of her mind was incongruously registering the thought that he was one of the most attractive men she had ever seen: thick dark hair, shaggily cut, fell over a high, intelligent forehead, and his face was starkly masculine, with a strong aquiline nose, and a lean, hard jaw.

‘Are you really a vet?’ she asked curiously.

‘Yes—but the principle’s pretty much the same,’ he reassured her. ‘I think you’ve broken this. If you can get to my car, I’ll take you to the hospital.’

‘Your car’s all right?’

‘You didn’t hit me—I managed to brake and get out of your way,’ he told her, a faintly sardonic inflexion in his voice. ‘What happened? Didn’t you see the sign for the bend?’

She tried to shake her head, but found it a jarring experience.

‘Steady,’ he advised. ‘You’ve been pretty badly shaken up. Take it slowly.’

Supporting her with one strong arm around her shoulders, the other holding her injured arm steady, he eased her very gradually from the car. It was crazy, but she found herself leaning on him just a little more than was strictly necessary; it just felt so good to have a man treating her with a little tenderness, a little kindness, after so many years of Colin’s indifference.

His car was just a few feet away, slewed across on to the wrong side of the road, and with a small stab of horror she realised just how dangerously close she had come to a much more serious accident. That thought made her feel slightly sick, and she found that she really did need all his support to make it the short distance to his car.

Dimly she took in that it was an old Land Rover: of course—he would need a tough car if he was a vet. An elderly black and white border collie was sitting in the front seat, but he gave it a crisp order, and with a look of mild indignation at being banished

it skipped over into the back.

It was a relief to be able to collapse into the front seat. She closed her eyes, for a few moments conscious only of the fires of pain in her wrist and her head. But she had had a very lucky escape. Opening her eyes, she peered across at her own car.

Well, she had certainly made a mess of that! It was tail-up in a ditch, the bonnet crumpled and the offside badly smashed in. It was probably going to be a complete insurance write-off. Well, that was Colin's problem, she reflected with vicious satisfaction—both the car and the insurance were in his name.

Her rescuer had placed a warning triangle in front of the wreck to alert any oncoming cars, and was coming back with her suitcase and her handbag. She offered him a grateful smile—but what she really needed was something to steady her nerves.

‘Did you bring my cigarettes?’ she pleaded urgently.

‘Your cigarettes?’ The impatient frown that crossed his brow warned her that he didn't much approve of the habit.

‘They were on the dashboard...’ guiltily she remembered that it had been in lighting a cigarette that she had taken her eyes off the road for just that fatal fraction of a second ‘...and my lighter,’ she begged. ‘It might have fallen down.’

‘All right,’ he conceded grudgingly. ‘I'll get them.’

Josey watched him walk back to her car, registering the easy, athletic stride, and the impressive breadth of shoulder beneath his green oiled-cotton jacket. She found herself wishing she hadn't asked him to fetch her cigarettes—he had made her feel about

two inches tall, as if she hadn't felt bad enough already. If only she had been able to give up the disgusting things. Somehow—foolishly—it mattered to her what he thought of her.

Not that he was going to think much anyway, she reminded herself miserably. The glass of the Land Rover's windscreen reflected her face to her all too clearly. She looked awful; correction—even more awful than usual. Her eyes were hollow and puffy from crying, and now there was a nice graze on her forehead, still trickling blood. She sought in her handbag for a tissue to dab it away as he came back.

He swung himself behind the steering-wheel, tossing her cigarettes and lighter into her lap, making no effort to conceal his contempt. 'No, I don't mind if you smoke in my car—just this once,' he grated, preempting her routinely polite enquiry as if he had doubted whether she would have the manners to ask.

'Thank you,' she mumbled, clumsily trying to open the packet with her one good hand. Tears of frustration welled into her eyes.

'Oh, here, give them to me,' he snapped, taking them from her. He drew one cigarette from the packet and put it between her lips, and then flicked the lighter for her. 'You seem pretty determined to kill yourself, one way or another.'

She stared up at him in shock. 'I wasn't trying to kill myself,' she protested.

'Weren't you?' he queried drily, starting up the Land Rover. 'It was pretty suicidal, the way you were driving.'

'I...had things on my mind.' She looked down into her lap.

Just at the moment she didn't feel like telling anyone about her marital problems—least of all this man. He already thought she was a pretty pathetic specimen.

'What were you doing on this road anyway?' he enquired. 'Were you lost?'

'No. I was heading for the village.'

'Cottisham? At this time of night?'

'I was left a cottage there, by my aunt,' she explained. 'I was going to stay there for a...a holiday.'

He slanted her a look of surprise. 'You don't mean old Florrie Calder's place?'

'Do you know it?' she asked.

He laughed with sardonic humour. 'Yes, I do. If you were planning to stay there, it's a pity you didn't do something about it before—the place is practically derelict.'

'Derelict? Oh, dear...I didn't realise...'

'How many years is it since you bothered to visit the old lady?' he enquired, a hard edge in his voice.

'I haven't been up since I was a little girl,' she countered defensively. 'She was my mother's aunt, really, and my mother died when I was twelve.'

'She was all on her own. Don't you think you could have taken a little more interest in her welfare?'

She hung her head, feeling ashamed. He was perfectly right—but it had simply never occurred to her to keep in touch. Even her mother had never been particularly close to the rather

eccentric old lady, and after she had died...to be honest she had virtually forgotten her existence, until the letter had come from the solicitor informing her that she had been left the cottage. At the time even that had been of little interest—as Colin had said, it was really not very well located for a holiday home.

‘I...I never thought...’ she mumbled.

‘No, I don’t suppose you did.’ His tone implied that he would have expected no better of her. Turning his attention impatiently away from her, he pulled over for a moment, reached down and switched on the car-phone. First he called the hospital and warned them of their arrival, then he dialled another number. A woman’s voice answered. ‘Hello, Maggie,’ he said. ‘It’s Tom. Look, I’m sorry—I’m ringing to let you know I’ve been delayed. There was a bit of an accident on the road, and I’m running someone to the hospital. I’ll get to you as soon as I can.’

‘Oh...Right,’ came the steady response. ‘Thank you for letting me know, Tom.’

So who was Maggie? Josey wondered dully. His wife? She had sounded as if it was a regular occurrence for him to be held up by something or other. It must take a great deal of patience to be the wife of a country vet, she reflected—always on call, never knowing when he would have to go out or when he would be back. She would have to be a remarkably strong woman.

She felt a twinge of envy as her imagination began to paint a picture—of a warm, rambling cottage, with the elderly collie snoozing beside the hearth, and a couple of fine strapping sons

who took after their father...

They had set off again. Her head was beginning to ache quite badly, and she felt as if she would have liked to cry. Today had very definitely been the worst day of her whole life.

‘Is there anyone you want to get in touch with, to let them know you’re all right?’ he asked, his voice suddenly gentle.

‘No.’ One single tear escaped from the corner of her eye, and began to track slowly down her cheek. She brushed it away with her good hand. ‘Thank you—you’ve been very kind.’

‘You’re in shock,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry—we’ll be at the hospital in a couple of minutes.’

She nodded gratefully. It would be nice to be able to lie down, and have someone take away the pain. But a strange pang of regret tugged at her heart—once he had deposited her at the hospital, Tom would go away, and she wouldn’t see him again. He probably wouldn’t even spare her another thought, except as the crazy woman who had almost smashed into his car.

Stupid, she scolded herself crossly. The last thing she needed at the moment was to start fancying she was attracted to some total stranger, who had crossed her path by complete chance. And yet...he *was* very attractive, she conceded, slanting him a covert glance from beneath her lashes. Six feet plus of rangy, well-built male, the kind that no woman could ignore.

And his hands...They were beautiful, with long, sensitive fingers, and strong wrists. She found herself remembering the gentle way those hands had examined her, and a shimmer of heat

ran through her...

No—it was all just reaction. The shock of Colin's announcement, followed by the accident, had left her off balance. And he was so very different from Colin—Colin with his immaculately combed hair, his designer suits, his decaffeinated coffee. She couldn't imagine this man drinking decaffeinated coffee. He wouldn't need to fuss with such things, not with the healthy, active life he must lead. So very different...

It was pleasant, this feeling of being close to him, cocooned in the warmth of the car—like some comfortable dream from which she never wanted to wake up...

'Here we are.'

She opened her eyes quickly to find that he had brought the car to a halt beside a wide porch, with a pair of battered plastic swing doors of the type used so much in hospitals. A sign above the entrance said ACCIDENT AND EMERGENCY. A young nurse had come out to the car, bringing a wheelchair.

'I don't need a chair,' Josey mumbled, feeling guilty for causing such a lot of fuss.

'Better if you do,' Tom insisted firmly, climbing out of the Land Rover and coming round to help her out.

And indeed she found that she did. During the short drive her body seemed to have stiffened; she could hardly move, and as he helped her gently to her feet her head swam sickeningly. She dropped heavily into the chair, and half closed her eyes again.

With part of her mind she was conscious of the nurse flirting

with him somewhere above her head, but she was past caring. They wheeled her into a small reception area, and straight over to a narrow cubicle, curtained with some ancient flowered cotton.

‘Could you just pop up on the trolley?’ asked the nurse, gratefully bright.

She looked round for Tom, but he had gone—and he hadn’t even said goodbye. But then she heard his voice on the other side of the curtain. ‘Hello, Andy.’

‘Well, hello, Tom. What’s going on? You don’t have enough of your own kind of patients, so you’ve had to start poaching mine?’

Tom laughed; he had a nice laugh, Josey decided—low and sort of husky, from spending so much time out in the raw Norfolk air. ‘No—just some woman who ran her car into a ditch.’ His tone was casually dismissive. ‘I don’t think it’s too serious—fortunately she had her seatbelt on. I think you’ll find she’s broken a bone in her wrist, but apart from that she’s just generally a bit bruised and battered.’

‘Any sign of concussion?’

‘No, just shock.’

‘Fine. Well, I’d better take a look at her.’

The curtain was brushed briskly aside, and the doctor came in. ‘Well, now, what have you done to yourself?’ he asked pleasantly, bending over the trolley.

‘It’s...just my wrist,’ she managed to respond. She could just see Tom, through the half-open curtain, chatting to the nurse again. A stab of stupid jealousy shot through her. The girl was

pretty, with a mass of sexily luxuriant ash-blond hair, tucked up neatly beneath her white cap, and an expression of sweet feminine kindness. It was a combination that most men would find devastating.

Was he married? Maybe not, after all—maybe the nurse was his girlfriend. In fact, she wouldn't mind betting that every unattached female in the district under the age of sixty was after him. Forget it, she advised herself despondently. Maybe once, a few years ago, she could have stood a chance of competing, but not now—he wouldn't even look twice.

Wearily she closed her eyes, hardly interested in what was happening to her as the doctor examined her. His touch was light, but not quite as gentle as Tom's had been, and Josey found herself wishing that it were he who was examining her instead.

'Well, I don't think you've done yourself any serious injury, apart from your wrist,' the doctor was saying. 'I'll send you down for an X-ray on that, and then we'd better see about putting it in plaster for you.'

She nodded apathetically. Tom had gone, and she just wished they would let her go to sleep. But first the nurse had a form to fill in, with all her personal details, and then a porter came—the irritatingly cheerful sort—and wheeled her through deserted corridors to the X-ray department. Then at last it was back to Casualty, where someone put a warm plastic splint on her wrist, and tied it up in a sling.

She was back in her cubicle, half-dozing in the wheelchair,

when she heard Tom's voice outside again. 'I thought I'd just drop by on my way home and see how she is.'

'She seems fine,' the doctor responded, a note of constraint in his voice. 'There's no sign of concussion. The wrist is fractured, but it's been set. Apart from a bit of shock, there are no other problems.'

'So what's wrong?'

She heard the doctor sigh. 'I really can't justify keeping her in, Tom—not on medical grounds. You know the situation we're in for beds—I've got a threatened miscarriage in cubicle three, and I've already had to send a coronary over to the Norwich.'

'You're going to discharge her?' He sounded surprised.

'I don't really have much choice. At the most, I suppose I could stretch a point and keep her here until the morning. But all she needs is a couple of days' rest, with someone to keep an eye on her, and she'll be perfectly all right. Did she mention to you where she was planning to stay? Does she have friends or relatives up here?'

Josey heard Tom laugh drily. 'She was old Miss Calder's niece—remember that old stone cottage out by Breck's Coppice?'

'She wasn't planning to stay there?' The doctor sounded incredulous. 'But it's been empty for years—it must be practically falling down!'

'Oh, the structure's basically quite sound, but it'll need a lot doing to it to make it habitable. Though she looks as if she's got the money,' he added, a sardonic inflexion in his voice. 'Anyone

who can afford to write off a Porsche can't be short of a bob or two.'

There was a distinct note of contempt in his voice, and Josey felt herself wishing she could crawl into a corner. Of course those who eavesdropped never heard good of themselves, she reflected bitterly, but what else could she do but listen?

'But in the meantime, that doesn't solve my problem of what to do with her, does it?' the doctor pointed out grimly. 'Of course, I could ring her husband and get him to come and fetch her.'

'No!' The sharp protest broke involuntarily from Josey's lips, and she tried to stand up.

The curtain was drawn back, and the doctor hurried in, frowning as he saw her struggling to her feet. 'Now, now! You shouldn't be trying to get up on your own,' he chided, pushing her back with a gentle pressure that Josey didn't have the strength to resist.

'There's...no need to ring my husband,' she insisted weakly. 'I'll find myself a hotel or something.'

Tom had come in behind the doctor, and he laughed mockingly at her words. 'Where do you think you are, South Kensington?' he enquired drily. 'We don't have too many hotels around here, and those there are will be full for the tourist season.'

'Besides, I wouldn't be very happy just to let you go to a hotel,' the doctor put in seriously. 'Don't you have anyone up here you could go to for a few days? A relative, or a friend?'

‘No,’ she admitted reluctantly. ‘It’s years since I’ve been up here. It...it was just an impulse that I came, really.’

The doctor sighed. ‘Well, where are you going to go...?’ He hesitated, glancing round at Tom. ‘I don’t suppose...?’

Tom looked faintly alarmed. ‘What...?’

‘It would only be for a day or two,’ the doctor assured him persuasively. ‘She won’t need any special care—just lots of rest. By Monday she should be as right as rain.’

Josey gasped in shock as she realised what the doctor was suggesting. ‘Oh, no! I couldn’t possibly...!’

‘It would really be an enormous help, Tom,’ the doctor persisted. ‘Besides, if I knew it was you keeping an eye on her, I’d know she was all right.’

Tom hesitated, then smiled wryly. ‘OK,’ he conceded with no great deal of enthusiasm. ‘It looks as if that’s the only option.’

The doctor looked relieved. ‘I’ll give you a prescription for some diazepam for her—the pharmacy will be able to make it up for you tomorrow. Where have you parked your car? Nurse, get the porter to bring a chair, will you?’

He bustled away without waiting for an answer, leaving Josey looking up at Tom in some embarrassment. ‘I’m sorry,’ she murmured awkwardly. ‘I’ve put you to so much inconvenience already.’

‘It’s no trouble.’ But his unsmiling expression did nothing to reassure her.

‘I’ll find a hotel as...as soon as I can.’

‘I said it’s no trouble,’ he reiterated a little impatiently. ‘Just don’t expect the Ritz.’

CHAPTER TWO

JOSEY lay in the big bed with her eyes open, trying to make herself believe that all this was actually real. Bright sunlight streamed through yellow chintz curtains, falling on the faded home-made patchwork that covered her bed and warming the mellow oak of the old-fashioned furniture.

Yesterday morning, and most other mornings for years past, she had woken in a stylish Italian bed, in a room with smart white walls and a pale beech floor, where she could just glimpse the south column of Tower Bridge if she leaned slightly to her left. Colin would be in the shower, and she would pad out of bed and into their glossy space-age kitchen, to pour him a glass of orange juice from a carton in the refrigerator.

But yesterday had gone—irrevocably. Her marriage—or rather the empty shell of it that she had been clinging to as if it were some kind of security blanket for so long—was over, and she had to face the world on her own. And this world was very different from any she would have expected to find herself in.

She didn't remember much about getting here from the hospital. The doctor had injected her with some kind of pain-killer, and she had wanted to do nothing but sleep. She vaguely recalled a low, rambling building of weathered brick and flint, and the perfume of roses on the night air. And a cosy, old-fashioned kitchen, with a slightly uneven quarry-tiled floor, and a

wicker dog-basket with a well-chewed red blanket beside a large inglenook fireplace.

These images came back to her like snap-shots in her mind. She could remember too, with a feeling that made her mouth a little dry, how she had stumbled woozily, and Tom had picked her up as if she weighed nothing at all, and carried her up a flight of steep, narrow stairs, and brought her into this room, with its low, oak-beamed ceiling and big comfortable bed.

And she had been so clumsy with her wrist splinted and tied up in a sling that she had had considerable trouble getting out of her clothes and into her nightdress, and he had had to come and help her. But the unceremonious way he had dealt with the task had told her quite unmistakably that any modesty on her part would have been quite wasted—she held absolutely no allure for him whatsoever.

What she didn't remember, though it was the one thing she had been trying to look for, was anything that suggested the presence of a wife or children in the house. She had only the impression of an exclusively male atmosphere—the shelf above the fireplace was merely a convenient place to put anything that didn't have an immediate home, none of the roses from the garden had found their way indoors, and the curtains were purely functional and slightly in need of a wash.

With a wry smile she acknowledged to herself that such interest in the details of his domestic arrangements was really rather silly. But maybe she just needed a shred of romantic

fantasy, to cushion the shock of the abrupt ending of her marriage. And maybe she was looking to him for just the smallest reassurance that she might still have some attraction for a man because it was so long since Colin had shown the least interest in her.

With a sigh she eased herself gingerly up on the pillows. If it was flattery she was seeking, she was wasting her time with Tom Quinn. Maybe he reserved all his warmth for the animals he cared for—he seemed to have little to spare for the human species, or at least for the female half of it.

But then what did she expect? Maybe five or six years ago she might have been able to make some impression, but she was going to have to take herself seriously in hand if she was ever going to expect any man to be attracted to her again. If it wasn't already too late; she was getting dangerously close to her sell-by date.

Goodness, she felt stiff. Every inch of her body ached, her head was sore, and her wrist was both throbbing and numb at the same time. And she was dying for a cigarette. Forming the thought brought the familiar craving, and she knew that somehow she was going to have to get out of bed to reach the packet, which was on the dressing-table on the far side of the room.

Tears of self-pity rose to her eyes. It was an exhausting effort even to move, and the dressing-table seemed a hundred miles away. But that raw need wouldn't let her have any peace. Tossing aside the quilted bedcover with an exclamation of impatience,

she swung herself round and put her feet on the floor.

Dark pain swam before her eyes, and she had to wait a moment for it to clear. Then gritting her teeth she tried to stand up. She had managed about three steps when the door opened, and Tom appeared on the threshold, a breakfast tray in his hands.

‘What the devil are you doing getting out of bed on your own?’ he demanded brusquely.

‘I...I was trying to get my cigarettes,’ she explained, giving up and sinking back on to the bed.

‘Why didn’t you call me?’

‘I thought...you’d probably be busy or something,’ she mumbled. Suddenly she was all too acutely aware of the way the dipping neckline of her silk nightdress revealed the gaunt hollows of her shoulders, while the pale ivory colour did absolutely nothing for her washed-out complexion. She crawled back under the bedclothes, drawing them up over her. ‘I’m sorry.’

A flicker of impatience crossed his face. ‘You don’t have to keep apologising,’ he grated, setting the tray down on a low pine chest beside the bed. He moved across and picked up the cigarettes, tossing them on to the bed with undisguised contempt. ‘Eat your breakfast,’ he advised tersely. ‘It’ll do you more good than those things.’

‘I...I don’t know if I can eat very much,’ she stumbled, eyeing the laden tray without appetite. ‘I don’t usually have breakfast.’

‘No.’ The wry twist of his mouth conveyed what he didn’t actually say—that she was too thin. He stood looking down at her

in critical appraisal as she lit her cigarette, drawing on it deeply in relief. 'How many of those do you smoke a day?' he asked bluntly.

'Oh...only about twenty or so.' She shrugged, unable to meet his eyes. 'I know they're no good for me, and I've tried giving them up, but I just can't.'

'You could if you wanted to.'

She slanted him a resentful look from beneath her lashes. It was easy enough for him to say that—he'd probably never smoked. He didn't look the sort of man who had ever suffered from a lack of will-power. 'Yes, well...I'll give them up some time,' she promised vaguely. 'But not just at the moment—they say you shouldn't try to give up when you're under stress.'

'That's the best time to do it,' he persisted with ruthless insistence. 'If you can cope without them now, you'll be able to cope without them any time.'

Those stupid tears were stinging the backs of her eyes again. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled thickly, and then, remembering that he had told her not to keep saying she was sorry, she apologised for that too. 'I'm sorry.'

He laughed drily. 'Eat your breakfast,' he repeated, and went out, closing the door behind him.

Josey leaned back against the pillows, closing her eyes. How had she ever let herself sink into such a mess, that she couldn't start the day without a cigarette? It was no wonder that Tom treated her with such disdain.

Wearily she turned to the breakfast tray he had brought her. There was far more food than she could ever manage, even if she had been feeling more like her usual self. With a groan she realised that she wouldn't be able to manage half of it—and Tom was going to be even more annoyed with her.

He had every right to be, of course—she had been nothing but a nuisance to him since she had all but smashed up his car last night. It would be better if she just took herself off to a hotel somewhere, out of his way. Holding that thought resolutely in her mind, she rolled herself painfully out of bed.

There was a small sink in the corner of the room, and she dragged herself over to it and had a sketchy wash, and then with some considerable difficulty got dressed. She had just finished, and was struggling one-handed to re-fasten her suitcase when Tom came back into the room.

‘What do you think you’re doing now?’ he demanded. ‘I told you not to try getting out of bed on your own—and you haven’t even touched your breakfast.’

‘I know—I’m sorry.’ Damn—he had told her not to keep saying that. ‘You’ve been very kind to me, and I’m very grateful, but I can’t trespass on your hospitality any longer. If I could just use your telephone, I’ll ring for a taxi, and find a hotel somewhere.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he rapped, his patience strained. ‘You’re as weak as a kitten. Get back into bed.’

‘No—I’m leaving,’ she insisted, though already just the effort

of getting dressed and packing her bag had left her feeling exhausted. 'I'm just a nuisance—you don't want me here...' Oh, damn—why did her voice have to waver so pathetically? She tried to pick up her suitcase, but it was loaded with bricks, and she slumped to her knees, tears of frustration stinging her eyes.

'Get back into bed,' he repeated, the sudden gentleness in his voice so unexpected that it made her sob harder. 'You're in no fit state to go anywhere today.' His strong arms came around her, helping her to her feet, and he led her over to the bed, sitting down beside her, still holding her comfortably close. 'I'm sorry if I've made you feel so unwelcome.' The taut note in his voice made her wonder just how rare it was for him to apologise. 'I suppose I'm more used to four-legged patients than two-legged ones.'

'I'm sorry,' she mumbled, her mind half-drugged by the evocative male muskiness of his skin. 'I must be in your way. You've got work to do, and I'm taking up your time, running around after me, making my breakfast...'

'Vi made your breakfast,' he corrected her drily. 'She couldn't bring it up herself—she's got a touch of arthritis, and can't manage the stairs.'

'Oh...' She managed to stifle her tears, helped by a strong dose of curiosity. It didn't seem very likely that this Vi was his wife, if she was old enough to suffer from arthritis. 'Who's Vi?' she asked, trying to sound as if she had no more than a casual interest.

'My housekeeper.'

‘Oh.’ She flickered him a cautious glance from beneath her lashes. ‘You’re...not married then?’

‘No.’

‘So...who was Maggie?’

‘Maggie?’ He looked faintly puzzled. ‘Oh, you mean Maggie Hunter? She’s the wife of a farmer over by Saltham Marsh. I was on my way to look at one of their cows when we—er—ran into each other.’

‘Oh...’ She could feel a faint blush of pink colouring her cheeks. Had she revealed a bit too much by asking such a pointed question?

He reached out and took the bowl of cereal from the tray, putting it into her hands. ‘Come on—just try and eat some of this,’ he coaxed. ‘You’ll feel a lot better with some good food inside you.’

She doubted it, but she made the effort just to please him—and rather to her surprise she was able to eat most of the contents of the bowl.

‘That’s better,’ he approved. ‘Don’t worry about the rest—maybe you’ll be able to eat a little more later.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘Now that you’re dressed, you might as well come downstairs and rest on the settee. I have to go out, but at least it’ll be a bit more interesting for you than being stuck up here with nothing to do.’

‘Thank you.’ She managed to smile, though it was rather a weak effort. ‘You’ve been very kind.’

He smiled back at her—and her heart flipped over. It was the first time she had seen him smile, and it was like the sun coming out, transforming his hard features at a stroke. ‘Some people would say that kindness isn’t my strong point,’ he remarked with an inflexion of sardonic humour. ‘At least as far as human beings are concerned.’

‘Oh, no,’ she protested a little breathlessly. ‘You’ve done so much for me.’

‘Yes, well... You don’t have to keep thanking me,’ he grated, that terseness back in his voice, as if he found her thanks even more irksome than her presence. ‘Come on, I’ll help you downstairs. Can you walk, or shall I carry you?’

‘Oh, no—I can walk.’ The thought of being scooped up in those strong arms again was enough to make her heart thud. Really, it was plain ridiculous, she scolded herself. She was reacting like a schoolgirl, not a sensible married woman of thirty-one. Just because he was so good-looking...

And he was. It was no use telling herself that it was simply the circumstances that were making her more than usually vulnerable. She had never even reacted to Colin like this. And the danger was that the powerful tug of physical attraction she was feeling was undermining her common sense, luring her into building all sorts of stupid romantic fantasies about him—especially now she knew that he wasn’t married.

But she must be very careful not to give herself away, she reminded herself firmly. He most certainly wouldn’t appreciate

it.

The kitchen was the main room of the house. It had that old-fashioned country feel about it that interior designers were always trying to recreate, and never could. No one could reproduce the comfort of the huge sofa that she was lying on, with old Jethro curled up in the crook of her knees, nor capture the feeling of sunshine streaming through a window on to whitewashed brick walls.

Last night she hadn't paid much attention to the location of the house, but it seemed to be in the middle of the village, and people were passing by outside all the time, calling to each other in greeting. Dogs barked occasionally; a rumbling farm tractor had gone past twice, the second time leaving a waft of rich country air in its wake; a couple of horses had clattered by; somewhere close to the window she could hear a bird singing.

Josey had wondered what Vi would think of a strange woman turning up in Tom's house in the middle of the night, but that lady had been kindness itself. From the minute Josey had come downstairs she had fussed over her, making her comfortable with piles of soft cushions and bringing through some battered old magazines from the waiting-room of Tom's surgery for her to read.

Before she had left, she had insisted on bringing her a cup of strong tea, and a thick wedge of moist dark fruit-cake, home-baked. It was years since she had eaten home-baked cake—her mother had always used to make cakes on Fridays for the

weekend, and she had learned herself, but Colin never ate cake, and so it had never seemed worth bothering.

But this was delicious. Jethro lifted his head, sniffing hopefully at her hand, hinting that perhaps she might like to share her good fortune with a friend. She stroked his sleek head, laughing.

‘Are you allowed tit-bits like this?’ she asked him. ‘I’m not sure that cake’s very good for you.’ His liquid eyes—so like his master’s—gazed at her meltingly, and she could not be immune. ‘All right,’ she conceded, breaking off a small piece and holding it out for him. ‘But don’t tell.’

The telephone began to ring, but she ignored it. *Vi* had told her that the answering service would cut in, and after a moment it did. With a sigh she laid her head back on the cushions, and closed her eyes. Sooner or later she was going to have to ring Colin, and let him know about the accident, and where she was. But not yet.

The clicking of the latch on the front door brought her awake as she was beginning to slide away into sleep again, and she lifted her head, expecting Tom. But Jethro clearly didn’t—there was no bark of welcome. He simply shifted his head, turning it away from the door in a manner of bored contempt.

The woman who appeared in the doorway was about the same age as Josey herself, a willowy blonde with the fine bone-structure and peaches-and-cream complexion of the English upper classes. Her white kid jodhpurs and leather riding-whip

gave the same impression, and her voice had the cut-glass diction of the county set.

‘Oh...’ She regarded Josey with refined astonishment, rather as if she were something naughty the Labrador had done on the carpet. ‘I called to see Tom.’

That haughty manner made Josey’s hackles rise. ‘He’s out,’ she responded, deliberately unhelpful.

‘I see...’

Josey felt the sharp scrutiny of those ice-blue eyes, missing nothing, and sensed a hostility that was a little puzzling—unless this young madam regarded the local vet as her personal property, and resented the interloper. ‘Can I give him a message?’ she enquired, cuttingly polite.

‘Oh...No, it’s all right. I thought perhaps Zella had thrown a spavin, but it’s probably nothing. I’ll walk her home gently, and if that doesn’t do the trick I’ll call him out later.’

The smile was confident enough, but the voice held just a hint of uncertainty. It had clearly unsettled her to find another woman ensconced in Tom’s kitchen, apparently very much at home. And Jethro, bless him, decided at that moment to start licking Josey’s hand, as if to demonstrate a bond of deep affection.

‘Fine—I’ll tell him you called,’ she responded casually.

So who was that? she wondered as the door closed behind the visitor. A proper little lady of the manor—was she a regular girlfriend of Tom’s? But clearly, in spite of the impression she had tried to give, she wasn’t quite sure of him—and that gave

Josey a kind of perverse satisfaction.

But of course it was all just a daydream. She would only be here for a few days—as soon as she was well enough, she would be leaving. Besides, he wasn't remotely attracted to her anyway—he had made that more than clear.

Automatically her hand reached out for her cigarettes, but then with a muttered curse she remembered that she had smoked the last one half an hour ago. She had known that she was running short, but she hadn't liked to ask Tom to buy some for her.

But now she was beginning to feel that uncomfortable craving. How far was it to a shop that might sell cigarettes? It was so frustrating to feel so weak—even to think of walking a hundred yards made her want to cry with exhaustion. And first she would have to get upstairs to her bedroom to fetch her purse.

If only she could give the horrible things up. She knew the unpleasant smell of tobacco smoke clung to her hair and clothes, and she had lately noticed that her teeth were starting to turn yellow from the nicotine. And she had read somewhere that smoking caused the skin to age prematurely—she'd used to have good skin. But she *needed* a smoke—needed it as a starving man needed food.

The stairs seemed like Mount Everest, but with grim determination she managed to climb them. She had to sit down on the edge of the bed to recover, and at that moment the sound of a car drawing up beside the house came to her ears, and from Jethro's excited barking she guessed that it was Tom. Damn, why

did he have to come back *now*, and catch her?

She heard him come in, and speak a few words to Jethro, and then he was coming up the stairs two at a time. She rose to her feet, ready to confront him, feeling as guilty as a naughty schoolgirl—though she knew she had every right to go out and buy herself a packet of cigarettes if she wished to.

On the threshold he paused, a look of angry impatience crossing his face. ‘What are you doing up here?’ he demanded.

‘I...I’m sorry.’ Automatically she was apologising again. ‘I didn’t mean...I just came up to——’

‘You shouldn’t be climbing the stairs when there’s no one in the house,’ he grated. ‘What if you’d fallen?’

Her temper—strained by the nicotine craving—was close to snapping. ‘All right—I’m not completely stupid, you know,’ she retorted tartly. ‘If I’d thought I might fall, I wouldn’t have tried it.’

The sharpness of her response had startled her as much as it did him, and as he frowned at her she sighed inwardly, waiting for him to bite her head off. But instead, quite unexpectedly, that incredible smile unfurled. ‘I’m sorry,’ he conceded wryly. ‘I was just worried—you should be resting.’

She couldn’t quite meet his eyes, conscious that her cheeks were tinged a delicate shade of pink. ‘I...I’ve been resting all day,’ she managed, trying hard to keep her voice steady. ‘I ought to be ready for a five-mile run.’

A little stiffly, she rose to her feet. She would go without the damned cigarettes now. Maybe he was right—if she could

manage to give them up when she was at such a low ebb, she would never need them again. ‘Oh...by the way,’ she added, slanting him a covert look from beneath her lashes, ‘there was a woman here to see you a little while ago. Something about her horse. She said she might call you later.’

‘She didn’t leave a name?’

‘No. She...seemed to think you would know who it was.’

A flicker of some expression passed across his eyes, but it was gone too quickly for her to read it. ‘I see,’ was all he said.

Having asserted that she was sure she wouldn’t fall, she was alarmed by how dizzy she felt as she gazed down the steep flight of stairs. But she wasn’t going to let him see that—he might offer to carry her again. Resolutely gritting her teeth, she took hold of the banister and slowly made her way down.

It was quite a relief to get back to the settee. She sank down a little more heavily than she had intended, leaning back and closing her eyes. It was hard to believe that just that small amount of effort could be so exhausting. Beside her she heard Tom laugh drily.

‘You’re not quite as fit as you think you are, are you?’ he remarked, a sardonic glint in his eyes.

‘No, I’m not,’ she conceded. ‘I feel perfectly all right when I’m sitting down, but when I try to move around it catches up with me.’

‘You’ll be better in a day or two,’ he assured her, his voice surprisingly gentle. ‘I’m just going to put the kettle on. Would

you like a cup of coffee?’

‘Y-yes, please.’ It made her nervous when he was being kind to her—it felt much safer when he was shouting.

Why did he have to be so utterly gorgeous? Aver-agely good-looking she could have coped with, but in her present highly susceptible state this just wasn’t fair. She watched him covertly from beneath her lashes as he made the coffee, fascinated by every economical movement.

There was something so very self-sufficient about him; he was a man who didn’t need a woman around. He had Vi to take care of his domestic comfort, and probably a whole posse of willing young ladies to minister to his other needs, without ever being offered much in the way of commitment. He got all the close companionship he needed from his dog.

But, though he wasn’t married now, had he been once? She judged him to be maybe in his middle thirties—surely even he hadn’t been able to get off scot-free all these years? There were so many things she wanted to know about him, but she guessed that he wouldn’t easily be persuaded to talk about himself.

He brought her coffee, and then folded himself into the battered old armchair beside the fireplace, his long, lean legs sprawled across the stone hearth. Jethro collapsed in a bundle at his feet, his head draped over his ankles, his eyes closed in sheer bliss.

Josey sipped her coffee, searching her mind for something to say, simply to make conversation. ‘This is a nice cottage,’ she

remarked, trying to keep her tone light and casual. ‘Have you lived here long?’

‘It was my uncle’s place. We were partners for a while, but he retired about five years ago—though he still comes in to help with the small animal clinic a couple of afternoons a week.’

‘You...were born around here, then?’ she asked.

He nodded. ‘My parents have got a farm, over by Withingham. Cows, mostly, and a few pigs. But my brother does most of the work now—he’s the farmer out of the two of us. My father’s nearly seventy—though he insists he isn’t quite ready to retire yet!’

His tone was quite friendly, and, emboldened, she risked probing a little further. ‘Had you always wanted to be a vet?’

‘Ever since I was a kid,’ he responded with a grin. ‘I was always over here, pestering my uncle to let me help him. I used to drive him mad, bringing in birds that had broken a wing, or a rabbit I’d let out of a farmer’s gin-trap. That didn’t make me very popular in certain quarters, either,’ he added darkly. ‘Sometimes I think that, the more I know about people, the more I prefer animals.’

‘It must be hard work,’ she mused.

He laughed drily. ‘Yes, it is—damned hard work, and there’s no money in it.’ He slanted her a look of hard mockery. ‘Not the sort of money that would run to a Porsche, anyway.’

She blinked in shock—that gibe had stung.

‘So what sort of work did you do in London?’ he persisted, a cynical edge in his voice, as if he was expecting something totally

frivolous.

‘Oh, I...used to be a secretary,’ she stumbled. ‘But I haven’t worked for several years now. My...husband didn’t want me to.’

‘How long have you been married?’

‘Nearly nine years. A long time, isn’t it? You can get less than that for murder these days.’

He lifted one dark eyebrow in sardonic enquiry. ‘It seemed like a prison sentence?’

‘Worse!’ She was unable to keep the bitterness from her laugh. ‘At least with a prison sentence you get time off for good behaviour!’

‘But on the other hand, you wouldn’t get to serve your sentence in some posh Docklands penthouse, or drive around in a flash sports car,’ he pointed out with a touch of asperity.

She flashed him a look of angry indignation. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you weren’t exactly in a hurry to leave, were you?’ he taunted.

‘Well, no...but I——’

‘Nine years—was it worth it for all that comfortable lifestyle?’ he sneered. ‘The clothes, and the jewellery, and the fast cars...’

‘That’s not true!’ she protested, stung. ‘How can you judge me? You don’t even know me.’

‘I don’t need to know you—I just have to look at you.’ His eyes lashed her with icy disdain. ‘What is it they say—“You can never be too rich or too thin”? You’ve dieted so much to fit the

fashionable image you're practically a bag of bones, and you're so screwed-up you can't get by without those things.' He cast a contemptuous glance at the empty cigarette packet on the table beside her. 'I'll tell you something—if you put on a bit of weight you might look halfway decent, but until you sort out what's going on in your head, you'll never——'

His words were interrupted by a sharp ring at the doorbell. He rose swiftly to his feet and crossed the room, to admit a tall, ruddy-faced young man, still in his muddy wellington boots. In his arms he was carrying a drooping bundle, wrapped in an old blanket.

'I'm sorry to barge in like this, Tom—I know it ain't your surgery tonight. But it's our old Shep,' he blurted out, agitated and upset. 'He was perfectly all right this morning, but when the missus came in from fetching the kiddies from school he was like this—couldn't move, couldn't get up, wasn't even interested in his bone. Daft old mutt, he is, and getting on a bit now, but the kids love him. I don't know if there's anything you can do.'

'That's fine, Bob,' Tom assured him swiftly. 'Bring him through to the clinic.'

'Do you...think he's going to be all right?'

Tom hesitated, casting a doubtful eye at the bundle in the young farmer's arms. 'I'll do my best,' he promised.

CHAPTER THREE

DRAWN by an instinctive concern for the little dog, Josey followed them. The veterinary clinic was through a thick oak door at the end of the passage. A cluttered office led into a much larger room, with a rubber-topped table in the middle of it and all manner of important-looking equipment stowed neatly around the walls.

‘Put him down, Bob,’ Tom instructed, gesturing towards the table. ‘You get off home now—I’ll have a look at him, and see what I can do.’

‘Right.’ The farmer’s voice was suspiciously thickened, and Josey noticed him surreptitiously wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. ‘Well, I’ll leave you to it, then. Maybe I’ll give you a ring in a couple of hours to see what’s what.’ Reluctantly he turned away from the table, barely even noticing Josey as he stepped past her.

She moved over to the table. The dog was a medium-sized black and white mongrel, with thick shaggy fur and a tail just made to be wagged. But now he was still, and even Josey could see that he was tense with pain. ‘Do you think he’ll be all right?’ she asked, unconsciously echoing the farmer’s words.

Tom was bending over his patient, his sensitive fingers gently examining the small, trembling body. ‘I don’t know,’ he admitted wryly. ‘I’ve a nasty feeling he’s got peritonitis—maybe from a

ruptured appendix or a punctured intestine. I'm going to have to open him up and have a look.'

He didn't sound very hopeful, and Josey felt tears rise to prick the backs of her eyes. Some children were going to be very sad if their pet didn't make it. 'Is there...anything I can do to help?' she asked.

'Just sit there by his head and keep an eye on him,' he instructed as he deftly slipped a needle into the dog's vein, and hooked it up to a plasma drip. 'I'll have to try and get his fluid balance right before I can operate. Make sure he's breathing steadily, and tell me if the colour of his gums changes.'

She nodded, glad to be able to contribute if only in a token way, and, pulling over a stool, she sat down. 'Come on, Shep,' she coaxed, stroking the small shaggy head. 'Keep fighting, boy. Just think of all those lovely bones waiting for you if you get well.'

As Tom worked, Josey watched, fascinated by the skill in those beautifully made hands. Gone was all trace of that cynical, short-tempered man of so brief a time before; he had turned on the radio, and to the soothing strains of a Rachmaninov violin concerto he was performing the delicate operation on the small furry body that slumbered in anaesthetised bliss on the table.

He seemed so deep in concentration that she was taken by surprise when he sat back. Glancing across at her, he caught the unguarded expression of admiration in her eyes, and a smile of mocking amusement flickered across his face.

'Well, I think that should do it,' he said, flexing the muscles in

his wide shoulders to ease their tension. ‘How’s he looking?’

‘Fine,’ Josey confirmed, feeling a surge of embarrassed colour in her own cheeks at having betrayed herself. ‘Will he be all right now?’

‘Well, it’s still touch and go, but if Bob hadn’t brought him in when he did he wouldn’t have stood a chance. We’ll know in a few hours whether he’s going to pull through. I’ll just get him settled in the sick-bay, and then we can see how he gets on over the next couple of hours. Come on, old feller.’ Gently he stroked his hand over the dog’s shaggy head. ‘Just hang in there a bit longer.’

With infinite care, he lifted his small patient and carried him through to a back room. There was already one occupant—a young tabby cat, who hissed viciously to show her resentment of being confined in her cage.

‘All right, Tuppence, I know it’s time for your dinner,’ Tom remarked to her soothingly as he passed.

Against one wall was a low wooden bench, divided into individual pens, and Shep was laid gently on a cosy pad of fibre bedding, his head arranged so that his tongue wouldn’t obstruct his breathing. Josey bent to look at him.

‘He...he’s twitching a bit,’ she remarked anxiously. ‘Is he all right?’

Tom laughed. ‘He’s dreaming. He’s probably out in a field somewhere, chasing rabbits. That’s a good sign—it shows he’s starting to come out of the anaesthetic.’

‘Oh.’ She managed a reasonably steady smile. ‘I didn’t know

dogs dreamed.'

Those intriguing hazel eyes slanted her an enigmatic smile. 'Everybody dreams.'

He was very close to her, and the faint, evocative muskiness of his skin drifted across her senses. She felt her heartbeat accelerate in response, and turned away quickly, afraid that he might pick up signals that she didn't want to transmit.

'Would you...would you like a cup of coffee?' she offered, to cover her confusion.

'That seems like a good idea.'

'Right.' She hurried away to the kitchen before he could notice that her cheeks were flushing a deepening pink.

But it proved far from easy to manage the simple task of filling the kettle with only one good hand, and she splashed water all over the place. Then trying to unscrew the lid from the coffee jar, she split the granules all over the scullery floor.

Her overwrought nerves seemed to snap in frustration, and she swore fiercely, tears springing to her eyes. From the doorway came the sound of Tom's laughter, low and husky. 'Having trouble?' he teased gently.

'I couldn't get the lid off. I'm sorry, I...'. She knew she was dangerously close to making a complete fool of herself.

'Hey...!' To her surprise, he came over, and took her gently in his arms, drawing her against him. 'Come on—it isn't that important,' he soothed, stroking his hand over her hair. 'It's only a bit of coffee.'

She couldn't help it—she knew it was meant to be no more than a comforting gesture, but the impact of being held so close to him, feeling the warm strength of his arms around her, breathing the evocative male muskiness of his skin, fuelled the fires of that fantasy she had been dwelling in, and she lifted her head, her lips softly parted, as if half expecting him to kiss her.

There was an arrested expression in those deep hazel eyes, as if he too had been taken by surprise, and for one timeless moment they hovered in uncertainty...and then with a faintly sardonic smile he let her go.

'I'd better wipe it up,' he said.

'Oh...no, I'll do that,' she offered quickly, her heart pounding in painful embarrassment.

'Perhaps you'd better not,' he advised in mocking amusement. 'You seem to be seriously accident-prone'

'I'm not usually,' she protested, not liking the clumsy, incompetent image he seemed to have of her.

'Well, never mind. It's soon done.' He had taken a floor cloth from beneath the sink, and mopped the floor quickly. '*I'll* make the coffee.'

She flashed a fulminating glare at his indifferent back, and sat down at the big scrubbed-pine table. He had retreated back into those arctic wastes he normally inhabited, and yet...somehow she was sure she hadn't imagined what she had seen in his eyes just a moment ago.

Mind, it was so long since a man had looked at her with any

kind of interest that she wasn't sure if she would even recognise it now, she conceded wryly. But it *had* seemed, just for those few incredible seconds, as if he really was going to kiss her...

Impatiently she shook her head. It was dangerous enough to let herself indulge in stupid romantic fantasies about him, but if she was going to start imagining that he might be remotely interested in her she was going to end up making a complete fool of herself.

By the time he brought the coffee she had managed to reassemble some kind of mask of composure, and her voice was commendably even as she thanked him.

'How's the wrist?' he enquired, sitting down opposite her.

'Oh...not too bad,' she responded with a flickering smile. 'It still hurts a bit.'

'You were extremely lucky,' he reminded her.

'I know.' She risked a brief glance up at him. 'I suppose I ought to report the accident to the police?'

'I've already reported it. Jack'll be down to talk to you about it when you're feeling a bit better.'

'Do you suppose they'll charge me with careless driving?' she asked anxiously.

He shook his head. 'I doubt it. Apart from Bill Wickham's ditch, you were the only one who suffered any damage. You'll need to put in an insurance claim, of course.'

'It's on my husband's insurance.' She couldn't keep the edge of bitterness from her voice. 'Personally I don't give a damn whether he makes a claim or not.'

‘Even so, don’t you think you’d better ring him and let him know where you are?’ he enquired levelly.

‘He won’t care,’ she asserted. ‘He’ll just be sorry I didn’t manage to kill myself—that would have saved him the bother of going through a divorce.’

Those hazel eyes were completely unreadable. What was he thinking? She hadn’t meant to tell him about her marital problems, but somehow it was a relief to talk about it.

‘Why are you getting a divorce?’ he enquired; there was a kind of empathy in the way he asked the question, and suddenly she was sure that he was divorced too.

‘Why not?’ She shrugged her shoulders, still trying to hide her hurt behind a pose of indifference. ‘He wants to marry his secretary, and who am I to stand in the way of true love? Besides, she’s pregnant.’

He looked surprised. ‘Did you know he was having an affair?’

‘Of course.’ She was trying to make her voice sound cynical and hard, but she suspected it wasn’t quite coming off. ‘He has affairs with all his secretaries—it’s just one of his endearing little habits.’

He laughed drily. ‘So why didn’t you leave him sooner?’

‘I don’t know,’ she admitted with wry self-mockery. ‘Habit, I suppose. And I didn’t have anywhere else to go.’

‘You don’t have any family?’

‘No—well, there’s my father, of course, but I couldn’t have gone there. I don’t get on particularly well with my stepmother.’

‘You could have got a place of your own.’

‘Yes, I suppose so...’ She looked down, swinging her foot in awkward embarrassment. How could she expect him to understand the way Colin had eroded so much of her confidence that she hadn’t believed she could manage on her own? She wasn’t at all sure that she could now—but at least she didn’t have to think about it for a few more days. She wasn’t well enough to leave Tom’s yet, and go to a hotel.

There was a long silence. She could still feel his eyes resting on her, and a kind of shimmering heat had started deep inside her. Was he aware of the effect he had on her? She was fairly sure he must be—he was far too perceptive to miss the signs that gave her away.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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