"Irma will be very happy when you go!"

Carl's words made her angry, but in truth, Sara would have been equally happy to leave. Coming to Africa to care for her invalid sister, Irma, had brought problems.

Irma had married Ray Barton, the man that Sara had once loved, and her jealous accusations made them all miserable.

But the cold-blooded solutions suggested by Carl van der Linden, their neighboring landowner, appalled Sara. She disliked Carl more than any other man she'd ever met!
CHAPTER ONE

The ever-changing subtleties of grey and green and gold drew Sara's eyes unsuspectingly to the delights of the valley farther on where, ribboned by the lazy river—a tributary of the Limpopo—the fields were lush and fruitful, the trees a riot of spring colour gleaming in the African sunshine.

It was a tranquil scene, viewed from the shady front stoep of Njangola Farm, but Sara's gaze was frowning, her thoughts disturbed, her normally clear and logical mind assuring her one moment that she had done what was right in coming here to this sub-tropical part of the Transvaal to care for her invalid sister, and the next moment telling her that she had made the greatest mistake of her life.

A step behind her brought her head round and she forced a smile as she looked up into her brother-in-law's drawn and tired face.

'Taking a rest?' Ray spoke softly, as if anxious to keep from his wife the knowledge that he was talking to her sister.

'Just for a few minutes.'

He stood looking down at her, seeing a slender slip of a girl with clear creamy skin, high cheekbones and a wide, unlined forehead. Her mouth, full and emotional, was as arresting as her eyes—eyes that were of a blending of blue and grey, large, and fringed by long dark lashes which, at this moment, were sending seductive shadows on to her cheeks.

'You must be tired,' said Ray at length. 'It's time you had some kind of a break.'

Sara shook her head.

'I'm not tired, Ray. After all, I've not been here a month until tomorrow. A month... It seemed more like a year since she had thrown up everything to come out here in response to Irma's impassioned entreaty.

'I wonder if you'll stay?' Ray's voice was listless, his brown eyes dull and brooding.

'What makes you say a thing like that?' she asked even while avoiding his gaze.

Ray shifted restlessly.

'I suppose I've no confidence. I don't know how deep the love is between you and Irma.'

'How does one measure love?' she countered, wondering what his reaction would be were she to unburden herself by the confession that she was deeply in love with him, that her heart had been his even before he met her sister.

'How does one measure love?' Ray looked away, towards the sun-hazed bushveld in the distance. 'I suppose, in some obscure way, that question has some connection with the one: how long does love last?'

Sara caught her breath, fear tightening her nerves. This mood of brooding discontent was new to her and it tore at her heart, increasing her unhappiness. Was Ray already becoming tired of the celibate life he was now forced to live?

A shuddering sigh escaped her as she thought of what might have been had not Ray fallen head over heels in love with Irma from the moment of Sara's introducing them to one another. What might have been... How profitless to dwell on something that was only a dream. Resolutely she thrust away the vision of herself as Ray's wife, just as she had thrust it away on countless occasions before.

The breeze from the berg had freshened; it began to rustle the leaves of the trees in the garden, and to sigh through the bamboo culms. Sara glanced uneasily at the sky, not trusting the clear blue heavens to retain their cloudless serenity. She said, more to end the oppressive silence than anything else,
'It's so peaceful at present, but I'm afraid we're in for a storm.'

Her brother-in-law nodded absently. 'You've already learned the signs.' His eyes rested on her face again, so searchingly that Sara turned away, endeavouring to concentrate on the diversity of the scene around her—the mealies in the nearest field and the paw-paws along its northern boundary, the bending willows by the stream, and in the garden close to the homestead, the gay canna lilies, the honeysuckle and the thickly-leaved acacias.

'Sara...' Ray's voice was very quiet and she swung around, her lovely golden hair floating about her shoulders. His mouth seemed to quiver; he said with difficulty, 'Tell me, truthfully, are you finding the life monotonous out here?'

At the depth of anxiety in his voice she instantly voiced the lie, wanting only to reassure him,

'No, of course not, Ray. How could anyone find life monotonous with so much beauty around?' She swept a slender white hand, just for effect and to add strength to her statement. 'I've a good deal of exploring to do, remember.'

The frown in his eyes brought uneasiness to her again, and she was not surprised when he said,

'I don't think you'll stay, Sara. What chance of exploring will you ever have, waiting hand and foot on my wife the way you do? Was she always as demanding as she is now?' he added in conclusion, bringing to Sara's mind the fact that he had known Irma only six weeks when he became engaged to her.

'Not at all,' returned Sara at once. 'You seem to forget, Ray, that Irma's condition has a lot to do with the way she feels and acts.'

'Forget!' he exclaimed bitterly. 'How can I forget that my wife of only five months is denied me for ever?'

'I'm sorry.' Sara bit her lip, thinking that it was most difficult not to say the wrong thing when speaking of her sister. Whatever she said Ray seemed to take it the wrong way. And yet in her deep compassion she could understand the anguish which consumed him, the terrible sense of loss, the bleak loneliness that faced him, both in his work and in his leisure hours. For he and Irma, enthusiastically taking up their new lives as farmers, had planned to work together, and to play together. 'I do feel,' murmured Sara at length, 'that Irma will eventually agree to using one of these marvellous wheelchairs they make nowadays for people like her. Then she'll begin to do things for herself, and not want me fussing around all the time—'—

'She enjoys it!' broke in Ray shortly. 'I've no faith at all in your assertion that she'll begin to do things for herself!'

Sara, her eyes darting to his harsh set face, knew a return of her fear. What a terrible disaster it would be if Ray were to fall out of love almost as speedily as he had fallen in love.

A few silent moments passed before her attention was caught by a horse and rider in the distance. Involuntarily she frowned, for in a short while she would be forced to treat the visitor with a civility she would be very far from feeling. In fact, she disliked the man more than any other person she had met in the whole of her life. His cynicism, his arrogance—which always seemed to be portrayed even in the movement of his long, athletic body—those inscrutable lynx-like eyes, deep amber in colour, which insolently flicked over her, that twisted smile with which she was occasionally favoured... all these compounded to outweigh the fact that both his looks and his physique could only be described as superlative.

Carl van der Linden... His name lingered in her mind as did the picture of his house, a white colonial-style homestead set among delightfully mature grounds where—Ray had told her—every conceivable species of exotic flower and bush seemed to flourish, where palm and frangipani and the magnificent flamboyant trees patterned the sky above them. His views were to the mountains on one side and the valley on the other; his seemingly limitless estate produced citrus fruits, maize, cotton and several other profitable commodities, all in addition to the extensive lands given over to mixed farming and pasture.

Of noble lineage, Carl seemed to Sara to flaunt his ancestry with an arrogance that was totally out of proportion. That he regarded women as necessary evils was plain; they had their uses, unfortunately, so could not be ruled out as the nonentities which, decided Sara, he would have liked them to be. Such was Sara's impression of her brother-in-law's nearest neighbour, and she felt convinced she would never change her opinion no matter how good he might
be to Ray who, being a novice at farming, was always calling upon Carl for assistance in one way or another. The help was always freely given, a circumstance that amazed Sara, who would have thought that Carl's attitude towards a newcomer to his country would have been that of derision rather than pity.

Sara watched as he rode along the plantation, galloping the magnificent chestnut gelding when eventually he diverted to the fire-paths. He was looking towards the homestead and Sara wondered whether he was comparing it with his own. A rambling, whitewashed structure with a red-tiled roof and huge water storage tanks precluding any possibility of beautifying the garden on the eastern side of the house, the Njangola farmhouse could scarcely be viewed as an attractive building. Yet inside it was surprisingly comfortable, with woodblock floors, attractive rugs and furniture — some inherited from the previous owner but most of it bought in England and brought over by Ray and his bride — and pretty lace curtains framed by side drapes and pelmets in varying colours chosen to match the decor particular to each room.

'I wonder what Carl wants?' Ray's voice had lightened; the visit was going to be an agreeable interlude for him, thought Sara with satisfaction.

'Perhaps just a social call,' she replied, her eyes still on the horse and rider, and darting into her memory the first meeting she had had with him a couple of days after her arrival at the farm. She recalled vividly her dislike, and the way the image of his austere countenance had left so strong an impression on her mind that it remained with her long after he had made his departure. 'You've not sent for him, so it must be a social call.' Sara smiled up at Ray as she spoke; he nodded, his eyes wandering to her hair, gleaming like pure gold in the sunshine slanting through the gaps in the trellised vines shading the stoep.

'You're miles away,' he commented. 'Where are you, Sara?'

Her smile hovered for a space, then faded.

'I was just relaxing my mind,' she said. But as a matter of fact she was cudgelling her brain to find some excuse for removing herself from Carl's presence just as soon as it was polite to do so. Not that the man would be at all deceived; he was under no illusions regarding her opinion of him any more than she was regarding his opinion of her. His affectation of politeness irritated her, in fact. On neither side had the dislike been made apparent, but undoubtedly there existed an undercurrent which, at some time or another, must blow the fuse, and the result would be open hostility.

'Carl!' Ray's smile was a welcome, his greeting almost effusive. Sara's heart went out to him; he had so little pleasure in his life these days. 'I'm so very glad to see you! You'll stay a while, I hope!' The faintest smile was his only answer and Sara's lips went tight. Why couldn't the man be a little more perceptive? Why didn't he realise that this visit made a most pleasant break for Ray? 'By Jove,' Ray was saying, 'that gelding's a real beauty! You don't happen to have another like it, that you want to sell?'

Having swung from the saddle Carl secured the reins before taking the steps two at a time, apparently without effort. Pompous creature I thought Sara uncharitably. Did he really have to show off like that?

'No,' he was saying, 'but I can have a word with Jacob Dessel, who breeds fine horses. He might have one to suit your taste.' Turning casually to Sara he greeted her with the kind of cool civility he might have extended to someone he was meeting for the first time. She responded with chill reserve, murmuring a stiff, 'good morning', and tilting her head in a gesture of hauteur. She saw his amber eyes glint, and wondered if he were piqued by her treatment of him. He was used to adulation, from what she had seen on her two visits to the Glenview Club in town. Most of the young women appeared to have had difficulty in keeping their eyes off his arresting figure. He had danced with them, but Sara had noticed that he never indulged in much conversation. With Sara herself he had adopted his customary manner of near indifference, which suited her well enough. She would have hated to be compelled to assume a show of friendliness which was insincere.

'I think Irma's calling,' said Ray with a sudden frown.

'I'll see what she wants.' Glad of the excuse, Sara murmured an apology to their visitor and left the two men on their own.
Irma, her delicate rose-tinted beauty unimpaired by the accident that had robbed her of the use of her legs, was sitting up, against the pillows, a petulant look on her face.

'I've called several times,' she complained. 'What have you been doing?'

'I was on the stoep. I didn't hear you, Irma, or I'd have come immediately. I must remind Ray to see about having a bell fixed up. I did make enquiries when I was in Paulsville the other day, and there's a man somewhere around here who might be able to do it, but I couldn't quite grasp just where he lives. So many customers came into the shop that I felt I ought not to bother the assistant any more just then.' Sara paused, smiling. 'What is it you're wanting?' Automatically she straightened the covers, and stooped to pick up a book that Irma had let fall to the floor.

'You didn't hear me, eh?' Irma's mouth twisted suddenly. 'Too busy talking to my husband, I suppose?'

Frowning, Sara looked down at her, puzzled by her sister's manner.

'What do you mean?' she wanted to know.

'Was my husband with you?'

'He came out to the stoep, yes.'

'He was here, but he soon left me. Ray hasn't any patience to stay with me these days.'

Sara bit her lip, at a complete loss as to how she could reply.

'What is it you want?' she asked again.

'Changing the subject?' Irma's voice was bitter. 'I'm thirsty.'

Sara made no immediate move, but stood staring into her sister's flawless countenance, and as always she had no difficulty in understanding why Ray had chosen her—in fact, he had never even noticed Sara in the way she had so desperately wanted him to. She recalled her first meeting with him when, at a dance, her friend had made the introduction. Awed by his outstanding good looks, Sara had at the same time felt a quickening of her senses, had felt the presence of something intangible affecting her whole body, had known a strange bewilderment in the little access of pleasure which she derived from his touch.

Fair and tall, with clear-cut features and a smile that could not possibly fail to charm, he was Sara's idea of perfection, the kind of dream-man she had hoped she would one day marry. He had danced with her many times; she had concluded he was attracted to her, but later learned that it was her superb lightness on the dance floor that made him choose her for his partner over and over again. He had escorted her home—to the house owned by Irma, with whom Sara had been staying for her Easter holiday—and even made a date with her. Sara's head was in a whirl, her mind overcharged with excitement. Ray must like her, for otherwise he would not have dated her I Perhaps this was the beginning of a courtship—the first ever for Sara. Would he kiss her the next time they were together? Would she feel the thrill of his arms about her, drink in the heady wine that even one tender word would give?

They dined on that second evening, then danced again. He brought her home and Sara found herself quivering with anticipation when, having stopped the car outside the house, Ray slid an arm along the back of her seat, and touched the nape of her neck in such a way that ripples of sheer ecstasy ran along her spine. Then, unexpectedly, the front door opened and Irma stood there with the light behind her, framed in the doorway like a beautiful picture. For she had been out too, and she wore a lovely evening gown of white lace and organza, tight-waisted and billowing out over layer on layer of ruched white net. Sara heard Ray catch his breath; a moment later she heard herself introducing her sister to him. And that proved to be the end of Sara's dreams and the beginning of Irma's. In a little less than six weeks she and Ray were engaged, and a month later, with tears in her heart but a smile on her lips, Sara stood in the church, arrayed in a lovely lime-green dress, long and full with tiny rosebuds trimming the neckline and the hem, and took part in the ceremony that joined Irma and Ray together as man and wife.

The reason for the wedding being rushed like that was that Ray had inherited a farm in South Africa, and as Irma was quite agreeable to go out there, they had married with all possible speed and immediately after the wedding
breakfast they flew to their new home.

Relieved to see them go, Sara had set about forgetting her handsome brother-in-law and picking up her life again. It was difficult, but she was determined. However, fate took a hand; she was not to be given the chance of forgetting Ray so easily, for within three and a half months of saying goodbye to the happy couple she was getting ready to fly out to join them, having thrown up her well-paid post as private nurse to a titled lady in whose beautiful home she had been given her own private rooms. The decision was difficult to make, causing Sara much uneasiness because she was still in love with Ray. On the other hand she could not ignore Irma's letter imploring her to come over to 'keep her company and look after her very few needs'. The sisters had been fairly close, having lost their parents within a year of one another when they were in their teens. Sara was now twenty-three and her sister twenty-five.

'Are you going to get me that drink?' Irma's voice intruded into Sara's reflections and she smiled then and said yes, she would make Irma a nice cup of tea.

'I don't want tea, I want orange juice,' Irma said.

'All right, I'll get it for you.'

'Make it fresh. I hate juices that have been standing. They taste bitter.'

'I'll see that it's freshly made.'

'Don't let Sadie make it; she's not clean enough for me.'

'She's very clean,' argued Sara. 'She's the best house- girl for miles around, everyone says so.'

'Oh, well if that's what you think. There's no need to be shirty about it, though.'

Not trusting herself to speak, Sara walked over to the door. As she reached it Irma said,

'I'd like you to stay with me when you fetch the drink. You don't seem to realise that I get bored, here on my own so much.'

'I don't leave you too long,' protested Sara, though in a patient tone of voice. 'I do have other things to see to, remember.'

'Well, I don't know what!'

Sara gave a small sigh, still trying to be patient. It was certainly difficult at times, especially when Irma was in one of her fractious moods, as she was today. But I'd be the same, thought Sara, realising just how devastating it must be to be confined to that bed all day.

'In spite of what you think, Irma, there really are other things which I have to do.'

'Such as looking after Ray, I suppose?' Irma's voice had a hollow sound that made her sister wince. 'We have Sadie to do that, and a houseboy.'

'Neither of them does any cooking, you know that.'

'All right,' sharply as Irma flopped back on to the pillows. 'There's no need to make excuses for the time you spend on Ray, and with him.'

'I don't think I understand you, Irma?' Sara had turned back into the room, a frown marring her clear wide brow.

'I'm not a fool, Sara.' The lovely girl on the bed looked at her sister through narrowed, resentful eyes. 'You were in love with Ray even before we were married. It was plain for everyone to see—and it's just as plain now! I'll bet Carl knows, because he has the sort of keen perception that can see such things. I often wonder if you're glad that I went out that day in the runabout, not knowing the brakes were faulty. If the truth were known you were on top of the
world when Ray cabled you to say that I was in hospital———'

'Irma!' Shocked beyond belief, Sara found speech impossible for a full thirty seconds after uttering her sister's name. 'What a dreadful thing to say to me!'

'You're all righteous indignation, but can you deny that you were in love with Ray—that you still are in love with him?'

Pale, and with anguish twisting at her heart both for Irma's misery and her own, Sara again found difficulty in speaking, but after a while she was able to say,

'If you thought that, then why did you ask me to come here?'

'Because, at the time I wrote that letter I scarcely knew what I wanted. I felt lonely and lost with nothing but blackness ahead. I knew that Ray's life was shattered, finished as far as sex was concerned. I couldn't even offer him friendship———-'

'Certainly you could! Your friendship would have deepened, on account of the other part—the sex part of the marriage.'

'What an idealist you are! What man of Ray's age wants nothing more than friendship from his wife?' Sara said nothing and Irma continued with what she had been saying previous to the interruption. 'We used to play tennis, to swim, to go for long rambles over the moors…' Irma's restraint broke and she burst into tears. In seconds Sara had her arms about her shaking body, her own eyes filling with tears.

'Don't, Irma! Oh, please don't cry so! If only I could do something!' She was angry because of her own helplessness. Irma, at twenty-five, a hopeless invalid. It wasn't fair! It was not fair! Sara wanted to scream, to curse fate, to shout at the doctors that they were wrong, that her sister would walk again! 'Dearest, if there was only something I could do to take away this unhappiness…' Sara's voice sank gradually, to a low pitch, while her strong young arms tightened protectively around her sister's tear-racked frame. Both girls were distraught, clinging to one another in an attitude of abandonment and lost hope. 'Why, oh, why do such things have to happen 1'

'I never thought that I'd be struck down like this! Sara, why wasn't I killed!'

'No!' almost shouted Sara. 'There'll be things to live for eventually. Believe me, Irma, it will become more bearable as time goes on.'

'As time goes on and I'm growing old, here in this bed—unloved by my husband, pitied by everyone else! I can't bear it! I shall kill myself!'

Sara, rocking to and fro, her sister held close to her breast, was unable to speak for the terrible lump in her throat. It was choking her, causing her actual physical pain. She thought: why didn't it happen to me? I have no husband to mourn, and I'm stronger than Irma. I'd have got over the worst eventually and -learned to live again!

'Don't cry any more,' she beseeched. 'I'll fetch you that drink, darling, and sit with you for as long as you want me to.'

'Will you, Sara? Will you stay with me all day?' Irma drew away, searching beneath a pillow for a handkerchief. Sara brought her one from a drawer, and one for herself.

'Of course I will, love.' Sara tried to smile, hoping her sister would respond. 'I won't be gone many minutes,' she promised, and left the room.

Once in the kitchen, where Sadie was standing on a stool tidying out the top shelf of a cupboard, Sara stood quietly for a spell, going over in her mind what had just transpired between Irma and herself. The situation was becoming more and more fraught with difficulties as time went on. Irma was obviously going to brood as she lay there in that bed, tortured by visions of her husband turning his attention to Sara, who loved him even though as yet he had no idea of this. Sara herself suffered agonies as she watched Irma's misery eating deeper and deeper into her heart, as
she saw the pain and hopelessness which came so often to her brother-in-law's eyes, and as she herself became oppressed by the utter bleakness of her future. There was no light ahead, no hope, nothing. Three people, living here at Njangola, all condemned to unhappiness for the rest of their lives.

What must she do? To leave here was not possible, because in spite of what Irma had just said when in her overwrought state, Sara knew that she needed her, desperately.

'Miss Sara, is there anything I can do for you?' The dusky housegirl's voice put an end to Sara's thoughts and she mentally thanked her for it.

'No, thank you, Sadie. I've only come for some orange juice for Mrs Barton.'

'I've some ready, Miss Sara. I thought she would want it.'

Sara hesitated, then, as Sadie jumped down from the stool she waited, accepting the long slender tumbler from the girl's hand.

'That looks nice. I see you polished the glass.'

Sadie's fine white teeth were revealed in a smile.

'Glasses always look prettier for polishing. I've a little lace doiley here, and it would look nice under the glass.' Sadie fetched a saucer, placed the lace mat upon it and then, taking the glass of orange juice from Sara, she put it on the mat. 'There, that's nice for Mrs Barton, isn't it?'

Sara nodded her head. Everyone was eager to have things 'nice' for Irma. It was a pity she so often failed to notice. And she failed to notice this time, but Sara could make excuses for her today, as it was one of those times when she was especially depressed.

'Thank you, Sara.' Irma took a drink, looked at her sister with faint apology and said, 'I'd rather have Ray with me. Do you mind?'

'Of course not.' Sara took the damp handkerchief from the table by the bed, relieved to notice that the evidence of tears was not nearly so marked as she would have expected it to be. 'I'll send Ray in at once.'

'Will he come, do you think?'

'Certainly he will,' answered Sara without hesitation. 'Why should you have doubts about it?'

'He doesn't enjoy being with me any more.'

'Nonsense. You imagine things, love. Ray adores you.'

'He used to, but how long does love last when one partner's as useless as I am?'

How long does love last… This was the second time within half an hour that Sara had heard the question. Ray must not stop loving his wife! He must not! He had made vows in church, and he would have to keep them; he must love his wife for as long as she lived!

'Irma wants you to go to her,' she was saying a moment or two later as she entered the living-room where Ray was now sitting talking to Carl. A frown creased his brow instantly, causing a little rise of anger which Sara had never felt against him before. Her glance was drawn somehow to Carl as Ray rose reluctantly to his feet. Carl's eyes were narrowed and their expression was undoubtedly one of contempt.

'I'll be back directly,' Ray was saying as he reached the door. 'Sara dear, will you make some tea?'

Dear… He scarcely ever used that expression when talking to anyone other than his wife, and Sara felt vexed that he should have used it now. However, her voice betrayed none of the anger she felt as she replied,
'Yes, of course, Ray. Er…'

'Well?' He paused by the door, impatience even in his pose of immobility.

'Irma would like you to stay with her for a while. Perhaps you'd like me to bring your tea in to you? She's particularly unhappy today.' She spoke gently, a persuasive inflection in her voice. To her dismay her brother-in-law seemed almost indifferent to what he had just heard.

'She ought to be sleeping!' He went off, his frown increased to a scowl. It was evident that he preferred Carl's company to that of his wife. Sara gave an audible sigh and glanced at Carl, who was leaning back languidly in his chair, one indolent hand resting on the arm. He was staring at her with that inscrutable expression which she disliked so much.

'I'll make the tea,' she said, and turned away from him.

'You say Irma is particularly unhappy today?' His voice reached her as she opened the door and she merely said over her shoulder,

'Yes, she is.'

'Is there any particular reason for this unhappiness?'

At the insistence in his tone she was forced to come around and face him.

'The reason's obvious, Mr van der Linden. Irma's lying there——— ' She stopped abruptly, resenting all at once the authoritative manner in which Carl had put his question. Sara had been about to say that Irma was lying there imagining things, that she was adding to her unhappiness because of it. Irma had been more active than most people, and it was a terrible, terrible thing for her to be laid up like that. This was what Sara would have said to anyone else who asked the question, but she had no intention of saying it to this arrogant man here, a man who normally found difficulty in even speaking to her.

He was staring at her, waiting for her to continue, but she remained silent, her eyes shadowed and the scalding tears pressing against the backs of her eyes, for she was seeing Ray, with that heavy frown and that air of impatience as he went off to obey his wife's request to come to her. She knew that Irma would quite naturally sense that Ray had not come to her willingly.

It seemed that burden after burden was being added to Sara's troubled mind and, because she had no desire that Carl should see her crying, she went from the room, her manner unintentionally rude as she left him with words half-spoken on his lips.
CHAPTER TWO

When she returned with the tray, daintily laid with a white cloth of fine lace and gleaming silver, Carl was still alone in the room. He stood by the window, erect, wide-shouldered, staring out, and Sara's own eyes wandered to where his maize fields sloped right down the valley sides. It was a fascinating landscape, hauntingly mysterious in the soft blue haze cast by the warmth of the sun-drenched atmosphere. At present all was placid, with that serene peace lingering over the bushveld, but clouds were still gathering, great banks of cumulo-nimbus piling up in the east, and gusty winds would soon be driving them towards the valley.

Turning his head, Carl glanced at the tray with that air of indifference to which Sara had become used. It was as if he said to himself,

'She's made the tea, so I'd better have a cup, just for the sake of politeness.'

Aloud he said, 'We're in for a heavy downpour. It'll do good, but at the same time it's going to batter down the more delicate of the garden flowers.'

'Yes, it's a pity. We haven't many flowers here, but Ray tells me yours is a magnificent show. Is there no form of protection you can give them?'

'Only to plant hedges, which was done a long while ago. The hedges merely prevent the wind from driving the rain on to the beds, but of course they still receive a great deal, and more often than not it's damaging.'

Sara put down the tray and straightened up. Was he talking simply in order to avoid an awkward silence?

It would seem like it, seeing that he was voicing nothing of any great interest. She poured the tea and handed Carl his. He thanked her coolly, then sat down. She turned away, uncomfortable under his impassive stare. What was he thinking? she wondered, bringing to mind what Irma had said about his probably having guessed that she, Sara, was in love with Ray. The idea filled Sara with dismay. She had been so sure that her feelings for her brother-in-law had been effectively hidden, but now she felt she might have been overconfident. If Carl had guessed, then what of Ray himself?

Shame possessed her; she had the urgent desire to leave here as soon as she could arrange to do so. If only she had not come! She was of course profoundly aware that Irma's letter had had the effect of causing her to act impulsively, for although her decision to come out here had been a reluctant one from one aspect, Sara had been guided more by anxiety for her sister than anything else. Certainly she had not given sufficient thought to the emotional problem that lay before her. She recalled that when she had read Irma's letter begging her to come to Africa, her one all-consuming thought was that of Irma lying there, alone for hours on end, because Ray would be forced to do his work on the farm. Irma would brood, and weep, and in consequence her mental condition would deteriorate.

'I can't let that happen,' Sara had told her employer who, although most unhappy at the idea of losing her, was infinitely understanding of the situation in which Sara found herself. She had said in that quiet gentle tone of voice,

'You know where your loyalties lie, my dear. If you feel it's your duty to go over to Africa and nurse your poor unfortunate sister, then do so.'

Carl spoke at last, breaking into Sara's unhappy thoughts, saying that he had had one or two long talks with Irma lately. His finely-timbred voice was cold and stern... accusing, almost, decided Sara, not without a hint of anger rising within her.

'Last Monday was one occasion,' continued Carl, 'when you were in Paulsville collecting some fertiliser for Ray. It's my opinion that your sister must be firmly watched. These fits of depression are dangerous.'

Sara shot a troubled glance at him.

'I try to bring her out of them,' she quivered. 'She's in one now.'
He was frowning heavily, but before he had time to speak Ray entered the room. Carl's eyes flickered towards him, then moved to Sara's face. She coloured, averting her head. It was obvious that he was searching for some sign that she and Ray were lovers. Revulsion sweeping over her at this idea, she had an almost irrepressible urge to round on him and tell him to keep his disgusting suspicions to himself! But of course she did no such thing, the absurdity of it striking her at once. She had no notion of the man's thoughts, so she could scarcely put forward accusations that had stemmed from nothing more concrete than her own imagination.

'I'll leave you to pour your tea,' she said to Ray. 'I feel Irma mustn't be left.' She was angry with him for leaving her sister. She had said she would bring in his tea, but he had not given her time and it was plain that he'd had no intention of remaining very long with his wife.

'She's going to have a sleep.'

'She is?' in some surprise. 'She didn't seem at all sleepy when I was with her just now.'

'She asked for a tablet.'

'You shouldn't have given her one, Ray. She takes far too many sleeping pills. They're bad enough at night, but in the daytime...' Sara frowned and shook her head. 'How is she to sleep later on if she sleeps now?' She turned her head, aware that Carl's attention was well and truly arrested. She made for the door, having no wish to answer questions he might be feeling inclined to ask. That he had taken a keen interest in her sister was evident, and Sara wondered why she should resent this interest. All she knew was that she would very much like to tell the disagreeable Carl van der Linden to mind his own business!

'If you'll excuse me?' she murmured. 'I'll go to her.'

Ray opened his mouth to protest, saw her expression and changed his mind.

'Will you tell Mikau to put some milk to settle? Irma wants fruit and cream for her meal this evening.'

'Fruit and cream?' repeated Sara, her eyes widening. 'Is that all?'

'For afters. She wants a chicken salad, so we'll have the same.'

Sara went out, along to Irma's bedroom which had its own flower-bedecked verandah running the full length of the large window. This window had been put in recently at Sara's suggestion, so that Irma could have a wide view as she sat up in bed, propped against the pillows. The flowers—hibiscus, canna lilies and anthuriums, oleanders and roses—had been planted in pots by Sara and were already in flower, while others were in bud. The oleanders, Carl had said, would outgrow the pots very soon, but they were so showy that Sara decided she would keep on planting new ones. Sara had also been planting a mauve bougainvillea vine and this she knew would be a real delight when it eventually established itself and began to produce flowers.

'Ray says you want to sleep.' Sara stood for a moment after opening the door of her sister's room, noticing Irma's pale face, her quivering mouth, and the listless way one white hand was resting on the counterpane. Sara's heart was as heavy as it was possible to be, and her feet dragged a little as she moved towards the bed. Irma's big blue eyes were glazed, her fair hair untidy on the pillow.

'I'm better when I'm unconscious. Oblivion—total oblivion—must be wonderful.'

Sara actually flinched, and a cloud of tears rushed to the backs of her eyes.

'Don't say such things,' she begged. 'Have you ever considered the improvements being made in medicine all the time? I'm optimistic enough to hope that, one day, you'll actually walk again.'

Irma drew a breath impatiently.

'You always did possess the happy knack of looking on the bright side of everything, didn't you?'
'I hate to admit defeat.'

Irma looked at her through sleepy eyes.

'Meaning that if you were in my place you'd be making an effort to walk?' Drowsy though she was, Irma struggled to ease herself up almost to a sitting position. Watching her, Sara strongly suspected that Irma was taking so many sleeping pills that they were not now having the effect they had at first. She had been trying to persuade her to cut down the number, keeping the use of the tablets strictly to the night time. But Irma succumbed whenever she felt depressed, declaring, as she had done a moment ago, that she preferred to be unconscious.

'I don't know that I'd be making an effort to walk,' returned Sara doubtfully. 'It's early days yet… but when you're stronger…' She let her voice fade, thinking of the way Irma seemed to have abandoned all hope of ever being able to leave that bed. 'I do feel,' continued Sara, 'that I couldn't ever resign myself to being an——-'

'Don't say it! I hate the word! It's almost as bad as "cripple" I And so you'd never resign yourself to being laid up for the rest of your life? Well, you haven't lain here and heard the doctor—his face apologetic and his voice regretful—telling my husband that there's no hope whatsoever!'

'The doctor shouldn't have said a thing like that in your hearing,' rejoined Sara with angry indignation.

'I wanted to know! I'm no coward, even though you might secretly brand me one!'

'I've never done any such thing,' returned Sara gently. 'On the contrary, I consider you very brave indeed, because it's not often you break down as you did just now.'

For a long moment there was silence in the room, broken only by the wind and a far-off rumble of thunder.

'I told you, didn't I, that Ray wouldn't want to stay with me.' The merest hint of a sob caused Irma's voice to quiver slightly.

'Carl's here, love. I expect Ray was remembering all that Carl's done for him and feeling he ought not to leave him alone for too long.'

'You could have stayed with him, but you don't like him, do you?'

'I've already admitted I don't like him.' Sara's eyes wandered to the window and the scene outside where the threatening cumulo-nimbus clouds were totally obscuring the sun. Lightning flashed from one horizon to another and within seconds the rain came down in torrents, reducing visibility to a few yards.

'Why did we ever come here!' cried Irma distractedly. 'Just look at that storm! Why was I ever fool enough to agree to come to this God-forsaken part of the world I Just think, if we'd stayed at home I would never have had that accident with the car—Oh, what's the use 1 Go away, Sara, and let me sleep!'

'But, darling———'

'Go away!'

Sara turned, and went blindly to the door. Once outside she allowed the tears to fall unchecked down on to her cheeks. If only something could be done for Irma! If only she, Sara, were not so helpless. She put her closed fists to her temples, an unconscious act but one which illustrated the terrible anguish that filled her whole being. She was frustrated by her inability to help her sister battle against this soul-shattering depression. If only Irma would take an interest in something it would at least occupy her mind for part of the time. But all she did was to read or to sit there staring into space. She wanted Ray to sit with her for long hours at a time, but this was not possible. He did spend time with her in the evenings, though, and recently Irma had complained to Sara that he scarcely ever opened his mouth from the time he entered her room until he left it. Perhaps, thought Sara, bringing out her handkerchief and drying her eyes, it would improve matters if they had some games with which to while away the time. Irma and Sara used to play chess together, and they always supported local whist-drives which were held in aid of various charities. Even when Sara moved some distance away when she went to nurse the titled lady, she still managed to
attended the whist-drives.

'Yes,' said Sara as she moved away from the door and proceeded towards her own bedroom, 'that's what's needed! I'll go into Paulsville immediately and buy some playing cards, and some games!' Without any further hesitation she bathed her face and hands, changed into clean denim slacks and a white short-sleeved shirt, grabbed her bag and made her way back to the living-room. 'I'm going into town,' she informed her brother-in-law. 'I've some shopping to do.'

'Is it urgent?' frowned Ray, glancing towards the window. 'It's not exactly the time to be driving the ranch wagon. The roads can be treacherous when they're flooded.'

'The main road will be okay.' Sara, aware of the studied interest with which Carl was regarding her brother-in-law, felt a little spurt of annoyance with Ray for making his concern so obvious. Carl, she felt sure, was putting an altogether wrong interpretation upon Ray's anxiety. However, Carl himself supported Ray by saying,

'Unless your errand's important you ought not to venture out in this storm, Miss Morgan.'

She looked at him a trifle belligerently, as if to inform him that she would please herself.

'The storm won't last,' was all she said, and turned away towards the open door.

'Might I ask what you're going into town for?' Ray's voice halted her and she swung around again.

'I'd rather not say.' Her eyes were caught by the glint in Carl's. He was obviously annoyed that she had not taken his advice, although she could not see why. He ought to have known that he was the last person of whom she would take notice. 'I must go,' she added, returning her attention to Ray. 'It's important to me that this shopping's done today.'

'Be careful, then. We don't want another accident.'

She went out, Ray's words ringing in her ears. That he hated the idea of her going out in the storm was plain, but she wished he had not made reference to Irma's accident. It was so tragic an occurrence that Sara had begun to shirk thinking about it. It was enough to be continually aware that her sister was condemned to that room for all day and every day; there was no need for the reminder of what had put her there.

Although the storm continued to rage, the lane leading from the farm to the main road presented no problems to Sara, having been baked hard by the recent long dry spell. And by the time she reached Paulsville the rain had stopped altogether. But the sky was still sullen, with black clouds pressing close to the earth; and an eerie mauve-grey dimness was creating conditions reminiscent of twilight, although it was not yet eleven o'clock. She should be home in plenty of time to prepare the lunch, thought Sara as, having parked the ranch wagon, she hurried along to the shop at which she hoped to be successful with her requirements. And she was successful, being able to buy the playing cards, a chess set and board, and some draughts. She saw no one whom she knew, much to her relief, as she had no wish to waste time chatting, not with the lunch to get ready for one o'clock.

The journey back was far more difficult, as the heavens opened immediately she got into the ranch wagon and the road became a river in no time at all. Lightning zigzagged through a distant line of kopjes and darted down on to the veld; the reverberating crash of thunder followed, and this pattern was repeated incessantly. Visibility was reduced to a few yards. Reaching the lane at last, she turned cautiously into it, afraid of skidding. The surface had become a quagmire and she was soon admitting that she was in for trouble. The wheels were spinning, throwing up a continual shower of ochre-coloured mud, and progress was reduced to about five miles an hour.

She still had more than three miles to go when, to her dismay, the vehicle squelched to a standstill and no matter how hard she tried she was unable to get it moving again. The wheels were in fact being driven deeper and deeper into the mud and she stopped the engine altogether. The rain was a cataract of silver all around her as she stepped from the vehicle; it lashed at her body, driven by the fury of the wind. The lightweight waterproof she had on was useless in a storm so violent as the one raging at present and she was soon feeling the penetration of water on her back. She had never seen anything like this in the whole of her life; it was frightening in its intensity, with the lightning's vivid blue flashes tearing threateningly across the blackness of the sky.
She looked at the wheels, saw that they were half buried in the mud. What was to be done? She would have to walk, she supposed, but the prospect of trudging through all that mud daunted her, and she looked longingly at the house, Ravenspark, where Carl van der Linden lived. It was fairly close... but she could never bring herself to ask his help—no, never! And so she began to walk, becoming drenched to the skin almost immediately. She found herself turning to look at the house again. The lightning scared her, and she tried to keep to the middle of the path, away from the trees, but the quagmire sucked her into its slimy depths and she had a terror-stricken few seconds before she was able to extricate herself. She looked down at her legs and turned again to glance at the house. Lights had appeared in several windows, inviting beacons which caused her to stop and stare... and to throw her pride to the four winds.

That she looked just about as unprepossessing as it was possible to be struck her forcibly as she rang the bell, but she was past caring. Carl's opinion of her could not fall much lower than it was at present. His houseboy opened the door, but Carl happened to be in the hall, and he was staring at his visitor over the boy's shoulder.

'It's all right, Paulo,' he said, advancing to the door.

'Come in, Miss Morgan———' Carl swept a hand; she entered the lighted hall without even a glance at her surroundings. Never in her life had she felt so embarrassed, as she stood there, drenched to the skin, her hair like rats' tails sprawling over her shoulders, her legs and feet thick with mud which, to her horror, was dripping on to his polished oak floor.

'I—I—er—I'm terribly sorry, Mr van der Linden,' she stammered, 'but the ranch wagon became stuck in the mud and I can't get it out. I hope you don't mind my coming here? It was so much nearer than the farm.' She noticed the houseboy had disappeared, noticed also the immaculate appearance of the man standing there, his lynx-like eyes roving her from the scalp-clinging wetness of her hair right down to her mud-begrimed legs and feet. She went hot all over, furious with herself for succumbing to the temptation offered by the sight of those lighted windows. Far better to have trudged on home, enduring the discomfort, rather than to have found herself in such a humiliating position as this.

'Where is the ranch wagon?' he inquired, at the same time moving to close the door behind her.

'Along the lane———' She gestured, but her gaze was on the little pool of muddy water gathering at her feet. 'I ought not to have come,' she murmured apologetically. 'I'll go———'

'I did advise you not to venture out in the storm,' Carl reminded her, just as if he had to. 'However, that's not important now. What is important is that you get out of those clothes.' He pointed towards a door just a few yards farther along the hall. 'That's a cloakroom. Go in there and take off those things. There's a shower, and towels. I'll get you a dressing-gown.' He stopped, quirking one straight dark eyebrow in a gesture of amusement. 'It'll be somewhat large, but it'll suffice until your clothes have been washed and dried———'

'Oh, I couldn't put you to all that trouble,' she interrupted hurriedly. 'If you would be so kind as to run me home in your station wagon———'

'I have no intention of taking a vehicle out in this,' broke in Carl implacably. 'Do you suppose I'd risk any station wagon becoming stuck in the mud the way yours has?' He spoke with that kind of inflection which told her plainly that he thought her every kind of a fool to expect him to run the sort of risk she had run.

'No... I spoke without thinking.'

'Do as I say and get those clothes off at once.' His tone had changed to one so imperious that she felt her hackles rising. However, she did as she was told, moving towards the door he had indicated. 'Put your clothes outside the door; I'll have them washed and dried right away.'

Sara made no further demur. Ray had told her that Carl had every modern convenience in his home, making his own electricity, so Sara concluded that his servant would be using a clothes washer and a tumbler drier. Nevertheless, this would take some time, and she was troubled about her sister. She was used to Sara waiting on her at meal times, and she would be upset if Sadie took her place. Perhaps, though, Ray would give her her lunch, explaining that Sara had
gone into Paulsville and obviously could not get back. Sara hoped he would not worry too much, hoped he would conclude that she was still in town, waiting for the storm to abate before venturing on the roads again.

She undressed, having to drag her underwear from her shivering body. It was a relief to put her clothes outside the door, and she determinedly thrust out any embarrassing thoughts that might have intruded. The shower was heavenly, warm and comforting; the soap had a masculine smell—like the waft of pine-scent carried on a breeze blowing down from a hillside. The towel was large and soft and she wrapped it around her, waiting for the dressing-gown which Carl was lending her. A feeling of languor and well-being enveloped her; the storm raging outside seemed a million miles away.

A quiet knock on the door and the voice of the houseboy telling her that the dressing-gown was there, hanging on the knob. She called out, thanking him, then, opening the door, she took the garment in her hand. It was of towelling material, bright orange in colour, with white trimming on the collar and cuffs. Sara put it on, smiling at the way it buried her. She tied the girdle, took a look at herself in the mirror, and gave a deep, deep sigh. Dared she use that comb? Carl had not given her permission to do so, and to her sensitive mind it would have been wrong for her to use it without first asking him, as a comb was such a personal thing. She emerged from the cloakroom; Carl had anticipated her requirement and was there, handing her bag to her. Surprised, she found herself smiling, saw his response and, to her astonishment, her feeling of well-being was increased to an intoxicating lightness of mind and body.

'Thank you,' she murmured, accepting the bag. But she made no immediate move to go back into the cloakroom. His eyes on her face were watchfully intent, giving her the impression that, for the very first time since they had met, he was affording her some measure of interest. 'I'll—I'll comb my hair,' she murmured, shy all at once, and a little vexed with herself because of it.

'Come into the room opposite to this,' he said, and pointed to indicate the door. 'Your clothes are already being washed.' He wheeled away before she could thank him, leaving her with a strange sensation of unreality. She supposed, on trying to analyse this as she stood before the mirror combing her hair, that his changed manner with her was making her feel as if the whole position she was in had an unreality about it. Here she was, in his home for the first time, clad in nothing more than the dressing-gown he had offered her. She coloured a little, then shrugged. Since coming to Africa she had begun to take life as it came to her, accepting each day—each hour, even—for what it was worth.

Carl was leafing idly through a magazine when she entered the living-room. Elegant, and furnished with an eye both to beauty and comfort, it was the kind of apartment to which she had become used when working for her last employer. The walls were white with one or two valuable paintings hung upon them; the long window, which extended the full length of one wall, was draped with crimson curtains of expensive Italian brocatelle, and this same material had been used to cover the sofa and the three large armchairs. Several charming antique tables had a familiar look and Sara recalled that her employer had had a piecrust table that was almost identical to the one she saw here. Valuable Persian rugs covered the tiled floor, with one particularly fine one in front of the black marble fireplace. In an antique display cabinet was a collection of Chelsea-Derby porcelain, while on a set of small shelves occupying a corner by the fireplace, was a collection of Sevres snuffboxes. Undoubtedly Carl van der Linden was a man of refined and cultivated taste. He had put down the magazine and for a fleeting moment his eyes roved her figure, his mouth curving in an unexpected smile of amusement. However, he quite naturally made no reference to the ill-fitting garment, merely asking if she now felt more comfortable.

'Yes, indeed! I've never had a soaking like that before.'

'You needn't have had it now, had you taken my advice.' He gestured with his hand. 'Sit down, Miss Morgan. I've a warm drink coming for you in a moment or two.'

'Thank you; you're very kind.'

The lazy amber eyes were unfathomable as he said, abruptly changing the subject,

'I was speaking to you about your sister earlier today. You do realise just how deep her depression is?'
Sara nodded.

'Of course I do, Mr van der Linden. I try to get her out of these moods, but sometimes I find it impossible.'

'What exactly are your methods when endeavouring to coax her out of these fits of depression?'

'I sit with her and chat. I try to convince her that later on, when she's not feeling so low in spirit, there'll be things to live for.'

Carl appeared to be considering this.

'She needs to have a hobby of some kind.'

Sara nodded in agreement.

'I've bought some games today—they're in the ranch wagon, and I do hope they'll not get wet. If Ray and Irma play games together it might make it easier for them both.'

Carl looked at her strangely; he seemed to be seeing her in an entirely new light, she thought, but she was still very conscious of the fact that in all probability he knew she was in love with her brother-in-law.

'So that's what took you out in the storm,' he said slowly. 'Was it so urgent that you got these games today?'

'It seemed urgent at the time,' admitted Sara deprecatingly. 'I know now, of course, that it was foolish to venture out in that dreadful storm.'

He was nodding thoughtfully.

'You mentioned the word "easier" just now. Wasn't that a rather odd word to use?'

Sara had already admitted to herself that it was an odd word to use when speaking to anyone like Carl, who would not understand just how difficult the situation between Ray and Irma was becoming. The word had slipped out, having fitted Sara's own thoughts.

'Perhaps I should have used the word "interesting",' she said.

'Perhaps, but you didn't,' remarked Carl with an odd inflection which sounded very much like a hint of censure—or was it accusation? 'Tell me, Miss Morgan, why should your sister and her husband need to play games in order to make things easier for them both?'

She frowned at the question, and sent him a look of bewilderment.

'I don't quite understand you, Mr van der Linden?' And she added before he could speak, 'You've taken an extraordinarily keen interest in my sister which, I'm willing to admit, puzzles me, since I wouldn't have expected you to concern yourself with other people's troubles.'

He lifted one arrogant brow and said,

'You're outspoken, if nothing else, Miss Morgan.'

She blushed, lowering her lovely long eyelashes to hide her expression.

'I must apologise, I suppose, but———- '

'There's no need for an apology,' he broke in with a touch of impatience. 'Apologies are, for the most part, merely superfluous, spoken more for politeness than regret.'

She smiled at this; the man was certainly perceptive—and forthright.
'You're amused about something, Miss Morgan?' he inquired smoothly.

'You accused me of being outspoken, but I find you equally direct———' She broke off as the door opened and Carl's houseboy entered carrying a tray.

'Thank you, Paulo. Put it down here, on this table.'

The boy obeyed, glanced at Sara with a stolid expression, then left the room.

'It's beef-tea,' Carl told Sara, taking up a beaker and handing it to her. 'It'll put some warmth into you.'

'Thank you very much.' She was learning about him with every moment that passed, learning things which, until now, she would not ever have connected with so austere a man, a man who rarely smiled, whose attitude towards her had been one of indifference or contempt, depending on his mood. Now, however, she was seeing a more human side of his nature. He had anticipated her need and so had fetched her handbag; he had been so casually unaffected by the necessity of offering her the use of the cloakroom, the loan of a gown while her clothes were washed and dried, and now this very practical offering of the hot beef-tea.

'Is it to your taste?' he was asking. 'Is it strong enough for you?' he added, watching her take a sip.

'It's just right, thank you,' she returned with a smile. 'As you say, it will put some warmth into me.'

There was another beaker on the tray, which Sara realised was black coffee. Carl took it up but held the beaker without drinking its contents. Sara stole a glance at him, noting the crisp brown hair, the straight dark brows, the enigmatic expression in the faintly-narrowed eyes. He half-turned, to look through the window, and she saw the set stern profile with its straight nose, its taut jawline and the thrusting chin. A formidable man but one whose masculinity was most profoundly marked, not only in his outstanding good looks and physique but also in his personality.

'I'm afraid this storm's not going to abate yet awhile,' he said slowly as he turned again to look at her. And if it does continue you're not going to be able to get back to Njangola unless you walk, which is certainly not to be recommended even were the rain to cease long enough for you to have the time.' He was thoughtful, obviously wondering how she was to get home.

'Won't you be able to take your runabout on the mad later, if the storm does abate?' she asked, realising only now that she had not given much thought to the possibility of being stranded here for any appreciable length of time. She supposed that, subconsciously, she had been waiting for the sky to clear, and for the appearance of the sun to dry up the path, just as it usually did. But there had never been a storm of such violence since she came out here, and in consequence the road leading to Njangola had never been reduced to the impassable state it was in at present.

'We'll have to wait and see,' answered Carl non-committally. 'Meanwhile, we can have lunch.' His glance flickered over her. 'Perhaps you'd feel more comfortable if you had your clothes? They should be ready in about half an hour. Would you prefer to wait?'

She nodded instantly.

'I would—if you don't 'mind.'

'Not at all.' The silence which followed was brief but thoughtful. 'To return to what I was saying about your sister,' he remarked at last, taking a drink from the beaker. 'It so happens that I am concerned, Miss Morgan, in spite of your fixed opinion that I'm not the person to trouble myself with other people's problems. Irma's condition is one that I've come across before, so I know what might be the result of it. So serious the tone, so direct his stare… Sara felt her heart jerk with a fear she could not understand.

'What are you trying to say, Mr van der Linden?'

Another pause, but longer this time.
'I believe you can take the truth.' He stopped, his expression taking on the familiar look of contempt. 'Your sister must not be allowed a free hand with those sleeping tablets she so often appears to ask for.'

'Sara's eyes opened to their full extent.

'Just what are you hinting at, Mr van der Linden?' she demanded with suppressed anger.

'I did say that I'd come Across that particular condition before,' answered Carl quietly. 'A friend of mine had a cousin who had an accident similar to Irma's. She became so low in spirit that she eventually ended her life.'

'Ended her life…' Sara repeated, hollow-voiced.

'You think that Irma might try—try—' She shook her head vehemently. 'No, she would never do a thing like that!'

'It's possible, Miss Morgan, quite possible… if her position becomes unbearable.'

A silence fell upon the room. Sara, no longer able to enjoy the drink which had been given her, leant over to place the beaker on the tray. She thought of Irma's anxiety about the relationship which might develop between her husband and her sister. Irma would obviously become more and more troubled as time went on. Sara had of course been over this before, but she was seeing an added danger now, a danger brought starkly to her notice by the words just spoken by Carl. And it certainly was a fact that Irma was always referring to oblivion, and saying that total oblivion must be wonderful. Moreover, Irma had actually said she would kill herself. Sick at heart, and with a fearful dread taking full possession of her mind, Sara looked across at Carl, his final phrase ringing in her ears, '… if her position becomes unbearable.'

He was looking at her, the contempt still lingering in his expression. Sara lowered her head, experiencing shame and guilt where none existed. He was blaming her for Irma's mental state, for her abject misery. The injustice of his condemnation stung in a way she would never have believed possible, since she had always told herself that she cared not one jot for the opinion of Carl van der Linden. Yet at this moment, as she suffered under the accusation in his manner, she knew that were she to follow the instinct which was strong within her, she would address Carl, explaining just how she had come to be in love with Ray; she would tell him that she had fallen in love with him at their first meeting, and that she had lost him to Irma the moment she introduced them to one another. Carl might then understand, and sympathise rather than blame.

As it was, Sara knew instinctively that he was convinced she had come over here to be near Ray rather than to care for her sister. Yes, it was so very plain what he was thinking. Sara could read it all over his face.
CHAPTER THREE

Three-quarters of an hour later Sara, feeling much more at her ease since discarding Carl's dressing-gown in favour of her own clothes, was sitting opposite to Carl in the dining-room, taking lunch with him. The conversation concerning Irma had been brought to an end by the entrance of Paulo to say that Sara's clothes had been washed, dried and ironed and were in the cloakroom.

Sara, glad to escape any more questioning from Carl who, she strongly suspected, had several questions ready, took rather longer than she need have done in getting into her clothes. She lingered over her hair, which was still very wet even though she had rubbed it vigorously with the towel. Her face was pale, her eyes shadowed and her heart heavy when at last she joined Carl again in the sitting-room. He had taken one look at her and it did seem that he made a sudden decision to let the matter of Irma drop for the present.

Soon afterwards lunch was announced and they went along to the dining-room where a delicious meal of grilled steak and mushrooms was served with Bearnaise sauce. Carl had said that if the storm kept on he would send Paulo to the farm to let Ray know where Sara was. She thanked him but said no more; she felt disinclined to talk about Ray, fearing that some evidence of her feelings might come through, thus increasing the contempt which Carl already had for her.

The storm raged intermittently for the whole of the afternoon and at half-past four Paulo was sent off to deliver a message to Ray, informing him that Sara was at Ravenspark and that it would be most unlikely that she would return to Njangola until the following afternoon. Sara had opened her mouth to protest, but instantly closed it again, realising that she was completely in Carl's hands and whatever his decision she had no alternative than to adhere to it.

'I'm putting you to such a lot of trouble,' she said apologetically. 'I ought not to have gone out—' She stopped, spreading her hands in a little gesture of self-deprecation. 'It's not much help to express regret now, though.'

'It's none at all,' was his dry rejoinder. They were in the living-room, Sara by the window, frowning at the scone outside, and Carl sitting on the couch, a file on his knees. He had taken this from a desk a short while earlier when Sara was glancing through one of the flossy magazines which she had taken from the wicker-work rack by the side of the fireplace. Now, however, they had both discarded what they were reading and Sara knew instinctively that Carl was about to broach the subject of Irma even yet again. And because she both resented and feared what he would say she spoke swiftly into the silence, forestalling him and hoping successfully to steer him right away from what was in his mind at this moment.

'Do you often have storms as bad as this out here?'

'It's several years since we had one as violent as this. It'll do a great deal of damage, not only to growing things but to buildings as well. I'm afraid that some of Kay's outbuildings will already have suffered.'

She nodded, twisting round to face him.

'He was saying the other day that one or two of the roofs needed to be repaired.' Would they have blown off? she wondered, sighing inaudibly. Ray had enough problems on his shoulders without the added ones of things going wrong on the farm.

'The dairy roof certainly needed repairing. It was held on with rocks of various shapes and sizes.'

Sara asked curiously, 'What was Ray's uncle like?'

'A nice enough chap, but not much of a farmer.'

She felt her hackles rise at his tone. It was just like the clever Carl van der Linden to disparage someone else's endeavours 1 He seemed to forget that the wealth he himself possessed had a great deal to do with the remarkable
proficiency with which his own estate was run.

'I hope Ray won't be put to too much expense by the damage,' she said, keeping the tinge of anger from her voice.

'He'll probably be able to manage the repairs himself, with the help of his boys, of course. If not, then I'll send over some of my boys who happen to have some experience of such things.' Carl spoke coolly, impersonally, and yet his gaze was fixed and searching, as if he were more than a little interested in her.

'It's good of you,' murmured Sara. 'You've done a lot for Ray.'

The hint of a sardonic smile touched the corners of Carl's mouth; his voice had a dry, ironic quality when he spoke.

'You're becoming very gracious all of a sudden, Miss Morgan.'

'I'm your guest,' she reminded him with quiet emphasis.

'My unwilling guest. I hope the ordeal won't be too harassing for you,' he said.

She coloured at his sarcasm, wishing she could retaliate. Instead she was forced to maintain an attitude of politeness, although she very much doubted if she could keep it up indefinitely if he continued to adopt this objectionable manner with her.

'I think you have the wrong idea, Mr van der Linden. I'm not finding anything outstandingly uncomfortable in my position—except of course that I'm very conscious of inconveniencing you.'

Carl shot her a satirical glance.

'Painfully conscious,' he corrected, stressing the first of the two words.

She lifted her chin.

'You have no justification for that remark, Mr van der Linden!' she flashed.

'I was merely judging by your expression,' he informed her, the satire in his voice matching to perfection the glance he had given her.

'I'm sure there was nothing in my expression that could be described as pained!'

'But you can't see your expression,' he pointed out. 'I can—and it most certainly is one of pained embarrassment.'

Was he teasing her? she wondered, incredulity in the look she directed at him. He most certainly had never been in a teasing mood before… at least, not with her.

'I don't understand you, Mr van der Linden,' she said on a note of complaint. 'You talk in riddles.'

The lazy amber eyes became veiled for a moment, their depths enigmatic. It seemed that, for some obscure reason of his own, he had drifted momentarily on to another plane of thought… and Sara felt unaccountably that Irma was in some way concerned. She looked at him, saw the tightness of the olive skin over a jaw that had suddenly flexed, and her pulses quickened with vexation because she found him so unfathomable. What was he thinking? The last words she had spoken to him came back to her: she had said she did not understand him, that he talked in riddles. And immediately on this recapture of memory came the words which he had spoken earlier, concerning Irma's plight and making the subtle suggestion that she might take her own life, '… if her position becomes unbearable.'

Sara had it! Like a flash she knew what Carl was thinking. He, too, was recalling the phrase, and dwelling on the fact that Sara had not understood what lay behind those actual words. But he was wrong, of course: she had understood, very plainly indeed. He had been blaming her, but he had been warning her too… warning her that, should her sister take her own life, then Sara would be the one on whose shoulders lay the blame.

Unconsciously she gave a deep sigh, which Carl heard, and he looked at her. She knew she was pale, most of the
colour having left her cheeks. She saw his eyes flicker, noted their slow movement from her face to her hair—which was still falling in damp tendrils on to her shoulders. He seemed to realise that she was uncomfortable under his prolonged unsmiling scrutiny and he spoke, lightly remarking on the fact that the storm seemed to be abating.

'But you'll not be able to get home tonight,' he added, seeing Sara's eyes widen instinctively with hope. 'It's not the rain, Miss Morgan, it's the state of that road.'

'Yes, of course.' She glanced through the window. Dusk was falling, and the gardens, already looking forlorn beneath the sombre sky, were losing what little colour they had retained in the face of so much destruction. 'Will it take long for it all to dry up once the storm's over?' Sara turned her head to look up into those lazy amber eyes of his. 'I haven't had any experience of a really bad storm since coming here. Normally, the ground begins to steam immediately the rain stops and within a very short time the sun's dried up most of the surface water.'

'This time it'll take much longer, especially on that path, which always becomes impassable in a really heavy downpour.'

She bit her lip.

'Shall I get home tomorrow?' she asked anxiously.

'I should think so.'

'And the ranch wagon…?'

'Don't worry about it. My boys will soon have it out of the mud.'

'Will it have taken any harm? It seemed to have sunk quite some way into the mud.'

'We shall have to see. However, it isn't your worry,' he added casually. 'I shall drive you home, and the rest will be left to Ray.'

The conversation became inconsequential from then on and Sara wondered whether Carl was as bored as she. Earlier Anna, one of Carl's maids, had shown her to a very attractive bedroom whose colour-scheme of dove-grey and lilac, with bird's-eye maple furniture, seemed to have been the work of a woman's hand rather than that of a man of such austere personality as that of Carl van der Linden. Thinking about the bedroom now Sara waited an opportunity to break the boredom of the conversation to ask if she might go and lie down for an hour as she had a slight headache. This excuse was a white lie, but she had no qualms about voicing it, since she was convinced that Carl was just as anxious to rid himself of her company as she was to rid herself of his. She and he would never get along, she decided, not if they knew each other for a hundred years. They had nothing in common…

Nothing in common… She was musing on this as she went to her room. The truth was that they had one very important thing in common: Irma's welfare. Not for the first time Sara was searching her mind for some logical reason for Carl's interest in her sister. Had he been a long-standing friend of Ray it would have been understandable, but he had known him for little more than five months. It was so puzzling, and Sara felt impatient at her inability to understand Carl's obvious concern for her sister. True, it was natural that the idea of her inflicting harm on herself should trouble him, just as it would trouble anyone else, but Carl was showing something far more personal than mere neighbourly concern.

'The man's an enigma!' she exclaimed almost angrily. 'I wish I could understand his mind!'

Dismissing him from her thoughts, she went into the mauve and white bathroom, deciding to take advantage of what it had to offer. The bath was oval-shaped, and sunken into a carpeted floor. The taps, towel-rails and other fitments were gold-plated. A huge oval mirror practically covered one wall, while on another was a scene—in tiles—of an underwater garden, with trees and flowers in coral, and brilliantly-coloured fish swimming in their midst.

Here again was the hand of a woman, and a clever woman at that. Was it his mother? Sara shook her head, deciding that he had no parents living. Perhaps he had a sister. How little she knew about him—not that she wanted to know much at all. Mere acquaintanceship with a man like Carl was more than enough for anyone!
She stooped to turn on the taps, standing still and watching the bath fill up. She found scented bath salts, a very expensive—and very feminine—brand of talcum powder on a shelf above the wash-hand basin. She supposed these were there for use, and yet she hesitated, feeling she might be taking a liberty. However, she did use the bath salts, luxuriously enjoying their subtle perfume as she lay in languid comfort in the big bath. That feeling of well-being crept over her again, as it had crept over her downstairs, when she had been in the cloakroom. This house was restful; it had the same sort of tranquil atmosphere which Sara had encountered in the home of her employer, the charming titled lady who had conquered adversity by the determination to retain her cheerful personality. It had been a real pleasure to work for her, and as she lay here, in the bath, Sara could not help sighing for what she had given up, could not control the nostalgia which filled her as the vision of her past life rose up before her.

Her job had been so easy, with many words of praise, and little rewards which, though of scant material value, meant such a lot to Sara. She still had several small bottles of perfume, some dainty lace handkerchiefs, a few pretty pieces of costume jewellery. These all had their own individual meanings; they had been given to Sara as tokens of appreciation when, for some reason or another, she had had to put herself out a little for her employer.

'You shouldn't feel you have to reward me,' Sara had at first protested, but she had not known her employer very well at that time. Later, she understood her personality so well that she recognised the genuine pleasure which the woman was deriving from the giving of these little presents.

Another sigh escaped her, but she was at the same time telling herself that she could not have acted in any other way than she had. Irma needed her and that was why she was here. It was both love and duty which had brought her, and despite the emotional disturbances caused by her own love for Ray, Sara knew she would do the same again; she would answer her sister's call without the slightest hesitation.

But what of the future? The problems loomed larger than ever now owing to the way Irma's mind was beginning to work. Yet Sara felt there was some way out of the 'difficulty. She had never looked on the black side, merely because she had realised the futility of it. She did have a happy knack of looking on the bright side of everything, just as Irma had said, and she was even now visualising a cure—if not a complete cure, then one which would enable her sister to get about, to leave that bed and that room, and the scene from the window which must already be so familiar as to be totally without interest. Meanwhile, there was the more immediate possibility of persuading Irma to try out a wheelchair. Sara's employer had had one before she became so crippled that she had to keep to her bed. She had told Sara how wonderful the chair had been, how it had helped her to get about the house and do certain things for herself. Sara's own visions extended to an invalid carriage which Irma could drive, taking herself to town, perhaps.

'If some of this can materialise, then Irma won't be thinking of such things as oblivion,' Sara decided, speaking her thoughts aloud. She was still fully relaxed, enjoying the warmth of the scented water, the peace, the feeling of aloneness which she had not experienced since coming to Africa. She liked being alone sometimes; her employer had instilled into her the necessity of this, saying, quite definitely,

'Everyone who is intelligent needs to be alone on occasions. We have thinking power, and private thoughts are to be indulged in when we're on our own. All my life I have insisted on having my own company for at least an hour each day.'

Yes, it certainly was nice to be alone. Sara prolonged her stay in the bath, and even when she did come out she lingered over getting dressed. She thought of having dinner with Carl and, being all woman—and despite her dislike of her host—she wished she had something more appropriate than the denims and the shirt. The ends of her hair had become wet again, but the rest was dry, and shining. She combed it, then used the blusher on her cheeks and the lip-rouge on her mouth.

The mirror sent back her reflection; she found her thoughts going to Irma, and the real beauty that was hers. Ray had been bowled over the moment he had set eyes on her, and no wonder. Irma had had many boy-friends, being more fond of the social life than Sara. Her job, too, brought her into contact with young men, as she had worked in the office of a large insurance company. Sara on the other hand had worked first in a hospital, and then had been persuaded to take the post of private nurse, and although a little doubtful at first as to whether she wanted to be on call all the time, she was soon admitting that she had no regrets about taking the job, and she never would have.
But this demanding kind of job allowed little time for socialising, and the only occasions when Sara really went out to dances and parties was during her holiday breaks, which were fairly often, her employer insisting on her having four breaks a year of one week each. During these times another nurse took over Sara's duties, and so Sara had no qualms about leaving her employer and going to stay with Irma in the smart little house she had been left by their uncle who, though he liked Sara and left her a small legacy, had always favoured Irma.

It was on these visits that Sara began to realise just how beautiful her sister was. The young men swarmed around her at every party or dance; she could have had HI many dates as she could fix into her leisure time. But she had never been serious with any man until she met Ray; it was love at first sight for both of them, and despite her own breaking heart Sara had to admit that they were ideally suited to one another.

With a last glance in the mirror she turned away, her thoughts still with Irma and Ray, the picture uppermost in her mental vision that of the wedding, when the glowing bride in white had walked down the aisle on the arm of her handsome husband. Everyone had gasped at the sight; there had been exclamations and soulful sighs. No one had had any eyes for the bride's sister; no perceptive glance had caught the shadows of unhappiness on her face, or the tremulous movement of her expressive mouth. Outside the church Sara had smiled for the photographer; her eyes had glowed in the sunshine. No one would have guessed that beneath her outward show of gaiety Sara's heart was almost breaking.

Carl was not in the sitting-room when Sara entered, a circumstance for which she was glad. Trying to keep up a conversation with a man she so disliked was an intolerable strain, and she hoped he would keep away until dinner-time. Immediately the meal was over she could bid him good night and go to bed.

She walked over to the window, greatly relieved to see that the rain had stopped altogether. But the dusk had long since given way to night and all was dark beyond the half-circle of light cast by powerful electric lamps fixed to the roof of the house. From where she stood Sara could see, to her right, the tall white gables of the dining-room, which was, she thought, an addition to the original homestead in that it lay at right angles to the main building and was of a slightly different type of architecture. The windows were long, with white shutters, and they faced a marble-floored verandah trellised with grapevines. Lights of subtle colours from golden-yellow through saffron to orange and amber illuminated the verandah, though the source of these lights was hidden, being cleverly masked within the foliage of the vines. Decorative pots held a variety of flowers—amaryllis and arum lilies, tuberoses, verbenas, coreopsis and several others which Sara could not make out, as they were at the far end of the verandah.

A light step behind her made Sara turn; Carl had entered the room and was now standing by the fireplace, his keen eyes taking in the fact that she had done her best to look respectable for the evening meal. He himself had changed into nothing more formal than a pair of brown linen slacks, a country-style shirt in handkerchief check and a tie with a heraldic design. It was obvious that he had considered her feelings and, quite unconsciously, she shot him a grateful glance. He smiled faintly and said,

'Dinner will be ready in about half an hour or so. Perhaps you would like a drink of something?'

'Yes, please.' Sara suddenly felt shy, but contrived a smile for all that. 'A dry sherry, I think.'

As he turned to go over to the cocktail cabinet she watched him, impressed by his air of confidence, the mastery displayed in his tall lean frame and the distinguished manner in which he carried it. She had already admitted to the superlative qualities of his looks and his physique, and she found herself making the same admission now. But this time, for some reason she could not explain, there was not the same reluctance in her admission.

He brought her the drink, contained in a delightful hand-engraved crystal glass. She smiled her thanks, saw to her surprise that his response came spontaneously. The interlude before dinner might not be so unpleasant after all, she thought.
CHAPTER FOUR

The dinner was served at eight o'clock, in an atmosphere of quiet elegance cleverly combined with sophistication. Apart from the two standard lamps giving out a muted rose-amber glow, the only illumination was from the candles set high in an ornate silver candelabrum in the centre of the table. Quiet music of the light classical kind was coming from a tape recorder in the hi-fi cabinet; suitably fine wines were on the sideboard, ready to be opened, while a bottle of champagne had been put into the ice bucket. Sara, conducted to her chair by Carl, who drew it out for her, found herself again in a state of unreality, her mind confused as it jostled with conflicting thoughts stimulated by the various aspects of Carl's character which she had seen today. From being a man unapproachable, austere, and almost rude in his attitude towards her, he had become thoughtful for her comfort, understanding of her embarrassment, gallant in his role as her host.

The first course, brought in by Anna on a silver tray, was shrimps mariette served piping hot. This was followed by loin of pork alsacienne; the sweet was apricot souffle, accompanied by iced champagne. Then came coffee and liqueurs served in the sitting-room, where the soft music could still be heard, extra speakers having been fitted in the four corners of the room. Sara, amazed at the cordiality existing between Carl and herself, could have wished the evening to go on for at least twice as long as it did. With a faint smile she recalled her previous intention of making her excuses immediately dinner was over and going to bed. Now, as she sat in the comfortable armchair drinking steaming coffee and sipping a liqueur, nothing was farther from her thoughts than putting an abrupt end to this most pleasant interlude. All her problems and heartaches had dissolved; she was in another world… a world of peace where nothing or no one could ever hurt her again.

Her thoughts brought a smile to her lips and Carl, happening to glance at her from over the rim of his brandy glass, asked her softly what she was feeling so happy about.

'It's the peace,' she answered at once, without really thinking that perhaps such a reply would puzzle him.

He lifted his eyebrows inquiringly.

'That's not very clear,' he said.

'There are no problems here,' she returned with a little sigh in her voice.

The lazy amber eyes flickered with an odd expression.

'Problems,' he said, 'are very often of one's own making.' Although he spoke mildly, enough, there was an undertone of contempt in his voice that could not possibly escape Sara's ears. She knew what he meant, and was angry with herself for her unthinking remark. To mention problems was to give him an opening to bring up the subject of Irma again.

'I wouldn't argue with you wholly, Mr van der Linden,' she said, offering him a smile in the hope that he would revert to his former pleasant manner with her. 'But I must say that many problems we encounter in life are definitely not of our own making.'

The amber eyes glinted, then scanned her face in a way that could only be described as censorious.

'It's my belief,' he said slowly and emphatically, 'that in your particular case the problems you have are of your own making.' So subtle the implication; this was a tactful approach but a direct one nevertheless. Disconcerted, Sara averted her head, sipping her liqueur. How long before he took the liberty of informing her that he knew she was in love with her sister's husband? Well, she intended to leave the ball in his court, but if ever he did decide to tell her what he knew, then she would most certainly take advantage of the opening and tell him the truth. He would learn that she had not come out to Njangola Farm in order to be near to Ray, but in answer to the appeal made by Irma; he would surely grasp, then, that all Sara's solicitude was centred on her unfortunate sister, that Irma's welfare was her chief concern and always would be. Carl would have to admit that Sara was neither so designing nor so bitchy as he had branded her.
She took another sip of her liqueur, her mind dwelling on what she had been thinking, going over it... and slowly, almost imperceptibly, the knowledge was borne upon her that she wanted Carl to change his opinion of her! Gone was her indifference regarding his conception of her character. What he thought of her really mattered!

Staggered by this admission, she looked covertly at him, seeing him differently from how she had seen him before, noting his chiselled good looks with a new kind of interest. What was wrong with her? she asked herself with slight impatience. Why should she have changed in her attitude towards him? Hitherto, he had merely been the neighbour who was proving useful to her brother-in-law, helping him over difficulties connected with the farm. As such, it was incumbent on Sara to extend to him a measure of politeness, which she dutifully did extend, but with an even greater measure of reluctance.

But now...

She sipped her liqueur again, aware that she was lightheaded. A swift calculation—which took her from the aperitif to the full-bodied Burgundy and on to the iced champagne and, lastly, to the Grand Marnier which she was now drinking—gave her rather a shock and she found herself asking the question, 'Am I tipsy?' Disgusted, she laid down the glass and picked up her coffee. Yes, she was tipsy, without a doubt, and that was the reason why she was feeling less hostile towards the man sitting there, looking so languidly comfortable, with his back against the soft velvet cushions, his long legs stretched out in front of him, and his half- narrowed eyes studying the tracery of light that marbled the surface of his cognac. She watched him tilt the glass; she looked at his eyes again and wondered what he was thinking. An enigmatic man, cool and confident and totally self-sufficient, he seemed to live for his work, although he did allow himself the recreation of playing polo and of attending the various functions which were held at the Glenview Club. Ray had said that he had a tennis court and a swimming-pool in his grounds here, but whether or not he used them Sara did not know.

Sensing her interest, he glanced her way. She coloured daintily and a smile fluttered. How charming he seemed! His severe features had softened, his eyes were smiling at her. She no longer found his mouth thin and ruthless, or his demeanour arrogant. In fact... she rather liked the man! Yes, he was quite nice, pleasant——— Her thoughts cut as she realised just how greatly affected she was by the alcohol she had consumed. Carl van der Linden was no different now from what he was at any other time! It was just that her vision was blurred!

Deciding that she could do worse than make a speedy retreat to her bedroom, she drained her coffee cup, placed it on the saucer, and a moment later she was mumuring a few quiet words which she fervently hoped did not betray the state she was in. Carl looked a little surprised, glancing at the clock as he said, 'Going to bed, at this time?'

She nodded as she rose from her chair.

'I'm very tired,' she returned, and took a couple of steps towards the door. Good lord! Her legs had never felt so weak!

'Goodnight, then——— ' Carl's voice checked; and saw his fine lips twitch, his eyes glimmer with amusement. Automatically she put cool hands to her cheeks. Why on earth hadn't she remembered that she was unused to taking more than one small sherry and one glass of table wine? How many times had Carl refilled her glass? She had no recollection of his refilling it at all, but she did remember drinking the wine—and thoroughly enjoying it! 'You——er —know the way to your room?' No mistaking the dry amusement now. The insufferable man was laughing at her!

She tilted her chin, and at the same time sent him a sparkling glance.

'I should hope so! I've been to it twice already!'

'Of course. However, just call out if you happen to get lost.' He watched the tightening of her mouth and gave a brief laugh as, leaning forward, he placed his brandy glass on the table in front of him. 'Do you know, Miss Morgan, anger makes you appear quite pretty.'

'You———!' She stopped, terrified that her legs would give way. 'Goodnight!' she said, and managed somehow to reach the door without losing one scrap of her dignity. Once through it she hastened away, thankful to be reaching her room without mishap. 'It was his fault,' she seethed as she stepped out of her denims and laid them over a chair. 'He did it on purpose!"
Which of course was not true, and she was soon admitting it. For how was he to know she couldn't take more than one glass of wine? It was the champagne, she decided, sitting on the edge of the bed and unbuttoning her shirt. It was very good, though, that sparkling wine they had drunk with the dessert. Did Carl always have it, even when he was alone? He had certainly drawn that cork with the expertise of one to whom the task was a regular occurrence.

Sara made her way to the bathroom, where she drank two glasses of cold water. That seemed better, but she was now conscious of a headache. Convinced that she would have difficulty in getting to sleep, she got dressed again, deciding that some fresh air would not come amiss.

The window of her room opened on to a verandah from where steps led to the patio fronting the room which she knew to be Carl's study. Would he be there? It was unlikely, she thought, seeing that she had left him comfortably relaxing in the sitting-room, listening to the music and enjoying his brandy.

The air was deliriously fresh and cool after the rain and the sky, which had so recently been cloud-laden, was filled with stars, and the crescent moon shone in their midst. Relieved to find that the effects of the wine were wearing off, Sara decided to take a short stroll in the grounds, but she had not gone very far when she became conscious of a sound behind her. She wheeled about, and came face to face with Carl.

'Oh…!' Her heartbeats increased, though she could see no reason why they should. 'I—I'm just taking the air.'

'Sobering up,' he suggested, uncaring for her feelings. 'I saw you come down the steps and felt I ought to keep an eye on you.' So casual! He might have been used to keeping an eye on females who'd had too much to drink!

Naturally Sara was embarrassed, but she contrived to sound as casual as he as she said,

'I have no idea why you should feel I need watching. I assure you I'm not sobering up, as you so impolitely put it.'

'Liar,' he returned softly. 'Why didn't you tell me you weren't used to it?'

She bit her lip. He was far too perceptive, this one!

'I think I shall return to my room,' she began, when he interrupted her.

'What made you come out? A headache?'

Sara gave a sigh of resignation. No use trying to fob him off, she decided, and said yes, she had a headache.

'I thought the fresh air would cure it,' she added, her eyes caught by fireflies glowing luminous in one of the bushes not far from where she and Carl were standing.

'A couple of tablets would be much more effective,' he told her. 'Come on back inside and I'll give you some.'

She hesitated, for although she had mentioned returning to her room, she was enjoying the fresh air, and the scent of the garden after the rain. It promised to be the kind of night she had so very much enjoyed when first she came to the farm. She had not slept very well, and would get up from her bed and go on to the stoep, her dressing-gown wrapped snugly around her. She had been excited by the magic of the African night with its velvet sky spangled with stars, with the enormous moon sailing among the wispy clouds, its argent light spraying the slumbering bushveld.

She looked up at Carl and said quietly, 'I'd rather stay out here for a while, if you don't mind?'

He seemed to frown in the darkness.

'But you've just expressed the intention of returning to your room,' he reminded her.

'I've changed my mind,' she said on a note of defiance.

'How like a woman! Still, it's her prerogative, so it's said. I shall walk with you,' he added, and fell into step beside her as she moved away.
They continued along the flagged path which eventually led to the swimming-pool. Sara stopped, her every nerve tensed. She had never felt quite like this, never been so profoundly aware of the attractiveness of a man. Ray had lit emotions she had never known before, but those were the kind of emotions she had been able to explain. These which she experienced now baffled her. She was excited, expectant, conscious of her heart beating a little too quickly. There was a strange inexplicable yearning within her which seemed all mixed up with the magic and the mystery of the night—the stars flaring in the sky and that clear-cut crescent moon, the whirring of cicadas in the trees, the distant drumbeat which only now penetrated her consciousness. It was just an echo, really, but primitive, haunting...

'Are you intending to remain here all night?' The voice, closer than she expected, drifted gently into her thoughts and she looked up into Carl's face. This was too unreal! She had no right to be here, in this magical setting, with a man as attractive as Carl van der Linden!

'No—er—no,' she stammered. 'I ought to—to be going back.'

'Ought?' with a faint lifting of his brows. 'What exactly does that mean?' He came closer; he was above her looking down and she knew instinctively that were she to move away he would reach out and bring her back. Every nerve quivered; she was vaguely aware that the effects of the wine had not worn off—not by my means! 'You haven't answered me,' said Carl very softly. 'Are you going back or aren't you?'

She swallowed, wondering why her throat felt so dry.

'I'm going back, of course,' and determinedly she moved, stepping to one side of the path so as to get past him. The atmosphere between them was electric, and her nerves were taut as, breathless, she prepared herself to resist should he act in the way she fully expected him to act.

'Not quite yet, my dear.' The voice seemed to be edged with sardonic amusement as his hand came forward to grasp her wrist. She twisted about in an attempt to release herself, but his strong brown fingers closed more firmly and a low, amused laugh escaped him as, with a swift and masterful jerk, he brought her protesting body close to his. Her mind was still fuddled, her thoughts hazy as a result, but she did make some effort to escape his lips as they came down to meet hers. With another masterful gesture Carl took her chin in his hand and forced her head up. She saw laughter in his eyes, felt the sensuous pressure of his body against hers, the commanding strength of the hand that was forcing her head up. And then his mouth touched hers, gently at first, caressing in its movement as he invited reciprocation. She swallowed hard, and made another feeble effort to free herself. And then she accepted that she was helpless in his embrace; she steeled herself for his kiss, one part of her angrily determined to allow him no satisfaction at all... but the other half actually contemplating surrender.

And surrender it was to be. His mouth, hard and sensuous, forced her lips apart in a kiss so ruthless and primitive that her already heightened emotions seemed to be set on fire. His arms about her, hard and inflexible as steel, crushed her tender body so that she felt sure it must be bruised. The strength of him was incredible; she made no attempt to combat it, but allowed his ardour to conquer any small mental resistance she might have been trying to sustain. She was soon carried to blissful heights, thrilling in the end to the sort of magnificent domination which he was so easily exerting, making her feel small and helpless... and yet she liked the sensation! Vaguely there flitted through her mind such things as common sense and rational thought, but these prosaic expressions were soon crushed beneath the rapture surging through her whole being.

'I rather thought I'd enjoy doing that,' said Carl when at last he held her at arms' length and regarded her with a sort of lazy satire from that incredible height of his. 'And it's easy to see that you derived a similar pleasure. We must do it again some time.' So casual! He was amused, too, and she had the humiliating impression that he had done this kind of thing many times before. His expression was clearly one of contempt—yes, even in this half-light she could make out that sneering curl of his mouth. Anger surged within her; her eyes blazed as she said, tilting her head to meet his gaze,

'You hateful cad! I hope you're proud of yourself!'

Carl gave a brief laugh, releasing her from the grip of his hands.
'Are you going to deny that you enjoyed that little interlude, Miss Morgan?'

Miss Morgan… How utterly absurd that sounded after what had taken place! And yet she would not have him address her in any other way. What had happened to her during those few irrevocable moments? She must have been mad—quite out of her senses… Yes, she admitted, colouring with shame, she had been out of her senses. She thought: I'll never touch a drop of wine again!

'I most certainly did not enjoy that—interlude, as you call it!'

'You little liar,' he accused softly, and he watched her colour increase, this time with discomfiture rather than actual shame. His lynx-like gaze held an expression of amusement as he added, still in that same soft tone of voice, 'You enjoyed it so much, my dear, that you'd have raised no objection if I'd decided to go a little further…'

'Oh!' She gritted her teeth, glowering up at him. 'What a detestable thing to say to me! And what an inflated opinion you have of yourself!' Tears of anger and mortification welled up behind her eyes, but her dominant emotion was one of bewilderment at her own action in allowing Carl to make love to her in that passionate, intimate way. She could have resisted, she told herself… but obviously she had not wanted to resist. 'You sp-speak to m-me as if I'm the kind of girl who would—would———!' A choking sob checked the last words; she turned abruptly from him as the tears rolled down her face. 'I'm going to my room—g-good- night!' And on that she sped along the path towards the steps leading to her bedroom. She heard Carl asking if she still wanted the tablets, but made no answer, and it was only when she had undressed and got into bed that she realised just how intensely painful her headache was.

The following morning she awoke to the sunlight streaming into the room and realised that she had not bothered to close the curtains the night before. Her head still ached and she wondered how she could have slept as soundly as she had. However, what really amazed her was that she had slept at all after what had taken place down there in the garden. How was she to face Carl this morning? The idea so appalled her that she would have crept surreptitiously from his home had that been at all possible.

By the time she had bathed and dressed she had collected herself sufficiently to be able to accept what was facing her with a certain amount of equilibrium. It was not the first unpleasant situation in which she had found herself and she did not suppose it would be the last.

She looked at herself in the mirror after combing her hair and applying the blusher and lip-rouge to her face as she had last night. Irma, despite her natural beauty, had always maintained that make-up gave a woman confidence, and this did appear to be a fact in this present situation, as Sara, when at last she was on her way to the breakfast-room, discovered to her astonishment that she had actually managed to assume an air of confidence which she hoped would remain with her, at least for the next half hour or so.

Carl was already there, looking immaculate even though he wore corduroys which were by no means new, and a checked shirt of several shades of blue from dark to pastel. His lazy amber eyes were without the amused satire she had expected to see in them; the fine lines of his mouth were unsmiling as he bade her good morning.

'Good morning, Mr van der Linden.' She moved to the chair he indicated, sat down unhurriedly and remarked on the weather. Carl sat down opposite to her, answered gravely, agreeing with her that it was a beautiful morning after the storm. And then he said, his eyes flicking over her face in a swift but examining glance,

'I trust you slept well, Miss Morgan?'

She nodded.

'Very well, thank you.'

Anna entered with bacon and eggs which she placed, in their silver dish, in the centre of the table.

Sara finished her grapefruit; Carl finished his and took the two glasses over to the sideboard.

'Can I serve you with bacon and eggs?' he inquired politely.
‘Yes, please—er—not too much.’ It was the strangest thing, but this attitude he was adopting disconcerted her far more than one of sardonic amusement—perhaps because she was far more used to seeing him in what she herself described as a disagreeable mood. This suave and polite manner seemed to be over-exaggerated and she wondered if, beneath it all, he was in fact amused. The idea gained strength as the meal progressed, with the result that the air of superb confidence which had clothed her like a protective mantle was beginning to fall away and she was becoming vulnerable to any change of demeanour which Carl might decide to display. She was suddenly filled with embarrassment; the whole disgraceful scene came back to her—Carl's mastery and her own lack of resistance to it; she looked at his face across the table and wondered if he were regarding her with deeper contempt now than ever before. If he knew she was in love with Ray—and she was very sure that he did know—then it was inevitable that he should be thoroughly despising her for her conduct last night. In love with one man but not averse to allowing another to make love to her! It was disgusting, and she had to admit that Carl had every reason for despising her.

‘You're not eating, Miss Morgan.’ Carl's voice drifted to her; she shook her head, wondering if the colour really had risen in her cheeks, or whether she just imagined that her self-disgust was making her blush.

‘I'm not hungry. I'm sorry I let you help me to the eggs and bacon.’

He looked at her, subjecting her to that kind of searching scrutiny that made her avert her head, hiding her expression from that shrewd and piercing regard.

‘Is there anything else that might tempt you?’ He seemed concerned, she thought—but then she was his guest, and so he would naturally want her to have some breakfast.

‘No, thank you,’ she answered in a low tone. ‘I'm not in the least hungry.’

‘More coffee?’

‘No, thank you.’ The position was becoming more and more embarrassing for her, and she toyed with the idea of making some excuse to leave him. But nothing feasible came to mind and after a few awkward moments she said, haltingly, ‘I will have some—some more coffee—if you don't mind…?’

Carl poured it for her, then pushed the sugar box towards her. He hesitated for a moment before saying, in a voice devoid of expression, ‘There really is no reason, Miss Morgan, for feeling the way you do. Have some breakfast; you'll feel much better when you've eaten something.’

‘I couldn't eat.’ The tears were close; she had no idea just how unhappy she looked, or how ashamed. She could not guess that Carl might be feeling a little bit sorry for her, even though his contempt was as strong as ever.

‘You know,’ he said after a pause, ‘with an incident like the one that occurred last night, there's apt to be an awkwardness of the kind which you're obviously experiencing. I assure you there's no need for this embarrassment, Miss Morgan. I've forgotten the incident, and I advise you to do the same.’

‘Forget it? You're asking me to forget it!’ Sara felt the tears stinging her eyes and strove to hold them back. ‘I shall never forget it—never!’

‘You're still blaming me?’

She shook her head almost instantly.

‘No—myself——’ Her lips twisted into a strained expression. ‘I'm not—not used to all that wine, you see.’ Her voice quivered as she added, ‘I should have refused it; I don't know what made me drink so much.’ She was brooding on it and Carl, frowning as if angry with himself, said rather kindly,

‘You worry too much, Miss Morgan. Come on, eat something—just a little toast and marmalade. I'm afraid I shan't be able to keep you company this morning as I have some work to do in my study. However, I'm sure you'll find amusement for an hour or two with my books. Irma was telling me you used to read a great deal at one time; I have a library which I shall show you in a few minutes. Browse as much as you like, and if there's anything you want to borrow then don't hesitate to tell me.’ His manner was friendly but casual; he picked up the toast rack with a languid
gesture and held it out to her. The effect of the way he was adopting with her acted like magic on her wrenched nerves, settling them immediately. Her tears, too, seemed to evaporate, her hand was surprisingly steady as, automatically, she reached forward to help herself to toast. She even managed a fluttering smile as she thanked him. He watched her for a space as she buttered her toast, then suggested that, when she had become tired of her own company in the library, she could go into the garden where, if she liked, she could talk to Masara, one of his gardeners, who would tell her the names of the flowers and trees.

'You know I'm interested in flowers and trees?' she asked in surprise.

'Irma told me that you've been trying to establish a garden at Njangola. As you've come from England I've taken it for granted that a good number of our plants here are unknown to you. If you take a look around my garden you'll be able to choose which plants you want to buy.'

'Thank you.' She fell silent, marvelling that Carl had been able so adroitly to dispel her embarrassment. Last night might never have happened, she thought. 'It's quite true that I've been trying to grow some flowers at Njangola, but it's difficult because Ray hasn't yet decided which ground he's intending to use for the vegetables and other produce for the house.' She could have added that she'd had little or no time for gardening, but she refrained. 'I'd very much like to take a look at your gardens. Ray's told me how beautiful they are.' She would look at the gardens before going into the library, she decided, for although the sun was shining in a clear sky, it might just start to rain again.

'Usually they're attractive, but you certainly won't be seeing them at their best today, not after the battering they received yesterday. However, with the larger plants, and especially the trees, it's surprising how soon they recover. The sun's been up for three hours already and you'll find that, although as I said the garden won't be at its best, many of the flowers will have dried off.'

Soon afterwards she was outside, gasping in wonderment at the sheer beauty of Carl's gardens. As he had predicted, the flowers on the larger trees had dried off. Masara, delighted at the idea of taking Sara round, spoke almost lovingly about some of the trees. He told her that the beautiful flamboyant tree on the edge of the lawn was also known as the flame of the forest and the royal poinciana. It was in bloom now, a huge scarlet umbrella with dense clusters of brilliant red petals—but one petal in each bloom was white. The jacaranda was also in bloom, but its pretty bell-like flowers had already begun to fall, forming a blue carpet beneath it.

Masara moved on, leading the way; he named the flowers in the borders—the heliconias and allamandas, the passion flowers, the chenille plants and numerous others, all contributing either colour in incredible bursts all over the border, or lovely foliage to enhance the picture still further.

At last Sara left the garden and went along to the library, where she spent a couple of hours, which brought her to lunch time. Carl came into the library, and stood by the door, tall, immobile, and too attractive by far.

'Well, have you enjoyed your morning? I'm sorry I couldn't be with you, but I saw that Masara was doing very well as your guide.' Cool tones and polished. He was a very different man from the one he had been last night, and it seemed impossible that he had shown so much feeling, so much ardour. This man before her now, impersonal and with a mask-like expression, was as unapproachable as he had ever been, his amber eyes were as indifferent in their gaze, the thin mouth unsmiling, the jawline implacable.

'I've enjoyed it very much indeed, thank you.' Sara adopted her old manner of coolness, in order to match his. They were back to where they had begun, it seemed; she felt that last night would never be mentioned again by either of them. And, strangely, she was scarcely embarrassed about it now. She knew instinctively that Carl would never even think of it again, which meant that he would never remind her of it even by a look. 'Shall I be able to go home immediately after lunch?'

He nodded casually.

'The sun's rather hotter than is usual at this time of the year, so the road might just have dried sufficiently for me to take the Land-rover over it without too much difficulty.'

'I do thank you, Mr van der Linden,' she said sincerely. 'I'm very grateful indeed to you.'
'There's no need to be,' he returned, rather abruptly, she thought. 'You were stranded and you came to me for help. My action in assisting was as natural as yours in approaching me. I'd have done it for anyone—just as you yourself would.'

She nodded, feeling snubbed, and inexplicably depressed because of it. Carl van der Linden had done something to her during these hours she had been with him—and she felt she would never be quite the same girl as she was this time yesterday.

The following Saturday Sara dressed for the club dance with rather more care than usual. The reason for this hovered at the back of her mind but was determinedly kept there. It had been a tiring day and one that had left her feeling exceptionally low in spirits. Irma had had one of her fault-finding moods; Sara's patience had been tried to its utmost but had not quite reached the state of exhaustion. Ray's patience on the other hand had snapped very soon, and the result was the first actual quarrel that had taken place between him and his wife. It left Irma weeping distractedly, Ray feeling so guilty that he had taken himself off somewhere, leaving work which was vitally important, and as for Sara, she scarcely knew how she kept her own tears from flowing as she tried to comfort her sister. Irma had repeatedly said that she wanted to die; she had spoken wildly about the accident, blaming Ray because, she declared, he ought to have known the runabout was not in a roadworthy condition. And then she had said, breaking away from Sara's comforting arms,

'I'll bet if it had been you who was going out in it he'd have tested it first!'

Sara had said nothing, but the words had gone deep, another stabbing reminder of her own position. For one angry moment she had almost decided to pack her things and leave, but Irma was already apologising—or trying to—for her sobs were racking her whole body, rising from the very depths of her, preventing anything like intelligible speech.

Ray had returned at last, and gone in to his wife's room. A quarter of an hour later, looking haggard and weighted down with worry, he had told Sara that the quarrel was made up. It had been his turn to have a night out, but he said, a sigh on his lips,

'I'll stay with Irma tonight, naturally. You get yourself dressed up and go to the Club.'

She had hesitated, but not for long. She needed to get out of the house, and in any case Irma would not want her, not when her husband was willing to spend the evening with her.

Sara had asked Ray to have his evening meal with Irma and he had agreed. Sara had put an especial effort into the cooking, and the setting of the two trays. She had the gratification of seeing Irma smile, of hearing her say,

'This looks delicious. You're so clever with making things look pretty———' she had fingered the tiny flower arrangement which Sara had put on her tray. 'A little garden in an eggcup! I wish I could keep it as a souvenir.'

After dining alone Sara had gone to her room to take a bath and get dressed, leaving Sadie and Makau, the houseboy, to clear away the dinner things; The warm water was soothing both to body and mind, but Sara was naturally in a state of deep dejection, telling herself one moment that she would have to leave Njangola, but the next moment the picture of Irma was there, Irma who needed her desperately.

Ray had thoughtfully brought the ranch wagon to the front of the house for her, and he stood there while she got in and pressed the starter.

'It's amazing that it didn't take any harm,' she said as the engine caught right away. 'It really was buried when we looked at it on our way here.'

'I've an idea that Carl, after he'd got his boys to haul it out of the mud, got one of them to give it a going over. He told me he has one boy who loves to tinker with anything mechanical.' Ray stepped back as Sara prepared to move.

'Have a nice time. I wish I were———' 

He stopped abruptly, lifted a hand, then walked slowly into the house.'
'I wish I were coming with you…' That was what Ray had been going to say. He did not really want to be with his wife, then? And after that dreadful quarrel which had left Irma so achingly distracted that she had wanted to die.

The ranch wagon moved away from the house towards the path which had caused Sara so much trouble only a few days previously. Once away from it, and on the main road, Sara forced herself to forget what she had left behind and to look forward to an evening's relaxation at the Club. It would be time enough to shoulder her burdens again tomorrow morning, when another unpredictable day would begin. Often after one of her unhappy moods Irma would be a little brighter, as if she really were making some effort to accept her situation, so perhaps tomorrow would be a lot more comfortable than today had been.

When eventually Sara turned into the Club grounds she had successfully cast aside her problems, and as she entered the lounge she was able to greet the people she knew with a smile. She had previously met Greta and Hal Drake, both of whom were artists, and who lived in one of the attractive bungalows situated on the outskirts of the town. They came up to Sara now and invited her to join them for a drink. They were soon joined by a young man Sara had met previously, Bernard Kirkby who was single and living with his sister and her husband, helping them on their farm for part of the time and being employed by Carl at the weekends. He had confided to Sara that he was working hard to save enough for a holding of his own, hence the long hours he so willingly put in.

'Hello, Sara! It's nice to see you!'

'And nice to see you,' she returned spontaneously, looking with undisguised pleasure into his plump, good-humoured face.

'Would you consider me rude, I wonder, if I remarked on your dress? It's absolutely smashing! You look sixteen in it!'

Sara flushed slightly, but grimaced as well. Greta tilted her head sideways as if to be considering the statement just made by Bernard.

'Sixteen, eh? Well, you might well be right.'

'I'm quite sure he isn't right,' from Sara with emphasis. Nevertheless, she knew the dress, with its attractive colour of midnight blue, its long full skirt and high neck trimmed with narrow white lace, did make her look younger than she was. Both Ray and Irma had told her this. 'In any case,' added Sara, 'I don't want to look sixteen.'

'The age of no real problems,' murmured Greta on a dreamy, nostalgic note.

So true, agreed Sara to herself. She glanced around, looking for Carl. He had not yet arrived—unless he was in the other room, dancing already. Some people would be dancing, she realised, for the music was playing.

After a while Bernard asked Sara to get up with him.

The next dance she had was with Hal, and the next with Bernard again. Carl had still not arrived.

At half-past ten Sara announced her intention of going home. Bernard, looking disappointed, tried to persuade her to stay a little while longer but she shook her head.

'I'm tired,' she told him… but to herself she had to admit that the evening had been flat almost from the start.

Carl van der Linden, the man she did not like very much at all, had not put in an appearance…
I was saying, a week or so ago, that you needed some sort of a break.' Ray had joined Sara in the garden, where she was cutting flowers for her sister's room. 'Will you promise me you'll think about it?'

'Why, Ray? I said I wasn't tired.'

'I'm so terribly afraid you'll leave here.'

. She shook her head.

'Not until Irma tells me to go,' she promised.

'Not until———?' Ray looked at her in surprise. 'You sound as if you're half expecting Irma to tell you to go.'

Sara turned away, intending to stoop and cut another rose. But Ray unexpectedly reached out and brought her round to face him.

'Ray, what———?'

'She's been saying something to you. I demand to know what it is!'

She quivered beneath his touch, casting down her eyes swiftly lest he should read the secret of her heart.

'She gets morbid at times, as you know. I don't take any notice—at least, not much notice,' she amended, managing to free herself from Ray's grasp. He said nothing for a moment and Sara began cutting the flowers again and dropping them gently into the basket she carried over her arm.

'What does she talk about during these morbid spells?' asked Ray at length.

'Oh——er———'

'The truth, Sara!' Ray's voice was almost threatening; Sara was seeing a new side of him altogether.

'She becomes upset about you and herself, getting the stupid idea that you'll eventually stop loving her.' There, it was out, forced from her against her will, but perhaps it was as well. Ray might give Irma a little more of his time from now on.

He moved silently away, to stand with his back to a tree, regarding Sara with a strange expression on his handsome face.

'You consider it a stupid idea, then?' he said softly at last.

'That you might fall out of love with her? Yes, of course I do I' Her tones were vehement; she was under no illusions as to why this was. She was trying to convince herself, not Ray.

'I did say to you that love couldn't last,' he began, when Sara, frightened and angry, interrupted him.

'You asked me how long love could last,' she corrected.

'Well, we'll not split hairs about that,' he returned casually. 'Irma's changed since the accident. She's become a termagant, a female whose only pleasure in life is in voicing complaints. Is she ever grateful for anything either you or I do for her?'

'She has so much to bear,' Sara reminded him, her memory jarred by that quarrel which had taken place between Irma and Ray, a quarrel which, declared Irma, had caused a rift that would never be closed. 'You should be kinder to her, Ray.' Sara's voice was gentle, persuasive. There was pain in her eyes because of the bitterness in his. It seemed of vital importance that he should be brought out of his present state of mind. That he was still in love with his wife
she did not doubt, but she also sensed that his love was weakening. And if it died altogether, what then? While his love still remained there were no major complications, since he had no idea that Sara was in love with him. But, should he come to lose the love he had for his wife he might then turn his attention to Sara, in which case complications were bound to result for, strong as she was, Sara had no illusions that, should Ray come to love her, she could resist a confession of her own love for him.

That was as far as it would go—but Sara was determined to do all in her power not to allow even this to occur. Irma needed her husband's love more than anything else at this time, needed it desperately because of her doubts, the doubts she had voiced to Sara. She was living with those doubts, so obviously needed reassuring the whole time. After Ray's love she needed that of her sister, and Sara was prepared to give her whole life, if need be, for Irma.

'She has a great deal to bear, granted,' Ray was saying. 'But surely she could, just now and then, express a word of gratitude?'

'I don't care for gratitude being extended to me, Ray. I do what I do for Irma because I love her and, secondly, because I feel it's my duty to care for her.'

'So you won't run out on me?'

'On you?' she frowned. 'I shan't run out on Irma, if that's what you really meant to say.'

'This break,' he said, resorting to his previous query. 'Are you prepared to take one? There are trips to the coast which can be booked in Paulsville—sort of package deals, they are. I saw them advertised the other day when I drove in for those fertilisers I was telling you about.'

'I don't want to go off on my own, Ray.'

He hesitated a moment and then,

'Carl and I were talking about it,' he admitted. 'His mother's living in Diera, near the coast ————'

'His mother?' broke in Sara, diverted. 'I didn't think he had a mother.'

'No? Why not?' inquired Ray in some surprise.

'I can't imagine what gave me the idea that he has no parents. Perhaps it's because he's never mentioned them.'

'He has no father. If he had he wouldn't be in possession of Ravenspark, and all the lands that go with it.' Ray looked at her. 'As I was saying, Carl and I talked about you. He said you needed a rest ————'

'Do you mean to say,' interrupted Sara for the second time, 'that Mr van der Linden actually suggested I go and stay with his mother?' What was Carl's reason? wondered Sara. He must have one, that was for sure.

'I know you don't like him,' said Ray, 'but that's nothing to do with it, really. He himself should have visited his mother who, from what I can gather, hasn't been too bright lately and desires company. She lives alone except for her servants. He paused as if to ascertain whether or not he had managed to arouse her interest. 'Carl's mother left Ravenspark on the death of her husband,' continued Ray as Sara looked interrogatingly at him, wondering why he had stopped speaking. 'She went to live nearer to her brother's widow, but this woman died recently and Mrs van der Linden seems to be depressed. She asked Carl to go and visit her and he promised to do so, but a young woman who was once his ward has written to say she's on her way to Ravenspark, but is calling for short spells at one or two places on the way. Carl was annoyed, as he hadn't been previously warned of the girl's intended visit. But apparently he has no means of putting her off, simply because she hasn't provided him with any addresses. She's merely stated her intention of phoning him the day before she's due to arrive here. I was saying how worried I was about you, and that I felt you needed a rest ———— '

'So he suggested I have a holiday with his mother?' broke in Sara incredulously. 'I can't believe it!' Nor could she believe he had ever had a ward, but obviously he had.
'You ought not to be so surprised,' said Ray casually. 'They do things like that here; it's the traditional hospitality. Carl's already been in touch with his mother by telephone and she'll be delighted to have you for a week or so.'

'Irma won't want me to go off and leave her for all that time. Nor do I myself relish the idea of going to a total stranger.' Sara found herself searching for Carl's reason for this amazing offer. They had met three times since her stay with him; neither he nor she had acted in any way differently from the way they had acted towards each other before. Certainly that incident in their lives was to be regarded by them both as of no importance whatsoever. It had faded into insignificance; its cause had been a few glasses of wine too many—on Sara's part, that was. She felt an overwhelming relief that it had been blotted out from Carl's memory so easily. As for herself, she had too much to do for her sister to be able to dwell on anything else at all.

Ray was looking at her, obviously expecting her to add to what she had been saying. She told him that she did not need a rest and a change, reminding him that she had not been here for any appreciable length of time.

His eyes were troubled as, looking squarely at her, he asked if she could honestly say that her time had not dragged, that she hadn't said to herself, more than once, that it seemed more like a year and a half than a month and a half since she came out to Njangola Farm. Taken by surprise that he should be so astute, Sara gave herself away by her very inability to find an answer. Ray nodded thoughtfully and said yet again that he was afraid she would decide to leave.

'This is the sole reason for my wanting you to take a break, Sara. Waiting on Irma the way you do, taking over the cooking and the general running of the house—well, it must amount to sheer drudgery after the easy and pleasant job you had before.'

Sara was quite unable to voice a denial; life was without doubt one of drudgery, and it was boring, too, for although she was busy all the time she had certainly to admit that time dragged. However, she decided that she could not leave Irma, and in any case, she told Ray, she had no intention of dumping herself on a stranger for a week.

'You won't be dumping yourself,' returned Ray with an unexpected flash of humour. 'You do have the most unattractive way of putting things at times!'

'Carl's mother might not like me.'

'You might not like her, but at least you can go and see.'

'You sound as if you're trying to get rid of me,' she just had to say. Her eyes were on his handsome face; her heart quickened. It was one of those rare moments when she allowed herself the luxury of forgetting that he was her brother-in-law and seeing him as the man she loved. But the twisting of her emotions was excruciating... the pleasure-pain that unrequited love can bring.

'Perhaps it does seem like that to you,' Ray was spying. 'But quite honestly, Sara, I feel you should get away from Irma for a while.'

It was just over a week later, as she drove the runabout into Paulsville, that Sara began seriously to consider Ray's proposition. Yes, it would do her good to get away from Irma—who had been so try yesterday that Sara had developed the kind of sick headache that by rights should have sent her to bed for an hour or so, but of course there had been no time for such self-pampering as that. It would do her good to get away from Ray, too, thought Sara, as it was so trying, seeing him constantly, feeling that her love was strengthening when all she desired was to discover that it was dying—slowly, perhaps, but very surely. Who, though, would look after Irma? There had been a nurse from Paulsville coming every day prior to Sara's arrival, but Irma confided afterwards that it was her intense dislike of this woman that had been one of the reasons for her sending for Sara. Still, it would only be for one week, mused Sara, her mind on Ray and the way he could look after his wife when he really wanted to. As gentle as any woman, he could tend her, with the same care and compassion as did Sara herself. He would murmur things she liked to hear, would drop a kiss on her forehead now and then as he straightened the bed covers or punched up the pillows.

Yes, mused Sara as she drove slowly into Paulsville, Ray would be able to cope—with the help of Sadie and the houseboy, of course.
After parking the runabout she went off to the chemists, then to the stationers for a few items Ray wanted, and for notepaper and envelopes for Irma. She had got these and was looking at the paperback books with the intention of buying one or two for her sister, when she was suddenly hailed by Bernard, who had just entered the shop.

'Hello, there! Are you buying up the place?'

'Bernard! It's nice to see you!' Sara turned with a ready smile on her lips.

'And it's nice to see you! I was disappointed not to find you at the Club dance on Saturday.'

'My sister wasn't very well, so I stayed with her.'

'Ray came, though.' Bernard's voice was as blank as his expression. Either he was being tactful, by not allowing his thoughts to be betrayed, or he was puzzled by the fact that it was not Ray who was looking after his wife.

'Ray's been working very hard,' she told him. 'He really did need the break.'

Bernard nodded slowly.

'It must be very trying, having an invalid in the house all the time. I shall never forget how shocked we all were when that accident happened. The lovely wife of our latest recruit to farming around here, crippled for life! It devastated us all for a week or more.'

Sara said nothing. Irma was more than a cripple; she was totally without the ability to move on her own two legs. If she would agree to try one of the wheelchairs… But as yet she flatly refused to be seen propelling herself about. If she had to be helpless, she said, she would be helpless in private.

Bernard had done all his shopping, which was in reality for his sister, and he asked Sara if she would care to join him for a cup of tea. She agreed, and after Bernard had carried her purchases back to her own vehicle, they entered the Club's grounds and sat at a table under the palms. They were drinking their tea when Carl came along, looking cool and arresting in a white open-necked shirt and a pair of white denim lacks. He stopped by their table to speak to Bernard, saying he would need him to work late on the following Saturday. Bernard was delighted and Sara felt that it would not be too long at all before he had saved enough money to buy his own small farm.

'Are you joining us for tea?' invited Bernard. 'We've only just started.' Carl agreed, and beckoned to a passing waitress.

'How is your sister?' he inquired after giving his order. 'I haven't been able to get over to Ray's place for the past day or two, but I shall come over tomorrow, and I'll sit with Irma for a while.'

Still concerned about Irma, thought Sara, her mind acutely alive to what Irma had said recently, in between the sobs in one of her bouts of weeping.

'I want to die! And I shall! The opportunity'll come —when you and Ray aren't so alert!' Later, after Sara had managed to soothe her with patience and gentleness and compassionate murmurings, Irma had looked at her full in the eyes and said, 'It would be better for everyone if I faded out of this life… and out of the way of other people's happiness.' What she meant was that, if she died, then Sara and Ray would be able to get together. Sara had gone away and wept; a terrible weight settled on her mind which had remained with her for the rest of the day.

A movement brought Sara's mind back to the present; the waitress was serving Carl with his pot of tea. He was staring at Sara, reminding her of his question.

'Ima's better today,' she said. 'Yesterday she was unhappy… it was a difficult time for us…' Her voice trailed off, for she had not meant to say anything like that. Carl was bound to read a complaint in her words. But the contempt was not in evidence—in fact, come to think of it, she had not been subjected to it on any of Carl's recent visits.

He was pouring his tea, his expression thoughtful. Bernard spoke, bringing her attention from Carl.
I've never thought, Sara—but perhaps I could come along some time and spend an hour with Irma?'

Sara's eyes brightened, a circumstance which did not escape Carl's notice.

'Would you, Bernard? Oh, I'd be most grateful if you came only for an hour once a week!'

He bit his lip, saying he ought to have thought of it a long time ago.

'I'll come tomorrow afternoon, if that's all right with you——— No, if Carl's coming I'll choose another day.

How about Thursday?'

'That'll be fine. She'll be delighted when I tell her.'

'Hardly delighted,' from Carl in that finely-timbred voice of his. 'You must expect, Bernard, to find Irma depressed—very depressed. Obviously she'll look forward to your coming, but it's better if you realise that visitors relieve the monotony, nothing more.'

'Is that so?' Bernard looked pained. 'I hadn't realised she was so very low—and yet it's natural, I suppose,' he added. 'You yourself appear to know a lot about her,' he said in conclusion, looking at Carl.

'As I've told Miss Morgan, I've seen a case like Irma's before——— ' He stopped then and shrugged his broad shoulders. 'But we won't go into that. Just try to remember, Bernard, that if Irma seems morose you must hear with her. Please don't stop visiting her because of it. Once you start your visits you must keep them up. Irma's condition will be harmed if you begin visiting her and then stop; she'll straightaway assume she's bored you, that you've had enough of her.'

'I see...' from Bernard thoughtfully. 'I shall remember, Carl.' He glanced at Sara. 'I can spare an hour or so each week,' he assured her. 'And I'll get my sister to come—on another day, of course.'

'That's kind of you, Bernard. I do thank you.' Sara threw him a grateful smile, aware that Carl was watching her intently, an odd expression on his face.

A short while later Bernard, glancing at his watch, said apologetically that he would have to be getting back to see to the milking of the cows.

'You don't mind?' His glance embraced them both as he rose from his chair.

'No, certainly not,' affably from Carl. 'Give my regards to Richard and Emma.'

'I will. Perhaps Richard'll see you on Saturday? He's going to watch the polo match.'

'I shall be playing—all being well.'

'Okay, I'll tell him. So long for now!' Sara watched him disappear along the palm-fringed drive, feeling a trifle awkward at being alone with Carl. He was all suave composure—maddeningly self-possessed. And yet her resentment of his cool nonchalance was far less now than it had been during those weeks prior to her staying at his house. She had disliked him intensely without there being anything really concrete in her dislike. She had felt there would have been more satisfaction if only she could have put her finger on the cause of her dislike. Other than his arrogance, and the indifferent manner he had adopted with her, there was nothing much to which she could take exception. Afterwards, though, she had noticed his contempt, and naturally her dislike of him had increased.

He spoke to her, casually making conversation, and for a few minutes there was a polite interchange going on between them. Sara, watching him teeter back in his chair after he had finished his tea, wondered if he were becoming bored with her company. She picked up her shoulder-bag from the vacant chair beside her and prepared to leave. Then she remembered the bell she wanted to have fixed up for Irma and decided to ask Carl if he knew the address of the man who could take on the job. The amber eyes gleamed with interest, then flickered over Sara's face, down to the graceful curve of her neck and then to the firm youthful curves outlined beneath the crisp white blouse.
she was wearing.

'Yes, I know his address,' Carl answered, but added immediately, 'However, there's no need for Ray to go to any expense. I have a boy who loves to mess about with such things. He'll fix up something, using a battery.'

Sara thanked him with her eyes before saying,

'It's good of you, Mr van der Linden, to do all this for us. The bell does happen to be important, since there are occasions when I don't hear Irma when she calls.'

'And then she becomes fractious, I suppose.'

'You seem to know a great deal about her,' she said, unconsciously voicing words already spoken by Bernard.

'She interests me. In fact, the three of you up at Njangola interest me,' he added cryptically. Sara looked at him, saw the narrowed gaze fixed upon her, critical, challenging. She glanced away, focusing her eyes on the lovely scene where brilliant tropical flowers nodded in the breeze. The gardens of the Club were superbly kept, with shady walks and mossy little tracts which, when one was strolling in the dark, would be come upon quite unexpectedly. Perfumes from hidden places would assail the nostrils; fireflies would glisten and cicadas would send their music into the air. Now, basking in the sunshine, the flowers gave forth exotic beauty in addition to their colour and perfume. A clump of jacaranda trees with their mist-like blossoms hung like a blue veil over the roof of the summer-house, and beneath them masses of golden buttercups flaunted the light they had stolen from the great incandescent ball above. Closer to —just a yard or two from where she was sitting—a couple of miniature tree-frogs seemed to be playing hide-and-seek among the shiny leaves of a bush honeysuckle, and on a warm stone below, a lizard basked, still as a statue.

'Tell me,' murmured Carl at length, 'what are you thinking about, Miss Morgan?'

'My thoughts are private, Mr van der Linden.' This was out before she could stop it and she frowned to herself. She had not intended to sound so unfriendly, especially after he had just offered to see to the fixing of the bell for her sister.

'Are you usually so reticent, or is it only with me?' Carl spoke casually, as if her last remark had been deliberately treated more kindly than Sara deserved. But his question took her aback for all that. She looked questioningly at him and said,

'I don't quite know what you mean, Mr van der Linden?'

'The dumb blonde act, eh?' His mouth curved sardonically. 'Why do women, when asked a question they don't want to answer, adopt that air of bewilderment and say they don't understand, or they don't know what one is getting at?'

Sara did not know whether to laugh or to flash him a darkling glance. She did neither, maintaining an unmoving countenance as she said quietly,

'You're accusing me of prevarication, obviously?'

'Obviously.' He decided to pour himself another cup of tea and so fell silent for a space. Then: 'Has Ray mentioned anything about a projected visit to my mother?' he asked, changing the subject with an abruptness that startled her.

'Mr van der Linden,' she said emphasising every word, 'just why should you want me to pay a visit to your mother, whom I've never even met?'

'So Ray did speak to you about it. Then he explained, surely?'

'He said something about your mother not being too well and that she had been expecting you to pay her a visit. I fail to see how I can be any sort of a substitute,' she ended, watching his sun-bitten face closely and trying to read something from it.

'Ray said you were needing a rest and a change—and I myself agree———' He lifted a hand imperiously as she
would have interrupted. 'Resent my interference if you like, but if you're sensible you'll give this trip some thought. You'd not be happy in an hotel on your own, and as this business of my own visit has fallen through I made the offer to Ray because he seemed so anxious about you.' Here the voice became devoid of expression; Sara glanced away, deeply conscious of the fact that he was probably thinking about her being in love with Ray. 'It seemed a most convenient way of making several people happy,' he resumed presently.

Sara, still puzzled, put forward the very reasonable question, 'Supposing your mother doesn't like me? To be quite frank, if it were me, I'd not be at all easy about having a strange young woman thrust upon me.'

'No?' Carl was amused now. 'You don't know my mother! She loves to be with young people; she's happy meeting new people of any age. She's a psychologist, so she'll analyse you. It's a hobby of hers which I've long since given up trying to bully her into dropping. You'll like my mother,' he added, and the glimmer of a smile broke, easing the hardness of his features. 'She isn't anything like her son, if that's what's troubling you.'

'You just had to say that, didn't you?' Sara could not help retorting.

'I was merely endeavouring to put your mind at rest regarding my mother. It's so easy to get the wrong impression of someone by comparing them with a relative. Rest assured, when you meet my mother you'll have the greatest difficulty in believing she produced a son like me.'

Sara, watching him with suspicion, could scarcely believe that he was actually teasing her! And yet there was no denying the hint of humour still lurking in those amber eyes.

'I must admit,' she said at last, 'that your mother sounds nice.'

'You'll have that holiday with her, then?'

'I'm still very puzzled as to why you should be interested in my welfare———-.' She stopped, colouring a little, then added rather quickly, 'What I meant was, you scarcely know me, and I wouldn't have thought you would be concerned about———-.' Again she stopped, embarrassed and unsure of herself.

'Miss Morgan,' said Carl quietly and imperturbably, 'I am not concerned about your welfare, but I am concerned over my mother's disappointment in not having her visitor, which of course was to have been me. If you go you'll be doing me a favour, but I also feel that you'll be doing yourself some good by taking the break.' He paused a while and for some inconceivable reason Sara felt that he was suppressing anger. 'Ray will have to give more time to his wife, which should be good for both of them.' Grimness edged his voice as he ended. Sara suddenly wondered if his real aim was to get her away from Ray… Yes, she felt sure that this was his reason for the suggestion that she should take the holiday with his mother. But why was he so very interested in the situation at Njangola Farm, or the problems of its occupants? He could never in a million years be branded meddlesome—on the contrary, he had an innate aloofness which, at first, had gone far to setting Sara against him. It was too much of a puzzle, decided Sara, admitting that there was nothing to be gained by dwelling on it when it was quite impossible to understand it anyway.

She was intrigued, though, by Carl's description of his mother and by the idea that she would be ready to have a stranger staying as a guest in her home. This, along with the recently formed conviction that the break really would do her good, and the idea of Ray's having to spend more time with his wife, made Sara's decision far less difficult than she had at first supposed. And when Carl asked again if she was prepared to take the holiday she found herself saying yes without any further hesitation at all. Then, womanlike, she asked about the kind of clothes she would need.

'Oh, slacks and shirts——what you wear here,' was his casual reply. 'Mother likes to dine out now and then, though, so you'd better take something feminine as well.'

'Meaning a long dress?'

'Or a long skirt and one of those frilly tops———-.' He
Hopped, eyes flickering over her as he shook his head. 'No, you don't want frills! You'd look like a scarecrow on exhibition. You'd look better in———'

'Thank you very much!' snapped Sara, conscious that two spots of angry colour had come instantly to her cheeks. 'I haven't been likened to a scarecrow before!'

The amber eyes actually laughed.

'No? Well, there's always a first time. You're thin, so why not admit it?'

'It's a darned sight better than being fat!' She glowered at him, at the same time staggered by the way the conversation had turned, the cool politeness having given way to what could only be termed outright rudeness on both their parts. 'Do you always go out of your way to be insulting to my sex?'

'Was I insulting? Maybe you're right. I apologise.' So casual that the apology entirely lost its meaning. 'And now, back to this question of clothes which seems to be of such major importance to you. Take something to wear on the beach and, as I said, slacks and shirts. Good lord, girl, you don't want me to advise you on clothes!' His glance was frowning; he seemed impatient with himself for what he plainly considered a lapse of dignity.

'I'm sorry. I merely asked because I didn't know if I should be called upon to do any work.'

'Work?'

'Tasks—you did say that your mother was not too well, and as I'm a trained nurse…' Sara allowed her voice to fade as he shook his head.

'She's been upset by the death of her relative, naturally, and was off-colour in consequence. But there's no sign of any physical illness—at least,' he added with a sudden knitting of his brows, 'I hope there isn't.'

'When shall I be going?' Sara wanted to know a little while later when, Carl having finished his tea, they were ready to leave the café.

'That's up to you, and Ray.'

'Irma doesn't know anything about the idea yet,' Sara told him uneasily. 'If she doesn't care for it I shan't be able to go, of course.'

A strange silence followed before Carl said, 'I don't think you need have any worries on that score, Miss Morgan. Irma will be very happy to see you

'Happy?' Tingles ran along Sara's spine. She was fully convinced that Carl had, by some subtle means, tested out her sister's feeling about Sara's going away from Njangola Farm for a while. 'What reason have you for saying that?'

'I feel that Irma knows you're in need of a rest,' was all he said, and although Sara would dearly have liked to pursue the matter she realised by the implacable tone of his voice that he would not take kindly to answering any questions she might consider asking him.

At the car park they said goodbye; she watched him stride away to where his own car was parked, under the trees and out of the sun. Dust from the ground rose as another car drove away, then more dust as a station wagon left the car park. Carl strode on, a majestic figure, upright, slim, with the spring-like step of an athlete. He swung sideways as two naked piccanins came running from behind a wall and almost collided with him, then he passed beneath the shade of a tall eucalypt and proceeded along by a cactus hedge. The breeze caught his dark hair and she saw him lift a hand to put its tousled disorder to rights again. He was almost at his car when Sara turned away, to open the door of the runabout. Her face was thoughtful, her eyes pensive. Strangely, her mind had cleared totally of the picture of Ray, and her own desires that had never crystallised, and instead it was the picture of Carl's arrogant face with its hard eyes and inflexible mouth which was fixed in her mind. She was stirred by a restlessness she failed to understand, by the sensation of having a new vista opening out to her. She was vitally conscious of a lifting of her spirit, of an exciting feeling of expectancy which dispelled—for the present at least—all her dejection.
'What's the matter with me?' she was asking herself as she drove along the dusty road where royal palms swayed in the breeze and little dark children played beneath them, waving delightedly to her as she passed. 'Why does everything seem bright and sunny all at once?'

It was wonderful to feel light-hearted like this! Almost from the first day at the farm she had known the full weight of unhappiness. Now, even Irma's plight seemed not to be such a burden on her; in this new uplifting sensation there seemed to be hope shining anew; Sara could actually see her sister walking again!

She was humming a tune as she entered the house; Irma called to her and she went into the cheerful, flower-filled room. The scent of roses met her nostrils as she moved to draw the curtains across the window, shielding Irma from the full glare of the sun. She turned; Irma was actually smiling!

'Want something, love?' asked Sara.

'I just wondered where you were. I don't think I want the curtains closed.'

'Okay! Let the sunshine come in!' Sara drew the curtains aside again, her appreciative eyes settling for a moment on the view—the open grasslands and hills winging away towards the mountains, the valley and the silver river, the eucalyptus plantation in which Carl's boys could be seen moving about.

'You're very cheerful today,' commented Irma from the bed. 'Had a fortune left to you, or something?'

A fortune… What would she spend it on? First and foremost, she would search the whole world to find a doctor who could help her sister.

'No, not a fortune. But it's true that I'm cheerful; some days are like that.'

'Where have you been this afternoon?' asked Irma curiously.

'Into Paulsville.'

'On your own?'

Sara frowned.

'Of course. I drove myself in the runabout.'

'Ray hasn't been around all the afternoon. I thought perhaps he was with you.'

Sara sighed, and there was a moment of distress in her eyes before she said, 'Ray's been busy repairing damage done during that terrible storm we had.'

'He's been long enough about it.'

'There was a lot of damage, Irma. Carl's sent some of his boys over each day and they're helping too.'

Irma leant back against the pillows; she reached for a box of chocolates and took off the lid, her lovely eyes roving over them until eventually she picked out a coffee cream and popped it into her mouth.

'I wonder why you're so happy today,' she murmured almost to herself.

Sara hesitated. Should she tell Irma that she was thinking of taking a holiday? No, better let Ray put it to her, and see what her reactions were. If Irma seemed in any way unhappy then Sara was determined to tell Carl she could not go.

'You're rather happier yourself,' she observed, turning the tables on her sister.

'I feel a little happier, I admit. Don't ask me why, Sara, since I couldn't tell you. I expect I shall be feeling as low as can be by this time tomorrow, though,' she added with a sigh.
'I've got your notepaper and envelopes, plus a couple of paperbacks which looked interesting,' Sara smiled, sincerely hoping that Irma would not be feeling low by this time tomorrow.

'You're good to me, Sara.' A wistful note crept into Irma's voice as she added softly, 'I don't deserve your tender care. I'm an ungrateful bitch—and I know it.'
To Sara's surprise Irma was in fact happy at the idea of her going away for a holiday.

'It'll do you the world of good,' she said with a smile. 'After all, you haven't had your annual holiday, not with coming out here, to look after me.'

Ray appeared to be happy, but Sara rather thought that, deep down, he was feeling somewhat depressed. Nevertheless he adopted a cheerful attitude, and when he left her at the airport he told her to have a good time and not to bother her head about Irma or himself. They would manage very well, he assured his sister-in-law as he waved her a smiling goodbye.

A chauffeur-driven car awaited Sara at the other end of her journey and she sank into the soft upholstery with rather mixed feelings, being on the one hand content with the luxury offered but on the other hand naturally a little apprehensive at the idea of meeting Carl's mother. True, Carl had assured Sara that she did not resemble him, but he had also said—perhaps jokingly—that his mother would analyse her guest... and the last thing Sara wanted was to be analysed. She had always avoided fortune-tellers like the plague, unashamedly admitting that she was afraid of what they might tell her.

'I recall,' she murmured to herself, 'our neighbour, Mrs Weald, once saying that fortune-tellers and the like were only able to tell you what you told them. They had a subtle way of questioning you so as to gain information. You gave it, quite unknowingly, and then when they began telling you things you were amazed.'

So the thing was not to tell Carl's mother anything about herself, and then she would not be so clever at her game of analysis. True, analysing a person was not quite the same as telling her fortune, but undoubtedly the two were related.

The chauffeur was an African and after a while he began to chat over his shoulder, asking Sara how long she had been in Africa.

'Eight weeks,' she replied, and his next question was naturally that of whether she liked it or not. 'I like it well enough, what I've seen of it,' she added a trifle vaguely.

'Mrs van der Linden says you are here to look after your sister, who had an accident and lost the use of her legs?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'It is a terrible thing for a young lady to be an invalid.'

'Very terrible.' Sara, surprised at the excellence of his English, was not averse to hearing more of it. 'Although her doctors have stated quite definitely that my sister will never walk again I myself can't accept that.'

The man nodded, his jet black hair appearing to have a blue tinge as the curls caught the sun's rays filtering into the car through the side window.

'You are an optimist, miss, as I am myself. One should never give up hope.'

Sara said nothing for a space; she was conscious of a certain pleasure in the African's company and knew she was going to like him. She asked about his family, found he had a wife and two grown-up sons. His job was, he laughingly told Sara, that of chauffeur, gardener, handyman and general errand-boy.

'But you obviously enjoy it,' she said, and the man instantly nodded.

'It's an excellent job, envied by my friends. But the van der Lindens were always known for their generosity to their servants. They pay well and in return expect the very best.'

'Which is only fair.'
At last the car turned into a tree-lined road, a quiet road of fine detached houses standing in their own mature grounds. This was a part of Africa so different from what Sara had seen that she gave a little gasp of surprise. Somehow, she had not expected anything quite so sophisticated as this. The chauffeur—whose name she had just learned was Joshua—turned the car into a wide drive and it scraped to a halt.

'Here we are, miss. I hope you enjoy your stay.'

'Thank you,' smiled Sara, turning to view the attractive house with its wide windows, prettily shuttered but at present shaded by gay orange and green linen sun blinds, their fluted edges moving in the breeze. Tall palms made an avenue to one side of the house, while a border of glowingly exotic blooms framed the house on the other side and at the front. Sara was soon to learn that the back garden was given over to an orchard, mainly, with oranges, lemons and many other fruits flourishing under near-perfect conditions.

Joshua led the way to the front door, which was flung open before they reached it. He stood aside; Sara went forward, taking the hand extended to her and looking uncertainly into the face above it. And what an arresting face it was! Totally unlined and yet plainly giving the woman's age at between fifty-five and sixty. A serene face, with an astounding likeness to an Athenian sculpture Sara had once seen in the British Museum. Firm contours, and yet there was both understanding and compassion in the features, a certain softness in the large grey eyes that was most appealing. A smile came instantly to Sara's lips, and Carl's words to her ears, 'You'll like my mother... she isn't anything like her son.'

'Miss Morgan—Sara Morgan! Happy to meet you, my dear. I'm Carl's mother—but of course you know! Come right in, Sara! How kind of you to agree to stay with me.'

'No, indeed,' began Sara shyly. 'It's you who are kind, taking in a complete stranger. After all,' she added with a rather shaky laugh, 'I might be difficult to get on with———'

'Carl assured me you were quite charming.'

'He d-did…?' Amazement mingling with a sort of stupor brought a comical expression to Sara's face. 'Imagine that!' The last two words, speaking volumes to the perceptive Mrs van der Linden, were out before Sara could prevent them, even though she did lift a hand involuntarily to her mouth.

'You and he don't get along too well, it would seem. No matter. He never has had much time for our sex, but I've warned him that one of these days he'll meet his match and fall in love.' The grey eyes twinkled with anticipation. 'How I shall gloat! He tells me that if ever he does marry it will merely be to have a son and heir. He feels that Ravenspark ought not to go out of the family.'

'It's a very lovely house, and I can understand his wanting an heir.' But what a hard, unfeeling husband and father he would make! Both wife and children would never be allowed for one moment to lose sight of who was master in the house, whose word was law.

Sara followed Mrs van der Linden through the hall, with Joshua in the rear carrying Sara's two suitcases. A balustraded staircase led up to a galleried landing off which were several suites of rooms. Sara soon found herself staring at the luxurious apartment into which she had been shown, vaguely conscious that Joshua had deposited the cases and made an unobtrusive departure.

'It's beautiful,' she breathed, wondering how she came to be here, in the beautiful home of so gracious a lady as Mrs van der Linden. It was all unreal suddenly, as if she were living through a prolonged dream. 'Did you create all this———?' Sara swept a hand embraceingly, swinging round as she did so.

'Create…?' Mrs van der Linden stared at her for a long moment. 'What a charming way of putting it! Yes, I did create it. I rather enjoy planning things, and every year I alter at least one of the rooms, or suites of rooms as the case may be. It's a pleasant hobby which sometimes goes wrong.'

'It does?' Sara looked uncomprehendingly at her.
'If the design I create is not as good as the one I've obliterated.'

'Oh, I see. Well, that's bound to happen sometimes, isn't it?' Again Sara allowed her glance to sweep around the lovely mauve and cream bedroom. 'This, for instance—I can't conceive how it could be improved upon.'

'You didn't see it before. It was a real dream! Even Carl, who never really notices such things, remarked on it, saying I ought to have known that I could never improve on the white and rose that I had as a colour scheme the last time.' She spoke matter-of-factly, but all the time Sara was conscious that her grey eyes were wholly perceptive, and examining. There would be little that Mrs van der Linden would miss and once again Sara was determined to be guarded as to the information she imparted to her. 'I'm going to leave you, dear;' Carl's mother went on. 'I don't know if you prefer to do your own unpacking—I know I do. But if you want Rima you can most certainly have her.'

'No, thank you, Mrs van der Linden,' returned Sara with a smile. 'I do prefer to see to my own unpacking.'

The older woman nodded, and said in that charmingly musical voice that was one of the most arresting things about her,

'You must be like me. I love to take my time when I'm unpacking, having a good look around as I do it. In that way one gets to know one's surroundings right away. I even do my own unpacking when I visit Ravenspark—though I have no need to get to know my surroundings there!'

Sara watched her go, her mind switching momentarily to Carl's bathroom and those scented bath salts and that very feminine talcum powder.

The bedroom door closed behind Mrs van der Linden and a moment later Sara was taking some of her clothes from one of the suitcases. The scene from the window was one of quiet suburban inactivity and Sara felt already that her mind was at peace. When she was at the farm, seeing Ray every meal time, and often in between, the strain was bound to affect her nerves. Irma's incessant moods of complaint, her heartrending misery and hopelessness, her repeated wish that she could die... all these had made their contribution to Sara's unhappiness. Would this short break be of any real help, though? Sara could not imagine that it would have any lasting effect on her, since things would immediately resume their previous course once she returned to the farm. Still, thought Sara, determined to make the most of this holiday, it would be very pleasant while it lasted and, if Mrs van der Linden should desire it, she would be only too happy to come again.

She joined her hostess in the sitting-room half an hour later after having taken a quick shower and changed into a brightly-flowered cotton dress. Sleeveless and with the bodice held up merely by laces made of the same material as the dress, it was cool and fresh, and very feminine. When Sara entered the room where Mrs van der Linden was sitting by the window, looking out on to the back garden with its fruit trees and its palms, the older woman glanced up, then stared hard and long, seeing—as Ray had seen—a slender wand of a girl with a flawless skin and features that were inordinately attractive.

'I like what you're wearing,' was Mrs van der Linden's disconcerting remark as Sara came rather shyly forward. 'Sit down, dear, and I'll have some tea sent in.' She lifted a well-groomed hand to pull a bell-rope. The smiling Rima appeared, a plump African girl whose husband worked at the house next door. 'Tea and cakes, please, Rima.'

'Yes, very good, Mrs van der Linden.'

'You found everything you wanted in your room? Plenty of coat-hangers?'

'Yes, thank you.' Sara sat down, her gaze on the scene outside the window. 'How very different it is here,' she murmured, almost to herself.

'From where my son is, you mean? Yes, but both have their charms. I was tremendously happy when I lived at Ravenspark. My husband was living then, of course.'

'You didn't want to stay on when he died?'

'Not really. I rather think that my will would have clashed with Carl's. He's far too domineering for my liking.
Perhaps you've noticed?

Sara prudently let that pass without comment, simply saying that she and Carl did not have much to do with one another.

'He visits my brother-in-law's farm,' went on Sara conversationally, 'and is always helping him out in some way. You see, Ray is a complete novice and I don't know where he would be without your son's help.'

'Carl's helpful, yes.' A strange pause ensued and then, 'He's been telling me a lot about your sister. Carl and I have long conversations over the telephone,' she added by way of an explanation. 'It was the greatest tragedy that she was struck down like that.'

'Indeed, yes.' Sara gave a deep sigh. 'She's so beautiful, Mrs van der Linden. I hope that one day you and she will meet. Irma would love talking to you.'

'Thank you, my dear. Yes, I feel I must see this young lady who so interests my son.'

Sara glanced at her, noticing the faraway expression in her eyes.

'You feel that Mr van der Linden's—er—exceptionally interested in my sister?' Sara could not fully explain why those words came to her lips; she supposed it was curiosity to see what kind of an answer Carl's mother could produce.

'Yes, he certainly is interested.' Mrs van der Linden was frowning slightly, as if she were impatient about being puzzled over something. 'It isn't like him to bother about emotional———' She stopped, but of course it was too late.

'You believe he's interested in the emotional repercussions of my sister's accident?'

'He appears to be,' answered Mrs van der Linden with a sigh. 'I do become so frustrated when I can't grasp something.' She glanced at Sara with a hint of apology in her eyes. 'I don't suppose you can help me to understand?'

Sara shrugged her shoulders.

'I feel you're attaching too much importance to the matter, Mrs van der Linden. 'Carl—your son, he's sorry for Irma, and for Ray too, of course. He sits with Irma and chats quite a lot———'

'What do they talk about?' broke in Mrs van der Linden curiously.

'I've no idea. Irma's never said.' Come to think about it, Irma was as close as an oyster whenever Sara, just to make conversation, asked what she and Carl had been talking about for so long.

'Oh… nothing much. He reads a lot, and so we discuss books,' Irma would say.

'Your sister,' said Mrs van der Linden slowly, 'is she like you—in temperament, I mean?'

Faintly Sara smiled.

'No two people are exactly alike in temperament,' she said.

'Not exactly, no. But sisters can be very much alike.'

'I think we're very different.'

'You do?' Mrs van der Linden glanced towards the door as it swung inwards and Rima entered with a silver tray on which was some fine china and a silver teaset. 'In what way are you different, Sara?'

'It's difficult to say. I just know we're different.'
'Tell me,' invited Carl's mother when the maid had left the room, 'if you had had that accident, would you have reacted in the same way?'

Suddenly Sara was remembering her resolve not to tell this woman anything about herself that could be in any way helpful to her in analysing her character. Already, thought Sara ruefully, Carl's mother had managed very easily to draw information from her guest, but, as yet, nothing of any real importance.

'That again is difficult to say,' answered Sara, shaking her head. 'I expect, though, that I wouldn't be feeling like producing a smile whenever someone came in to see me.'

'So your sister's feeling very sorry for herself?'

'No, I wouldn't care to put it like that, Mrs van der Linden. She's unhappy, but wouldn't you be if at her age you had no hope of ever walking again?'

'I'd be unhappy, yes—but I don't believe I should want people around me to know the full extent of my unhappiness, especially those who were trying to help me, to make my lot easier.'

Sara was frowning by the time this little speech came to an end.

'You seem to have gained the impression that Irma complains a good deal,' she said in some distress. 'I can't think how I've come to give you wrong ideas about Irma. She's grateful for what we do…' She tailed off, recalling what Ray had said about Irma never showing gratitude. Ray had been right—but on the other hand Sara had no wish for a show of gratitude on her sister's part. To be saying thank you all the time was humiliating for the one uttering the words and embarrassing for the recipient.

'She is?' Mrs van der Linden was smiling as she poured the tea. 'Well, it's nice to know—that your sister fully appreciates all you and her husband do for her.'

A small sigh of relief escaped Sara; she had had the unpleasant conviction that, unintentionally, she had put Irma in a bad light, but obviously this was not so.

Two days went by peacefully and most pleasantly. Sara and Carl's mother were getting along together so smoothly that they might have known one another for months. They went to the beach each morning, had a swim and a sunbathe, then returned to the house for lunch. Mrs van der Linden would then take a short rest while Sara lay on the lawn reading a book and at the same time acquiring the tan which she had hoped to get; but until now she had not had the opportunity even of taking an hour a day off for anything so unproductive as lying half-naked on the lawn.

On the third day Mrs van der Linden said they would be dining out that evening, at an hotel.

'Carl probably told you that I like to dine out sometimes,' went on Mrs van der Linden. 'I feel I mustn't get stale, or lose touch altogether with the kind of occasion which necessitates my dressing up.'

The idea of wearing an evening dress brought to Sara's mind Carl's unflattering remark and in consequence her cheeks took on an added colour. Mrs van der Linden asked if anything was wrong.

'Well—not really.' She hesitated, but as she saw the inquiring expression on Mrs van der Linden's face, she said, 'Carl told me I'd look like a scarecrow if I wore a frilly blouse.'

'Did he now? Hmm…' Mrs van der Linden's eyes opened very wide indeed. 'Either my son likes you, Sara, or he dislikes you intensely.'

'No,' protested Sara, not at all put out by the second part of the sentence. 'He's indifferent, I can be certain of that.'

The older woman was slanting Sara an odd glance, appearing to be making a thorough appraisal of her looks.

'My dear,' she said presently, 'a man who's indifferent to a woman doesn't trouble to tell her what she'll look like in this or that. In fact, he never even notices her, much less takes the trouble of trying to picture what will suit her.'
There was a moment’s pause and then, ‘Don't you see the logic of what I've just said?’

‘Well...’ Sara was not convinced, though she did have to admit, now that it was pointed out to her, that it was rather odd that Carl should have made so disparaging a comment. ‘I can only think that he dislikes me, then.’

‘But he assured me that you were charming, if you remember?’

‘I believe that was said merely for your reassurance, Mrs van der Linden. After all, you must have asked him what I was like? ‘Yes, of course I did.’

‘Then naturally he'd say something flattering about me.’ Sara paused, then added on a note of humour, ‘He could scarcely say something like, "Well, I personally don't care for her, but I daresay you'll find her tolerably pleasant," could he?’

Mrs van der Linden burst out laughing. ‘You have a sense of humour, child, which I like. Also, even though you're convinced that my son doesn't like you, you don't appear to harbour a grudge on account of it.’

She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Harbouring grudges is so unprofitable; don’t you agree? It causes a sort of canker which eventually you can't control.’

‘How very true. You have a maturity that surprises me. How old are you, Sara?’

‘Twenty-three,’ she replied, accepting the tea being offered to her across the small rattan table that had been placed between them by Rima.

‘Twenty-three...’ A faint sigh escaped Carl’s mother. ‘A delightful age to be. Make the most of it, Sara—and of the opportunity it offers.’ ‘Opportunity?’ Sara queried.

‘You're a very attractive girl, and you're twenty-three years of age—a perfect combination, my dear. I was pretty, and just your age, when I had my first proposal of marriage. I turned it down, of course, because I’d already fixed my eye on Carl’s father—a tall and handsome man whose son resembles him, a circumstance for which I've always been grateful. It’s every mother’s wish to have a tall and handsome son.’

The pride in her voice was wonderful to hear and it brought an instant and understanding smile to Sara's lips.

‘Have you any more children?’ she inquired after a pause.

‘Two daughters, both of whom are miles away! Margaret’s in South America, married to a Brazilian, and Sophie’s in Paris, married to a Frenchman. I see them about once in every two or three years and I don’t know whether it’s a good thing or a bad one. The wrench is grim when they leave again.’

‘Yes, I expect it is.’ Sara’s eyes had shaded with compassion and her mouth trembled slightly. ‘I don't think either my sister or I would have come out here if our parents had been living.’

‘You have no parents, then?’

‘No, they’ve been dead some years.’

‘But had they been living you wouldn’t have left them?’

‘No, I don’t think we would.’

‘You can speak for your sister too?’

‘I suppose I shouldn’t,’ said Sara with a deprecating little smile. ‘Perhaps Irma would have come, because Ray wanted her to. A woman must go where her husband wants her to go, mustn’t she?’
The older's woman's eyes flickered for a moment, as if she were deep in thought.

'If you were married, then, you'd put your husband's wishes before your own?'

'I expect so, yes."

'Because you loved him?'

'Of course. I wouldn't marry without love.' Her big eyes looked straightly into the grey ones... and suddenly she realised that, during the past few minutes, she had revealed a great deal about herself without even being aware of it, so clever and subtle was this woman who, at times, had not even had to put a question to her.

What an idiot she was! decided Sara. Yet did it matter? Again she told herself that she had given away nothing of any real importance. However, she firmly made up her mind to change the subject, and this she did, abruptly, as she asked about the girl who was coming to see Carl.

'Ray says she was his ward at one time,' added Sara. 'I can't imagine your son with a ward.'

'I don't blame you,' laughed her companion. 'She wasn't his ward exactly. Her father considered her to be a gadabout and left his fortune in trust for her. Carl was to look after it for her until she was twenty-one. It seems that her father had an idea he wouldn't last that long and so he drew up his will in this way. Carl wasn't at all pleased with the idea of being the girl's trustee, but he wouldn't have shirked the job once it had been given to him. Marie fell in love with him, of course—what ward didn't have notions of marrying her guardian? Silly child! I believe Carl gave her a couple of spankings in the end, just to cure her of her infatuation. Wouldn't stand any nonsense of that kind, not Carl!'

Sara had to smile. Poor Marie! Still, she should have had more sense than to fall in love with a man like Carl, who was quite plainly not interested in women.

Mrs van der Linden was speaking again, saying that her son had not been at all pleased when he heard that Marie was intending to visit him.

'He'd have put her off,' she continued, 'but she was cute enough not to offer him the chance of doing so. She's all there as regards Carl, and knew he wouldn't want to have her. So she simply left him no alternative. He'll give her a stern dressing-down, but she won't take too much notice of him. She knows his bark's much worse than his bite.'

'It is?' Sara looked curiously at her, noticing the sudden quirk of amusement that lifted the corner of her lip.

'You don't think so, obviously. Tell me, child, just what is your relationship with my son like?'

'I'm afraid,' answered Sara with all honesty, 'that we haven't much time for one another.'

'No friendliness?'

Sara shook her head.

'None that you'd notice,' she returned—and although she had meant to accompany that with a laugh, it was a little sigh that issued from her lips.

'Apparently you don't mind?'

'No, I don't mind.' But did she mind? Sara asked herself.

A strange pause ensued before the older woman spoke.

'Most young ladies aspire to attracting my son's interest to themselves.' The tone was also strange, as if there was a subtle undercurrent somewhere. 'Perhaps,' added Mrs van der Linden slowly, 'you're already in love...?' So artful, but Sara with her quick intelligence realised at once that Carl had told his mother that she was in love with Ray. She
would have liked to deny it, strongly, and to adopt an air of indignation, but how could she, when no mention had been made of her brother-in-law? In any case, she was incurably honest, and it was owing to this that a tide of colour swept up into her cheeks. 'I see you are,' murmured Mrs van der Linden in the same slow manner.

'I'd rather not talk about it,' said Sara, and now her tone was sharp because she felt sure that unless she discouraged her hostess there would be some questions forthcoming which could bring her considerable discomfort. There was no doubt about it, Mrs van der Linden had a way of extracting information, and yet again Sara made the vow to be on her guard.

'I'm sorry, dear.' Carl's mother lifted her cup to her lips and for a few moments there was silence in the room. This was broken eventually by the entrance of the maid, after she had knocked quietly on the door panel. 'Yes, Rima?' said her employer with a smile.

'The telephone, Mrs van der Linden. It's Master Carl.'

'Ah.' The grey eyes lighted up as their owner rose instantly and, with a word of apology to her guest, she left the room.

On her return five minutes later she looked at Sara a little ruefully—but happily for all that—and said,

'Marie isn't coming to see Carl after all; she's changed her mind. So he's coming here. He'll be arriving in time for lunch tomorrow.' Mrs van der Linden sat down, but her gaze never left Sara's face. Sara swallowed hard, a frown gathering between her eyes. Carl here… She would feel out of place, in the way.

'I ought to go,' she murmured, almost to herself. 'He won't want me around; I'm very sure of that.'

'Nonsense, dear. You've come for a rest and that you shall have.'

'I came instead of Carl—Mr van der Linden.'

'I wouldn't keep giving him his full title, Sara. Carl will do very well.'

'About my stay,' said Sara, bypassing with impatience the comment which she felt was quite irrelevant. 'As I've said, your son won't want me around all the time.'

It was Mrs van der Linden's turn to show impatience.

'My dear child, he knows you're here, and he wants to come. Surely that's enough to put your mind at rest?'

'Well…' There was certainly logic in what Carl's mother had said. 'I don't know…' A sigh escaped her; she knew that one part of her would welcome his presence here. 'You see, we have nothing in common,' she added rather quickly, noticing that Mrs van der Linden was staring interrogatingly at her.

'How do you know you have nothing in common?'

Taken aback by a question she soon realised was difficult to answer, Sara could only say, rather selfconsciously, 'Instinct, I suppose.'

'Instinct?' with a sardonic lift of an eyebrow that was so reminiscent of her son. 'Rubbish, my child! How can you know if you've anything in common if you haven't been with one another, chatting together?'

Sara said nothing; she was thinking again that they did have one thing in common, and that was her sister's welfare. Also, she recalled that, when she was at his house, they had in fact chatted together, not intimately, of course, perhaps not even in a way one would call friendly, but certainly they had managed to converse amicably.

Mrs van der Linden was speaking again, saying that if Carl and Sara had a few days together on holiday here, then they'd soon know whether or not they had anything in common.
'Yes,' nodded Sara automatically, 'I suppose you're right.'

'Certainly I'm right. Now don't you worry any more about it. I have a feeling you'll both have a most pleasant holiday, and be very good friends by the time it's all over.'
True to his word, Carl was at his mother's house in time for lunch. Sara, who had spent part of the morning on the beach and the other part on the most pleasant task of cutting flowers from the garden and arranging them decoratively in the lovely cut-glass and silver vases provided by Mrs van der Linden, happened to be on her own in the sitting-room when he entered. He stood for a moment, just inside the door, watching her as she placed the last sprig of foliage among a bowl of blue verbenas. She turned, her colour rising a little, and spoke quickly, embarrassed by his lazy manner as he stood there, apparently interested in what she was doing.

'Your mother's just gone up to wash and change. She'll not be long.'

Carl advanced slowly into the centre of the room.

'How are you enjoying your visit?' he inquired, his amber eyes taking in her flushed face, her quivering mouth. 'I hope my mother didn't disappoint you?'

'No—she's all you said she was,' replied Sara, wishing she had seen him arrive, so that she could have made her escape before he entered the room.

'You're obviously getting along all right, then? But I had no fears that you wouldn't. Everyone gets along with Mother.'

'Did you see Irma before you left?' she asked, and Carl nodded.

'She's quite cheerful.' There was an odd inflection in his voice which seemed to match in some way the slight narrowing of his eyes. 'You have no need to worry about her; Ray's managing very well indeed.'

'I'm glad,' returned Sara automatically.

'Why should there be?'

'She does have a gift,' he acknowledged.

'Or one could call it an eye for beauty.' Sara glanced towards the door as Mrs van der Linden entered, an impressive figure in a dress of pearl-grey silk which fitted her slim body to perfection. Her hair was immaculate, her skin enhanced by the skilful application of make-up. Watching Carl closely, Sara noticed the sudden hint of pride that lit his eyes. Coming forward, he took his mother by the shoulders, bent his head, and kissed her on the cheek.

'As always, my love,' he said with a smile which, somehow, caused Sara's heart to jerk strangely within her, 'you look superb. I'm of the opinion that your urgent call for my visit was specious, to say the least.'

She laughed, and admitted that this was true.

'Although,' she added, 'I have been depressed by poor Angela's death. We'd begun to drift apart, granted —with her being off colour so much lately—but we still visited one another now and then. I felt I had someone close, whereas
now I'm entirely on my own.'

'You have the remedy, Mother. You can come back to Ravenspark.'

'And what if you marry?'

To Sara's surprise he produced no swift and emphatic retort as to the unlikelihood of such an occurrence. His eyes flashed a lightning glance at Sara before becoming hooded as he half-closed his lids.

'I don't believe you'd be the one to interfere,' he said mildly in answer to his mother's query.

'Well, we shall see. I don't really think I shall come hack to Ravenspark. I've been my own boss too long now to submit meekly to your domineering ways.'

Carl said nothing and within a few minutes they were all sitting down to lunch together. When the meal was over Carl's mother announced her intention of resting for a while. Carl turned to Sara, asking if she would care lo go down to the beach.

'I'm going for a swim,' he added. 'You can come if you like.'

'That would be very nice for Sara,' intervened his mother before Sara could speak for herself. 'You'll lake the car, of course?'

'Of course—without Joshua.'

'He won't worry. He's been neglecting his gardening while he's been driving Sara and me about—and you know how troubled he becomes if a couple of weeds manage to escape his vigilant eye.'

Sara, not at all sure whether she would enjoy an afternoon on the beach with Carl, searched her mind lor some excuse she might be able to put forward but nothing remotely feasible presented itself. Resigned, she went off to collect her swimsuit and bathing wrap. Then, instead of returning to the living-room where she had left Carl and his mother, she went out to the garden, intending to wait there for Carl. Voices drifting to her from a bougainvillea-draped arbour told her that Carl and his mother had come out into the garden. Sara stopped instinctively, undecided as to whether she should carry on, past the arbour, or turn back. It was as she stood, undecided, that she heard her name mentioned by Carl's mother, but although she failed to catch what was being said about her, her attention was arrested and, almost without knowing it, Sara found herself listening.

'In love with her sister! Mother, are you serious?'

'Well, you're plainly interested in the girl, despite her disability.'

'It's owing to her disability that I am interested ..' Sara, guilt creeping in to do battle with her curiosity, began to move away. But the temptation was too great and she was once again giving way to her curiosity. '… my opinion that Irma… getting a raw deal from her sister.'

A raw deal! Sara's whole frame quivered with anger. To be condemned like this when she had made such sacrifices for Irma. It was true, of course, that Carl had felt contempt for Sara owing to her being in love with Ray, but it had never occurred to her that he could be blind to all that she was doing for her sister. Hot tears stung Sara's eyes as she walked away, towards the exotic flower border to which she had been proceeding when, on hearing her name, she had stopped. The sheer injustice of Carl's remark was something she could scarcely believe, and the more she thought about it the more she began to disbelieve the evidence of her own ears. And yet the words had been plain enough.

The border was reached, but its beauty no longer interested her; the tears were blinding her anyway, tears of self-pity and anger and several other emotions as well. For it could not be denied that the idea of Carl's having so low an opinion of her was so painful that, subconsciously, she was groping for the reason why this should be.

What was Mrs van der Linden's opinion of her? Sara knew without any doubt at all that she had made a good
impression there. Perhaps she would argue with Carl, telling him that Sara was not like that at all. Would he take notice? Sara knew him well enough to be sure that, once he had fixed an opinion, it would take a great deal to sway him from it.

Sara's thoughts flitted about; she recalled her feelings when Ray had told her of Carl's offer, an offer made, Carl had later told Sara, in order that it would make several people happy. He had wanted Irma and Ray to be together, with Sara out of the way. Sara recalled also her own feelings with regard to Carl. They had changed, no use denying that... no use trying to convince herself that she was as indifferent to him now as she had been during those first few weeks she had been at the farm. But if he was affecting her emotionally what of her love for Ray?

It was all too much for her; she had come here in order to shed her problems and her unhappiness, had come to find peace of mind, just for a little while. Taking out a handkerchief, she dried her eyes and cheeks, determinedly giving her attention to the flowers. She could never forget those words she had just heard, but she could put them out of her mind for the present... or could she? How was she to act towards Carl? A deep sigh escaped her. Could she assume a friendliness in her relationship with him? Unless she wanted to upset his mother she must do just that.

'I shall be courteous and that's all,' she whispered, putting away her handkerchief and hoping that she had effectively removed all evidence of her tears. 'But, one day, I shall be free to tell him exactly what I think about him—and the conclusions he so cleverly comes to!'

He was with her a few minutes later, asking if she were ready. Never had she known so much difficulty in keeping her voice steady as she answered, 'Yes, of course.'

'Have you been waiting, dear?' Carl's mother was faintly apologetic. 'We were having a little talk over in the arbour. You should have called; we'd have heard you,' she added with a smile.

'I know—because I heard you!' returned Sara, but silently. Aloud she said, 'There was no hurry. I've been enjoying this beautiful garden.' She flicked a hand to indicate the dazzling border, the hibiscus bushes at the back, and the lovely palms towering above. 'It's so well established that it seems it must have been here before the house.' She spoke conversationally, not even glancing at Carl. 'Was it here before the house?'

'Yes, it was,' answered Carl's mother. 'The whole of the grounds were here before the house. Originally, there was a small homestead built of mud-bricks; it had a flat tin roof and four squat rooms with whitewashed walls. Down at the bottom of the garden was a windmill over the bore. From what, I can gather the owner ran the place as a small farm of sorts.'

'How interesting! That must have been a fairly long time ago, though?'

'It was many years before I myself came here. There would have been a lot more ground, too. Probably all these houses were built on the grounds of the original farmlands.'

'But you happened to get the One which had been put on the actual site, and so got the lovely gardens.'

'The gardens weren't like this then, but the foundations had been laid, in the form of all the established trees and shrubs.'

While this interchange had been taking place Carl stood, saying nothing, but watching Sara intently. His mother, noticing his fixed expression, said with a curious inflection in her voice,

'What are you thinking about, Carl?'

He shrugged and returned mildly,

'I was merely listening to your interesting conversation, Mother.'

'Sara's so appreciative of everything around her—but you must have noticed, of course.'

'Yes, I have noticed.'
"Mr van der Linden's gardens are incredibly beautiful, too," said Sara. "I've never seen any gardens to come up to them." She was speaking into a silence that had settled after Carl's words, saying the first thing that came into her head.

"Sara will keep on referring to you as Mr van der Linden," frowned his mother. "Tell her, Carl, that she must use your Christian name."

He glanced down into Sara's face, saw the colour rising in her cheeks and seemed to be amused by her obvious discomfiture.

"Yes, you must try to use it, Sara. As you will have learned already, we all use Christian names here. I shall use yours from now on."

He had already used it… and Sara was freely admitting that she found a certain attractiveness in the way it rolled off his tongue.

"I don't know…" she began. "It'll be difficult."

"Nonsense, child," laughed Carl's mother. "Well, off you go! Enjoy yourself and don't hurry back; I've several letters to write after I've had my rest, so you've no need to be anxious that I'll be lonely." With that she turned and walked away, her tall stately figure most impressive as she crossed the velvet lawn before becoming lost to view as she entered the shrubbery on the far side. Carl looked at Sara, and prevented an awkward moment by saying, in his calm and confident manner,

"My things are already in the car, so we can be off right away."

She nodded distantly and fell into step beside him as he strode to where the long white car was parked in the drive. He opened the door for her, closing it when she had got in. They were soon on their way, the car's engine purring smoothly under the influence of Carl's foot on the accelerator. Massive oak trees towered on either side, their branches meeting over the road, providing a welcome shade from the fierce rays of the early afternoon sun. Presently they reached a region of open country, and then a sprawling suburb cleverly laid out with winding roads bordered by tasteful villas surrounded by a wealth of trees and flowering shrubs, and commanding a panoramic view of the cerulean sea down below. It was a restful, idyllic scene and in spite of the lingering elements of indignation and anger Sara felt relaxed both in mind and body and the problems of Irma and Ray and Sara's own unrequited love seemed to have become indistinct, and even unimportant. Not that Irma's plight was unimportant, but the emotional side of it all had suddenly become less tormenting in that Sara found she could actually thrust it all away and give her mind to the pleasant atmosphere which surrounded her.

Carl was driving at a leisurely pace and this added to her sense of peace. She had always derived an exceeding amount of pleasure from trees, and as she stared ahead she felt that nothing could be more charming than the long avenues of oaks, or the picture of the horizon glimpsed through the waving tops of the eucalypts. Quaint Dutch houses raised their heads above the scattered groves of wattles that had been planted to fix the soil on sandy flats, while to the east a low range of hills formed an undulation of green velvet caressed by the sun's rays. Sara spoke impulsively, saying what was in her mind and forgetting, for the moment, the antagonism she felt towards the man at her side.

"It has a sort of Hobbema flavour, hasn't it?"

He turned, slanting her a glance of surprise.

"Strange you should say that. I've always thought so myself."

"You have?"

Carl nodded.

"The wooded aspect, the pastoral scene——— ' He flung out a hand to indicate the thickets with the low hills beyond. 'Hobbema's water-mill is all that's missing."

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"The wooded aspect, the pastoral scene——— ' He flung out a hand to indicate the thickets with the low hills beyond. 'Hobbema's water-mill is all that's missing.'
'Yes; he often did include a water-mill in his paintings, didn't he?'

'That's right.' Carl looked around, as if taking in the scene again. 'I didn't know you were interested in the Dutch painters,' he commented at length.

'I'm not, but I've seen exhibitions, like most people. I was particularly struck by Hobbema—I expect it was the sheer lack of anything dramatic. Peace and tranquillity seemed to float out at you.' Sara slanted him a deprecating glance. 'Perhaps you have other impressions of his work?'

'No, as a matter of fact, I haven't.' The trace of a smile softened the hard outline of his mouth for a moment. 'Apparently we have at least one thing in common,' he said.

'Apparently.' Sara's tone was expressionless. 'We appear to have the same ideas regarding this particular man's work.'

For a long moment Carl said nothing. Then he murmured, an unfathomable inflection in his voice,

'You interest me in the way you use the words peace and tranquillity. Are you finding peace and tranquillity here?'

'Here, with your mother, yes.' The car was descending all the while, coming from the plateau down to the shore. A beautiful bay and a semi-circle of turquoise sea dappled with sunlight met her gaze as the car turned on to a long straight road.

'You're happy about your decision to come, then?'

'I couldn't be otherwise with your mother as my hostess.' She supposed words like these would please him, though she had no wish that he should show it. 'I've been made most welcome, just as you told me I would be.'

'Mother's thoroughly enjoying your company; she's said she intends to invite you to come again.'

Sara said nothing; she was staring ahead at the scene which was new, Carl having driven to the beach by a totally different route from that used by Joshua. To her left rose a rock prominence, with low mountains stretching away from it, and on the horizon a ship moved gently against the clear azure sky. Palms swayed here and there, lofty silhouettes of grace and charm.

At last the car was driven right on to the sands, and parked beneath a trellised cover which had been erected specially for the convenience of those who came to the beach in their cars. The bathing huts were close by and Sara went off to change, an assortment of emotions stirring within her. It was a long time since she had had the exclusive company of a man in a purely recreational atmosphere. In fact, since her meeting with Ray she had never wanted to make friends with anyone of the opposite sex. Ray had won her heart and she had been in that particular state of mind where the possibility of falling in love with anyone else was so remote that she had seen no profit even in cultivating a friendship.

Now, however, she experienced a degree of pleasure at the prospect of spending an afternoon on the beach with Carl, this in spite of those words which she had so recently heard him utter. It was illogical, she supposed; she ought by rights to be wishing him miles away... but she wasn't.

She came from the hut, clad in her swimsuit and swinging a gaily-coloured towel in her hand. Her wrap was draped casually over her shoulders; it was very short and afforded no cover at all at the front. She saw Carl's eyes darken with interest, felt her heart give an excited little thud.

'I see you've managed to get a tan already,' he observed. 'Mother did mention that you and she had done some sunbathing.'

They went into the sea and Carl left her, swimming strongly towards the far end of the bay where rocks rose sheer from the narrow shore to the plateau above. The sea was calm, a misty turquoise blue with golden channels meandering through it and little white rolls of foam caressing the sandy beach. The sky was sapphire, clear and bright, with here and there the vaguest hint of a feathery wisp of cloud coming in on the seawind and melting away
in the soft warm air. Sara, content to take things more easily than Carl, lay floating on the water, her gaze dreamily
fixed on the cliffs, her mind marvelling that she had thrown off those hurtful words as if she had never even heard
them, and now she was fully relaxed, revelling in the atmosphere of peace that washed over her.

When eventually she and Carl were on the beach she was still in that relaxed state, and so enveloped in it that she
could not have felt any animosity against Carl even had she tried.

He asked her why she had not swum out, farther from the shore.

'Are you afraid?' he added, eyeing her curiously.

'No, but I felt like taking life easy.'

A small silence and then, 'Are you really enjoying this break, Sara?' He seemed faintly anxious, she thought.
Anxious for her? That hardly went along with those words he had uttered about her.

'I'm very contented, yes,' she answered, bringing her knees up under her chin and hugging them with her arms.

He lay back then, exposing his body to the sun. Sara stole a glance at him, appreciating as always the perfection of
his features, the long lean frame, sinewed and bronzed. She found herself comparing him with Ray, and knew a little
access of vexation that Carl should be so superior in every conceivable way. True, Ray was exceptionally handsome,
but there was not the strength of character in the lines of his face which she saw in Carl's. Ray's eyes were big, and
long-lashed, yet they did not possess the frankness that seemed always to characterise Carl's expression, be he
staring with that look of lazy boredom or showing a keen interest in what was being said or done. Ray's body, too,
was unfavourably compared with Carl's as Sara reluctantly admitted that he carried some excess weight, whereas
Carl carried none at all. Suddenly Carl spoke, causing Sara to jerk at the question,

'What the devil are you scowling for?' and he raised himself at the same time, to regard her with a frowning
expression in his amber eyes. 'Whatever your thoughts, they're far from pleasant.'

She coloured, glancing away, unable to find an immediate answer. Eventually, though, she managed to laugh lightly
and tell him that her thoughts were her own.

'I feel it's time we were getting back,' she added. 'We seem to have been out for hours.'

'Changing the subject, eh? Yes, we have been out for hours—three. Mother stressed that there was no hurry, but if
you're bored with my company we'll move.' The voice was crisp; the eyes had hardened a little. Sara felt her spirits
sinking.

'Of course I'm not bored with your company,' she denied. 'I don't know why you should say such a thing.' Her voice
was low, her lovely eyes limpid as they looked into his.

A tense moment ensued, with Carl's gaze seeming to be both critical and thoughtful. Sara, her eyes fixed on his face,
waited for him to speak, aware that she was hoping his touch of ill-humour had gone.

'Are you sure you want to go back?' he queried at last, and she instantly shook her head, because his voice had lost
that crispness, and because those amber eyes were no longer tinged with hardness.

'Not really,' she answered. 'It's so very pleasant here.'

'Contrary wench,' was Carl's surprising response. 'What is it that makes the female mind so perverse?'

She had to laugh.

'Are you trying to analyse me?' she asked, a quiver on her lips.

'So Mother's been busy, eh?' Carl's own mouth twitched with amusement. 'I did warn you. I expect she's read your
character and you've never noticed her subtle cleverness.'
'I did, as a matter of fact,' returned Sara with honesty. 'But I couldn't do anything about it. I'd already answered her
questions before I remembered to be careful.' 'So you intended to be careful?'

'After your telling me she'd analyse me I naturally resolved to be careful.'

Carl's gaze became penetrating.

'I wonder what she learned about you. I must ask her.'

'I feel that she has formed a rather more favourable impression of me than you have,' she returned, faintly surprised
that she had been bold enough to utter words such as those.

Carl's straight dark brows lifted a fraction.

'How do you know what kind of impression I've formed of you?' he demanded abruptly.

She almost wished it were possible to tell him that his words to his mother had been overheard, and that she knew
full well what kind of impression he had formed of her. But she refrained, naturally. In any case, she had no desire
to spoil this most pleasant interlude, to destroy the contentment she was enjoying for the first time since coming out
to Africa.

'Perhaps,' she said, contriving a smile, 'I've sensed that your opinion of me isn't very high.'

An awkward moment followed; Sara wondered if she had embarrassed him. But his manner remained cool as he
said, 'And perhaps, Sara, your senses lead to the wrong conclusions.'

She looked at him, startled.

'You're telling me that I'm wrong in believing that your opinion of me is low?' He would be lying were he to say yes,
she was wrong in believing his opinion of her was low.

'My opinion of you,' he replied with studied deliberation, 'is exceedingly high.'

'High?' She stared blankly at him, as well she might, with his words about her giving Irma a raw deal ringing in her
ears. 'I don't believe you, Mr van der Linden!'

'You———!' It was Carl's turn to be startled. 'Well, that's forthright enough! So I'm a liar, am I?' He seemed angry
but was suppressing his feelings admirably. Sara suspected that no one had ever called him a liar in his life before.

'Mr van der Linden,' she said earnestly, 'I happen to know without any doubt at all that your opinion of me is low.
Don't ask me how I know, because I can't tell you. It's enough to say that I've had proof.'

'Proof?' he snapped. 'When?'

'Today.' Sara felt she was gradually getting herself into a trap of her own making. 'But I've no intention of going into
details, so please let the matter drop.' Her voice had fallen into a pleading note. She fervently wished she could take
back the words that had led to this situation.

'You ask me to allow a thing like this to drop?' Carl looked at her with incredulity not unmixed with arrogance.
'No, my girl! You'll explain yourself—and at once!'

Sara went hot at the thought of having to confess that she had listened, and for a moment she contemplated defying
him. But a covert glance at his stern implacable countenance convinced her that he was determined to have an
explanation from her and—as he had said—at once. She swallowed, aware that his eyes were dark with anger but
bewildered also. Obviously he had no idea at all what form her explanation was going to take. She heaved a sigh of
resignation, becoming hotter still as she told him, in a quiet, self-deprecating tone, that she had overheard him
telling his mother that Irma had had a raw deal from her sister.
'So you's-see,' she added, avoiding his dark scrutiny, 'I have had the proof I mentioned.'

Silence, deep and profound. A breeze came in from the sea, fanning Sara's burning cheeks and tousling her hair. The silence continued and her nerves began to stretch. She lifted her head and looked into eyes so hard and stern that she instantly glanced away again. She began to fumble with a handful of golden sand, letting it trickle through her fingers. At last he spoke, and to her great astonishment his voice was kinder and more human than she had ever heard it before.

'I must congratulate you, Sara, on your superb control. Any other woman would have had to come out with it and tell me what she thought about me. You, though, kept it to yourself. For my mother's sake, I assume?'

Sara nodded, her eyes wide and questioning.

'Aren't you contemptuous, because I listened?'

The amber eyes held the trace of a smile in their depths.

'I'm glad you did, in a way. It means that some plain speaking can now be done. However, the first thing is to inform you, little Miss Clever, that if you must listen, then make sure you put the correct interpretation on what you hear. It's obvious that you missed a word or two of what I was saying. And those words altered the sense. You've just said that you heard me say that in my opinion Irma's getting a raw deal from you.'

'Yes, that's exactly what you did say,' returned Sara defensively, but Carl was shaking his head even before she had finished speaking.

'What I said was: "In the beginning it was my opinion that Irma was getting a raw deal from her sister," and after that I added that it was now my opinion that Irma was fortunate in having you to take care of her.'

Sara could only stare, going over in her mind what Carl had just said.

'I—I didn't hear aright, did I?' she faltered at last.

'No, my dear, you didn't.'

'I'm sorry—er—I ought not to have been so hasty in coming to a conclusion.'

'No,' he agreed, 'you ought not.'

Sara swallowed saliva collecting on her tongue; she looked at him across the small expanse of sand that separated them. She might not have heard aright before, but she had certainly heard aright now… when he had said, 'my dear'. She had also heard aright when he told her that his opinion of her was exceedingly high… He had spoken the truth, too, but she had all but called him a liar.

'I don't know what to say. I feel rather foolish,' she was forced to admit.

He opened his mouth and she waited for the caustic rejoinder which obviously hovered on his lips. To her surprise he smiled instead of voicing the words, and when presently he did speak it was to say, in that quiet, kindly voice he had so recently used to her,

'Shall we forget it, Sara?' The expression in his eyes matched the tone of his voice as he added, 'Embarrassing moments are best forgotten, aren't they?'

Sara nodded, wondering if he were subtly referring to that other embarrassing time she had had with him. Perhaps, but it was obvious that he was not going to mention it specifically. He was waiting for her answer, that kindly expression still lingering in his eyes. She nodded again, and a smile fluttered to her lips.

'Yes, indeed, Mr van der Linden, embarrassing moments are best forgotten.'
CHAPTER EIGHT

Carl was dressed and waiting by the car as Sara came from the changing hut. She saw his appreciative eyes take in
her appearance in one sweeping glance and was glad she had chosen the white cotton dress with the wide blue belt
of plaited moire ribbon, since it suited her to perfection even before she had acquired the lovely suntan which now
contrasted so strikingly with it. She was happy and it showed; she had vague glimpses of another life—of
treachorous burdens and mental discomforts, a life peopled by Ray and Irma and Sadie and Makau, but this was the
life she was living now, this ever-precious moment. And she still had more precious moments, days, even, before the
return to reality.

Carl saw her into the car, closed the door on her and went round to the other side. She watched with interest as he
tucked his long frame into the driver's seat and thumbed the starter. Relaxed, she pressed luxuriously against the
upholstery and gave a contented little sigh.

'You sound like puss when she's been stroked,' said Carl, and she gasped at the unexpectedness of words like those.
But after the shock had worn off she entered into his mood, saying, with a hint of tartness in her voice,

'First I'm a scarecrow, and then I'm a cat! I wonder what I shall be next!'

He laughed and something tingled pleasantly beneath her skin.

'You're improving; what more do you want? With luck—and time—you might become something quite attractive.'

She just had to say—because, womanlike, she was fishing,

'I wish I understood you, Mr van der Linden.'

'You do?' He slanted her a glance, then returned his attention to the road again. They were traversing an avenue of
blue gum trees whose foliage met overhead so that the sunlight was obscured and the whole scene became dramatic,
with blue-black shadows forming great pools which seemed to close in on Sara as she sat there, mystified by the
incredible change in Carl's attitude towards her. 'Perhaps,' he said after a small silence, 'you will soon understand
me, Sara. I did say, you'll remember, that some plain speaking can now be done. You and I shall have a talk later,
after dinner, maybe, when Mother's retired with her book and her thimbleful of brandy which she chooses to call her
nightcap. Meanwhile,' continued Carl as they emerged into the sunlight again, 'I do feel that Mother's right in saying
you ought to drop the formalities and use my given name.'

'It's so... difficult ————' She shook her head. 'No, I can't call you Carl... ' Sara's voice drifted off to silence as
she saw the twitching of Carl's lips. 'You and I haven't yet—what I mean is, we've always been so aloof up till now.
We can't suddenly become intimate ————'

'My dear girl,' broke in Carl, seriously enough but with an undertone of amusement which could not possibly be
missed, 'I have no intention of becoming intimate with you.'

She coloured enchantingly. Carl shot her a swift sideways glance and laughed.

'It isn't funny, Mr ———— ' She stopped abruptly, realising just how amusing the whole thing was. 'Yes, it is
funny, when you come to think of it.'

'I'm glad you agree, and I hope you'll agree that as I found no difficulty in using your name you ought not to have
difficulty in using mine.'

'It's different for a man.'

'Rubbish! I shall stop the car in a moment if you continue to be so stubborn.'

'I can't see what good that will do,' she retorted.
'I shan't continue our journey until you've done as you're told.' Firm decisive tones which she would have resented not so long ago, but not now. The car slid to a standstill unexpectedly at the side of the road; Carl switched off the engine and turned towards her. 'You've managed to use my name once,' he reminded her, 'and very easily it slipped out. Now, let's have no more nonsense. I'm waiting,' he added when she failed to obey him at once.

'Is it so important?' she could not help asking, faintly puzzled by his insistence.

A small silence followed, the kind of silence which could only add to her puzzlement.

'Yes, it is important,' he answered, and there was the most odd inflection in his tone. 'Don't ask any more questions, Sara,' he went on swiftly as she opened her mouth to speak. 'I've said we shall talk later. When we do you'll have all your questions answered automatically.'

'But, Carl, I———- ' She stopped; they looked at one another and burst out laughing.

'And now,' decided Carl as he pressed the starter, 'we can continue with our journey.'

Sara was glad she had decided to bring the wild silk evening dress. It was originally Irma's and had, as Irma said with a wry grimace, cost a small fortune. But she had never even worn it, deciding it did not suit her after all. Sara loved it and had immediately offered to buy it, which she did, but for half the price which her sister had paid for it, Irma's having insisted on this even though Sara would have been quite willing to pay the cost price in full.

She had bathed and was now holding the dress against her; she was filled with a sort of nervous excitement, as if something of vital importance was going to be conveyed to her this evening when that 'plain speaking' took place between Carl and herself. She had quite naturally pondered the matter, but then had dismissed it as being far too troublesome; in any case, the answers would come to her soon enough—this evening after dinner and when Carl's mother had gone to bed.

She stepped into the dress and zipped it up, her lovely blue-grey eyes shining, reflecting the pleasure she felt at wearing the dress. Of a soft creamy colour, it was fashioned in a faintly Oriental style, with sheath-like lines fitting Sara's slender frame as if it had been made especially for her, and to her measurements. The high mandarin collar was deceptively modest, for the back of the dress was open to the waist and the skirt slashed almost to the thigh. Full sleeves, gathered tightly into a wristband, added to the impression of modesty, while the bodice, fitting with such perfection, accentuated the exquisite curves of firm and youthful breasts.

A brisk brushing of her golden hair gave it a delightful gloss; a little colour on her cheeks and lips, a spot of purple eye-shadow and the result was perfection. Sara faced the long, gilt-framed mirror and breathed a sigh of sheer pleasure. The excitement was still very much with her, filling her whole being, vanquishing clear and logical thought. She recalled that uplifting sensation which followed upon her agreeing to pay this visit to Carl's mother. She had felt that a whole new vista was opening out before her and she was feeling exactly the same way now. Vaguely she knew that if she had tried to recapture a picture of her life at Njangola Farm she would not have been able to do so. It had become too remote, too much a thing of the past, of a world which she had left behind. This house was different; it was restful, it had an atmosphere clinging to it that spelled happiness, contentment, a total absence of strife or heartache.

She felt incredibly shy as she was about to enter the lounge where she would join Carl and his mother for pre-dinner drinks, and she actually paused, her hand resting on the gleaming brass knob of the door. Then suddenly it swung inwards, away from her, and, startled, she stared up into the impassive face of the man who had been occupying her thoughts for the past hour, while she had been dressing for dinner. She saw his expression change as his eyes roved over her from the top of her head to the perfectly-shaped toe-nails peeping from between the straps of her beige kid sandals. A tense moment followed, with neither inclined to break the silence. Sara's mouth quivered a little; her long dark lashes swept down as her shyness increased, and adorable shadows were cast upon her cheeks. When she glanced up again it was to see the unmistakable gleam of admiration in his eyes. And then, absurdly, she was thinking of scarecrows and cats and in consequence a smile of sheer amusement parted her lips. She found her shyness slipping away, but she did blush a little when, after Carl had questioned her as to the reason why she was so amused, she was forced to say,
'It was the idea of the scarecrow, and the cat… it seemed so funny…'

The fine lips twitched; the amber eyes actually laughed.

'You obviously know that in this superb dress you deserve a much more flattering description.' Despite his obvious humour his tone was dry and carried a hint of mock disparagement. 'You're a surprising girl; I hadn't connected you with vanity———'

'Oh, no, I'm not in the least vain!'

"All women deny it——— ' His hand lifted imperiously to stem another protest. 'However, I shall pander to your vanity, as I always pander to my mother's. You look charming, Sara.'

'Carl, when you have quite finished bestowing your doubtful compliments on my little friend perhaps you will allow her to come past you. I want to see this superb dress with which you appear to be so impressed!' The voice of Mrs van der Linden was quiet, musical, but commanding for all that. Laughing, Carl stepped aside for Sara to enter the room. Her shyness had returned and she stood for a moment, not quite knowing where to sit. 'You look absolutely ravishing!'

'Thank you, Mrs van der Linden…' Sara moved automatically towards the chair which Carl was indicating. 'I must admit I love this dress. It was my sister's, but she found she didn't like it, so she sold it to me.'

'And you've considered it to be one of your best ever buys, eh?' said Carl's mother with a smile. Her glance had moved from Sara to Carl, and she seemed to fall into a considering mood. Then her lashes were lowered, as if she desired to hide her expression from the two other occupants of the room. Carl was at the cabinet, pouring Sara a dry sherry; he brought it to her, standing over her for a second before handing it to her. She thanked him, aware of delicious tinglings which she refused to analyse. But she did admit to herself that Carl was responsible for the way she felt. Her eyes followed him as he walked back to the cabinet, to pour his mother's second drink. He was wearing a white linen suit which had a soft, almost draped line, very casual, but elegant for all that. What an impressive figure he made! No wonder his mother had spoken of him with such pride.

The dinner was, as usual, a most pleasant meal—far different from the meals at Njangola, which, for Sara at least, seemed invariably to be eaten in a hurry, because of the need for serving Irma with the various courses. Ray had grumbled because Sara was always getting up, but his protests had been ignored, since Sara felt that it would not be very pleasant for Irma if she had to wait too long between each course.

Soon after the meal was over Mrs van der Linden bade Sara and Carl good night and went to bed. It was not unusual for her to retire early, and Sara was actually glad to see her go, so troublesome had become her curiosity about what Carl was intending to say to her. They were on the verandah outside the dining-room, and the soft lights were throwing a flattering glow on to Sara as she sat there opposite to Carl, who was languidly relaxed in his chair, his eyes fixed upon her face.

'I can see that your patience has been stretched a good deal since this afternoon,' he commented. 'Well, I shan't keep you in suspense any longer, Sara. I did warn you that some plain speaking would be done. I hope you're prepared for it?'

'Yes,' she nodded, 'I am.'

'Good. Then I shall begin by saying that I know how you feel about Ray.' He stopped, and the only sound intruding into the silence was that of the trilling cicadas in the tamarind trees close by. Sara, glancing at Carl, felt relieved that his plain speaking had begun in this way. She could now let him have her side of the story. She spoke, saying that she had known that he was aware of her love for Ray, then went on to ask how he had learned of her secret.

Irma had told him, he said briefly. Sara did not want to know any more. It was very plain that during those long visits, when Carl and Irma had talked, that Irma had said things to blacken Sara's character. This explained in some measure the dislike and the contempt which Carl had shown towards Sara; it also explained why Irma would never tell Sara what she and Carl had been talking about. It was, however, inevitable that in spite of what he was hearing from Irma, Carl would eventually judge Sara for himself, and this he had done, with the result that he had readily
admitted that his opinion of Sara was now high. She spoke again, in a calm unembarrassed way as she said, 'I've felt, Carl, that you condemned me out of hand at first, and promised myself that, should you ever come right out and say what you have said, I would let you hear my side of it.'

He nodded, his face inscrutable.

'I'm ready to listen,' he said quietly.

Sara talked, explaining exactly what had happened. She kept her eyes on his face, interestedly watching for any change of expression. All she saw was a faint hint of grimness touching his otherwise mask-like countenance. When she had finished he was frowning rather heavily and for a long moment he remained silent, deep in thought.

'You were right in that you believed I felt contempt for you,' he agreed at last, but went on to say that, of late, he had changed his opinion, fully realising—as he got to know Sara better and listened to odd things she had said about her sister in the course of conversation—that Irma had been very fortunate in having Sara to care for her. 'I admit, though, that I believed you had come here mainly in order to be near to Ray. You've now made it clear that this was not so.' He paused, and she saw deep regret in his eyes even before he said, 'I'm sorry I misjudged you, Sara. I hope you won't hold it against me, because I have something very important to say to you, something I hope you'll think about carefully before making a decision.'

Her eyes flew to his; she had suddenly begun to tremble, and although her heart was fluttering and her nerves were agitated in sympathy, she knew it was not fear which caused these disturbances, as it had been a few moments ago.

He seemed to be waiting for her to speak, but she shook her head vaguely, impatient for him to explain.

'You've just revealed a great deal to me,' he continued eventually. 'It's obvious that you're extremely unhappy, not only because of your own unrequited love, but because of Irma's plight and also Ray's.' He paused again; Sara merely nodded as an indication that she agreed with all he was saying. She had told him this and much more besides—in fact, there was scarcely anything that she had left out. 'One of your main worries is that Irma, aware that you love her husband, is worrying herself sick with fear that Ray might turn to you.' Again Sara nodded and again he continued, 'Her repeated threats of suicide are another cause of anxiety to you———-' 

'Yes, because I shall feel entirely to blame if she should take her life. You yourself said—not in actual words—that I would be to blame if she took her own life———' Sara stopped, sorry she had added that last sentence, for Carl was plainly upset, deeply regretting his treatment of her. 'I didn't mean to remind you of that, Carl. It's all in the past—and unremembered as far as I'm concerned.' She knew that all she wanted was to be in harmony with him. It was a soft and balmy evening, with a full moon sailing in a sky of deep purple—not a night for causing hurt, for opening up old sores. 'I'm happy here,' she went on, unconsciously wistful and a little pleading. 'I want to stay like this until I go home.'

Was he affected in some emotional way by what she had said? wondered Sara, noticing the pulsation of a nerve in his throat. She had not meant to become intense or melodramatic in any way, but merely to convey her desire to retain the wonderful feeling of peace that had come to her from the moment she had arrived here and met his mother.

'Sara——— ' Carl spoke her name and then stopped, clearly searching for the right words. 'Tell me, would you welcome a way out of your present difficulties?'

She frowned, puzzled by his question.

'There isn't any way out of them,' she said.

'There is a way, a very practical way,' he returned calmly. 'If you remember, I spoke a short while ago about having something important to say to you?'

'Yes…?' Her voice quivered; she was suddenly gripped in a vice of tension. 'Yes?' she said again, this time on a little breathless note.
If you were to marry, you'd be taking a constructive step that would solve every one of your difficulties.' So cool his tone, so matter-of-fact the words which he spoke. Sara, taken aback, could only stare at him, half suspecting him of being facetious.

'Marry——— I' She stared at him incredulously. 'Did you say marry?'

'Yes, Sara, I did. I'm suggesting you and I get married———-'

What! Every nerve in her body seemed to be rioting. This wasn't happening! It was all part of the unreality that seemed to have been enveloping her since she had come here. Carl van der Linden marry her, Sara Morgan! 'You must be j-joking—and—and I don't think it's a—a very good joke at all!'

The merest twitch of his lips indicated his amusement, but his voice had never been more serious as he said, 'It isn't a joke, Sara; I'm in deadly earnest. I don't treat marriage as a joking matter, I assure you. If we do marry it's permanent; this you must accept—and always remember. You're in love with Ray, and this I myself accept. If you marry me you'll set Irma's mind at rest, you'll set your own mind at rest because you'll not be worrying about her taking her own life. You'll still be able to go over each day to take care of Irma, but on the other hand you won't be tied to her all the time. You'll have a life of your own, which you need to have. Ray will have to take over when you leave, which will be some time in the afternoon. I shall insist that you have your week-ends free, but otherwise I won't interfere too much with your activities; you can go over to Njangola early each morning and stay all day if you wish.'

Sara, listening with a sort of dazed fascination not unmingled with disbelief, told herself again that this was not really happening. Yet it was happening, for there was Carl, relaxed in his rattan chair, with the amber glow from the hidden lights accentuating his bronzed skin and the handsome lines of his face, looking calmly at her and obviously waiting for her response. She naturally asked the question that had been hovering on her lips, but which she had held back while her blunted mind jostled with the various aspects he was mentioning to her.

'Why do you want to marry me, Carl?'

'An obvious question. There are two main reasons, the first being that I feel a very natural reluctance to die without leaving an heir and I've recently been seriously considering marriage. As I consider love unimportant simply because it doesn't last, it has never entered into my scheme of things. Therefore, I shan't mind that you yourself can't give me love—in fact, I wouldn't think of marrying a woman who was in love with me; her demands would both irritate and bore me.'

So cold and clinical his attitude towards love! Sara thought of Ray, and of what might have been, and something twisted agonisingly in her heart. And yet, as she could never have Ray, why not consider the advantages of this constructive step which Carl had so coldbloodedly put forward as the answer to her problems? Carl was speaking again after the short pause he had made, and Sara looked up, her lovely features deceptively calm and composed, her neck arched, her hair caught by the light which tinted the gold with bronze. 'My second reason is that one of my sisters—she's married to a Brazilian…' He paused again. 'Mother's mentioned her to you, obviously.'

Sara nodded.

'Yes; she's mentioned both of your sisters.'

'This one—Margaret—is having marriage trouble and, having decided to leave her husband, has told me that she's intending to settle in with me as my housekeeper. I naturally told her she could go to the d— Er— that I didn't require a housekeeper, but she's a very headstrong woman, is Margaret, and I can tell by her letters that she's made up her mind to come to Ravenspark and squat. She—————'

'But,' interrupted Sara with a frown, 'you're not the kind of person to be bullied into something you didn't want to do!' She was recalling her previous conviction that, if he ever did marry, he would make the most domineering husband imaginable, letting his wife know, right from the start, who was the master.

'True.' He smiled faintly as if appreciating Sara's accurate reading of his character. 'But if she arrives at Ravenspark I can scarcely turn her out, especially as she would then come to Mother, who doesn't want to be bothered with other
people's problems at her time of life.' Carl shook his head decisively. 'It'll make matters much more simple if I can write to inform her of my marriage. That will make her think again about leaving her husband, who happens to be an admirable fellow anyway—far too good for Margaret!'

Sara said nothing; she was discovering that her nerves and her thoughts were settling, that she could look objectively at the offer made to her by Carl. All the points he had put forward made sense—so long as one left emotion entirely out of it. But although this could be done, there was the important matter of providing Carl with an heir, since this was the whole point of the marriage as far as he was concerned—or at least it was his most important reason for marrying. He himself was willing to give a great deal, so naturally he would demand that her part of the bargain was kept.

Suddenly she felt the dampness of perspiration on her forehead. In love with Ray but sleeping with Carl…

Carl making love to her—no, not making love, but merely using her to provide—Sara cut her thoughts and shook her head vigorously.

'I can't marry you!' she quivered, very close to tears. 'It wouldn't be right…' Her voice hung suspended for a moment as she saw the way Carl was regarding her, with reproach in his eyes. 'I can't!' she cried again. 'I know what you're thinking—that I haven't done as you asked and given the matter some thought. Well, I have given it thought, and it isn't right to use marriage to suit one's own ends! How can so cold-blooded a bargain be right?'

Carl's eyes narrowed a little.

'You're really thinking about Ray,' he accused. 'You love him, so you can't imagine yourself being made love to by another man. But, Sara,' he went on deliberately, 'you can never have Ray; he's your sister's husband. He loves her and she loves him. You're sensible enough, surely, to realise that the sooner you forget him in that way the better.'

Sara hung her head.

'I know you're right, Carl,' she agreed. 'I must forget him in that way, I suppose. But I still can't marry anyone else.'

'I believe you will one day marry someone else,' he said. 'You're very lovely, in spite of what you say about Irma's superior beauty. I'll grant you she's one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen, but you're also beautiful, in a very different way.' He stopped, watching her colour rise at his unexpected words of flattery. Then—on impulse it seemed to Sara—he reached across to place his strong brown hand over hers as it lay on the table. 'Give it some further thought,' he advised. 'Stop to consider whether this hopeless love you have is worth remaining single all your life for. Marriage to me will give you that peace and tranquillity you always seem to be craving for. You'll be the mistress of your own home; you'll be a proud mother one day.'

His words came to her softly on the perfumed air; she thought of the man she had first known, the austere and distant Carl van der Linden who treated her with near indifference, and then, a little later, with added contempt, believing as he did that she had come over to Africa to be near to the man she loved. He knew now that she had given up a great deal to come here, and that the reason for coming was the love she had for her sister, and the duty she owed to her.

'Come,' he invited, rising from his chair and bringing Sara up with him, 'let's take a stroll in the garden and forget this discussion for the time being.' She was on her feet, rather close to him; she had a sudden flash of memory that brought vividly to mind that other occasion when she had been close to Carl… much closer than this. She remembered his strength and the easy victory that had carried her to blissful heights. She felt again his passionate kisses, his arms about her. She had blamed her own lack of resistance on the wine… but was it the wine…?

'We'll go this way,' Carl had his hand under her elbow; they wandered away from the lights of the house to the silvered light which filled the garden. It was an idyllic, dreamlike atmosphere, hauntingly still and restful, with no sound but that of the cicadas in the trees at the far end of the lawn. Above, in the vast expanse of sky, a million stars pierced the celestial veil of cirrus cloud that floated, wraith-like, across the purple dome of the heavens. A draught of perfume- laden air touched Sara's face and played tricks with her hair. She felt exhilarated, her senses tingling with excitement.
'It's so beautiful,' she breathed, aware that Carl had turned his head, but unaware that his eyes were fixed with admiration on her profile, or that he put out a hand to tidy an unruly lock of hair but then dropped it again, faintly astonished at his action. 'Just look, Carl———' Sara pointed to the small ornamental pool just ahead of them. 'The clouds are mirrored in the water.' It was so pretty, but she thought that perhaps Carl would not be as appreciative as she was.

But to her surprise he stopped, and said after a moment, 'The clouds look like silver—the result of the moonlight, of course.'

'How quiet it all is!'

'But the leaves are whispering.'

'Yes, I can just hear them.'

They walked on again, Carl still keeping his hand beneath Sara's elbow. Her thoughts wandered, to the pleasant times she had had since coming here, to stay with a woman she had never even met. They had got along as if they had known one another for years. Sara began to picture that gracious lady as her mother-in-law… A little thrill of pleasure shot through her; she knew she could never have a nicer mother-in-law and she thought that if only she could have been in love with Carl then her future would have looked rosy indeed. But she was not in love with Carl, nor was he in love with her, so marriage was definitely out. It could never succeed if it was entered into in so cold and calculating a manner as Carl had suggested. Why, it was no more than a business deal! No, attractive as was his offer in one way—and there was no doubt that the idea of living at Ravenspark was most attractive indeed—it had no appeal for Sara at all.

Or did it…?

Sara found herself going over it all again, this time seeing only the advantages, Irma's peace of mind being the most important. Ray would spend more time with her, as Carl had said, so it was reasonable to assume that they would become close again, as they used to be before Sara's arrival at the farm. She had taken over the running of the home quite naturally, because Irma had had no interest at all. But if Sara was not there to run the home then Irma might do it herself. She could certainly do such things as planning meals, making shopping lists, giving orders to Sadie and Makau. All this would take up some of her time and in consequence there would be less time for brooding.

Yes, there were certainly many advantages…

But what of Sara herself—married to a man as unfeeling as Carl? True, she did not want his love, simply because she was unable to give love in return, but she could scarcely go through her life without even affection. There would be the children, though…

A sigh escaped her and Carl turned his head to look at her.

'What was that for?' he inquired softly.

'I was thinking,' she murmured.

'I told you to forget it for the time being.'

'How can I? It's natural that it should be on my mind.'

'You're looking at the advantages and the disadvantages,' he stated. 'But are there many disadvantages, Sara?'

'There are certainly more advantages,' she agreed.

'I ought not to influence you. It's your decision, Sara. As for me—well, I can look out for someone else to serve my purpose.'

Someone else… Sara looked up into his handsome face; she remembered again that ecstasy of his love-making.
Someone else… A frown creased her wide clear brow. She saw the picture of him with a pretty wife, and two or three children. She had thought once that he would make an unfeeling father, but she knew now that she had been quite mistaken; he would make an excellent father—stern, certainly, but a kind father for all that.

Someone else… Why did the words jar like this?

He was speaking again, saying it was time they returned to the house. She nodded and they turned, retracing their steps. Sara spoke, softly, into the balmy night where the sweet perfumes of flowers drifted through the air.

'I've made up my mind, Carl.'

'You have?' He stopped, and looked down into her lovely face. 'And what decision have you come to?'

'I'd like to marry you—and th-thank you for asking me.'

'Thank you for accepting,' was his quiet unemotional response. 'I rather think, my dear, that we've made a profitable bargain tonight, one which neither of us will ever regret.' He paused a moment and then, 'I shall not, of course, expect you to be my wife immediately. We shall marry, and soon, but I think you'll agree that we ought to get to know one another a little better before we put our marriage on a normal footing?'

Deep gratitude welled up within her. He might have known that no sooner was her answer given than the thought of her wedding night had brought to her something almost akin to fear.

'I do agree, Carl,' she returned, fluttering him a shy smile. 'Thank you for being so considerate.'
CHAPTER NINE

Irma lay back against the pillows and watched her sister using a duster on the dressing-table. Sadie had been ill for three days and so the dusting and cleaning of Irma's room had fallen once again on Sara's shoulders. Not that Sara minded; she arrived at Njangola at nine o'clock every morning, anyway.

'I'm still staggered that you and Carl should have got married.' Irma spoke into the little silence that had fallen between them. 'I lie here and ponder, and always come to the same conclusion.'

'And what's that?' Sara wanted to know, sending Irma a smile across the room.

'That there's something that doesn't quite fit.'

'Such as?'

'You hated him until you went on that holiday.'

'I didn't hate him,' denied Sara, bending down to dust the narrow length of polished wood supporting the legs of the dressing-table. 'I disliked him, I admit, but there was nothing stronger than that.'

'You disliked him one week and the next you were married to him.'

Sara had to laugh.

'Not as quickly as that, Irma. We were engaged for ten days, remember?'

'Ten days!' scoffed her sister.

'What about you and Ray?' Sara could not help reminding her.

'We were engaged longer than that.'

'I don't really see that it matters.' Straightening up,
Sara glanced around to make sure she had dusted everything.

'Are you in love with him?' asked Irma curiously.

'What a thing to ask!'

'Well, I am asking it.'

Sara twisted away, and began to dust a small bookshelf for the second time.

'Of course I'm in love with him. Am I the kind of girl to marry without love?'

'You were in love with Ray... perhaps you still are in love with him.'

Sara swallowed hard, her nerves quivering. If it had not worked... if it had all been done for nothing...

Naturally she mentioned it to her husband at dinner that evening. It was the first time they had seen each other that day, for Carl had already gone out when Sara got up, and he was still out when she returned to Ravenspark at almost six o'clock, having had to see to the evening meal for Ray and Irma.

'You mean she actually asked outright if you're in love with me?' Carl seemed almost unable to believe it.

'She also reminded me that I'd been in love with Ray, and suggested I might still be in love with him.'
Carl frowned.

'Irma needs convincing,' he declared. 'When I was with her yesterday she seemed as depressed as ever. I've an idea
that Ray isn't doing all he should for her.' His voice was stern, his eyes faintly angry. He was one of the family now
and it seemed that he intended to have his say. His next words left Sara in no doubt about this. 'I shall speak to Ray,
and give him some advice.'

'You've just said that Irma needs convincing. How are we to convince her?'

'There really shouldn't be any need,' he answered shortly. 'The very fact that we're married should be proof enough
that we're in love.' So calm and casual! He might have been talking of the weather, or that field of mealies over
there, for all the emotion he put into his voice. Sara, bride of three weeks, was of course often allowing her mind to
see a different picture, that of herself as a well-loved bride… But there it was; not for her the rapture that had been
Irma's. She was fortunate, anyway, Sara had decided. Mistress of this beautiful home, a handsome husband to escort
her to the Club dance on a Saturday night. Carl was satisfied with his bargain and so was she. As he had prophesied,
it was a most convenient arrangement for Sara and for him, but one part of it seemed to have failed—unless Irma
could be convinced that Sara was in love with her husband. Carl was speaking, wanting to know how it had come
about that Irma had asked such pointed questions.

'She just began by saying she was staggered that you and I had got married. She knew, you see, that we didn't like
one another very much.'

Carl nodded thoughtfully.

'She used to hint now and then that you and I were not as neighbourly as she would have expected.'

'What are we to do?' asked Sara again, her eyes filled with anxiety. 'She was very low in spirits today.'

An exasperated sigh escaped her husband.

'Apart from making love in front of her I can't think!'

'Making l-love?' Sara's eyes opened very wide indeed, as well they might. 'What———?'

'I meant kissing and cuddling, of course.' He had to laugh at her expression. 'Are you willing to act with a little—er
—affection towards me, just for her benefit?'

'If it's really necessary,' she said after a little frowning silence.

'If it's so abhorrent to you, then we won't bother!'

Sara said nothing more about her sister. Carl was obviously not feeling up to a discussion on the matter and so it was
prudently dropped by Sara, who abruptly changed the subject, talking about other, more trivial things.

The following afternoon Carl arrived at Njangola Farm, having ridden over after being with his boys all morning,
supervising the felling of several mahogany trees. Sara watched from the window of Irma's bedroom as Carl slid
lightly from the gelding's glossy back, secured the reins to a tree and went off towards the dairy where Ray was on a
ladder, painting the new guttering that had been fixed beneath the repaired roof. What would Carl say to her brother-in-law? Sara wondered, turning her head as Irma asked what she was looking at that interested her so much.

'It's Carl; he's talking to Ray.'

'Carl—your husband.' Irma's voice was so low as to be scarcely audible. 'Tell me, what's it like, living in such a
luxurious house as Ravenspark?'

'I've been living in a luxurious house for some time,' Sara reminded her, but immediately went on to say, 'I love it at
Ravenspark. As you know, the gardens are fantastic, and the house itself—well, you've been inside it, so you know
how comfortable it all is.'
'Yes; we went to a party there once, when we first came here... and I was able to dance every dance, and take part in the games, and stroll in the grounds............'

'Irma, stop being so bitter I It's not always going to be like this!'

'No? Tell me, then, how is it ever going to change?'

Sara found herself spreading her hands helplessly.

'I don't know, Irma, but I just feel it isn't always going to be like this!'

'Bet your life it isn't! I'm not intending to live, Sara.'

Sick at heart, Sara turned away. She watched Carl and Ray walking towards another of the farm buildings —where they would be out of earshot of the boys working by the dairy, Sara supposed.

'We were talking about Ravenspark.' Irma's voice caused Sara once more to turn her head. 'Tell me about the other rooms. I've seen only two.'

'There's Carl's study, which he has let me see, but that's all. It's definitely his own private domain. Then there's a small sitting room which we like to use in the evenings. The bedrooms are very attractive, all the decor having been planned by Carl's mother—I did tell you about her gift, didn't I?'

Irma nodded.

'Go on,' urged Irma, and Sara was only too willing to oblige, glad that Irma was interested in something for a change. She continued to describe the house which was now her home.

'The guest rooms are in blue and gold and blue and white, while—while——— ' She checked just in time, her heart giving a little bump. She had almost given away the fact that she and Carl occupied separate rooms!

'While what?' demanded Irma, frowning in puzzlement at this pause.

'While ours is in a lovely shade of peach—the curtains and the bed-cover are peach, and so are two of the walls.' Sara went on to expand on the rest of the decorations, and to describe the furniture. When she had finished she heard Irma say, 'That sounds awful for a man's room. It's too dainty for a man like Carl.'

Sara said nothing. She had brought two books from Carl's library and she had already read one short story to Irma, but now she asked if she would like her to read another. She would far rather have seen Irma reading the stories for herself, but although she did quite a lot of reading when Sara was not there, she seemed always to want Sara to sit on the bottom of the bed and read aloud to her.

'No, I want to go to sleep. Give me a couple of tablets, will you?'

Sara frowned darkly.

'You don't want to sleep at this time of the day, Irma. Let me read to you.'

'I want to sleep.'

'I ought not to give them to you,' began Sara, when Irma almost snapped, 'For heaven's sake, Sara, do as I ask! I know what I want better than you do!'

With a sigh of resignation Sara went off to get the tablets, which she took back to the bedroom, along with a glass of water. A few minutes later she stood by the bed, her eyes filled with tears, and watched her sister's eyes begin to close.

Carl had left when she went out to the dairy to speak to Ray, telling him about the tablets she had been forced to give Irma.
Ray shrugged, much to her astonishment.

‘I don’t argue any more,’ he admitted dispiritedly. ‘If she wants to sleep her whole life away then who are you and I to try to stop her?’

‘Ray, how can you be so unconcerned? Are you sitting with her in the evenings, after you’ve done your work?’

‘Sara, please don’t you start. Carl’s just been on to me——— ‘ He broke off, his voice quivering, his eyes actually moist as tears came close. ‘I’ve been so damned blind, Sara! I’ve made a terrible mess of my life.’ He looked down at her in a way that made her catch her breath between her teeth in a little sound of protest, and she involuntarily brought a trembling hand to her mouth. ‘Don’t say it,’ she whispered, but already he was speaking and as she heard his broken accents her heart cried out for him. ‘It’s you I love——God help me! I couldn’t see it until she told me that you were in love with me, that you’d fallen in love with me that first night———-’

He turned away and Sara’s heart twisted in anguish as she saw his shoulders shake and knew that he was crying. How she kept from comforting him she would never know; it was sheer agony not to go to him, and to cradle his head on her breast. Instead, she said persuasively that he had better go into the house, as some of his boys were coming across from the hut where they had been having their afternoon drinks and sandwiches. He nodded, and a few moments later she and he were sitting on the stoep, facing one another across the rattan table.

‘I’m surprised that Irma spoke like that to you,’ she said, speaking into the oppressive silence. It was a strange thing, but she felt so calm about Ray’s knowing that she loved him. And all at once she knew why: she was married, and therefore safe from any temptation.

‘She thinks you married Carl as a cover-up, so that you and I could have an affair without anyone suspecting it.’

‘She——— !’ Horror-stricken that Irma could even imagine anything so infamous as that sort of conduct, Sara was speechless for a full half minute. ‘Oh, what’s got into her, Ray? It—it sickens me!’

‘And me, but I have to agree with her when she says you didn’t marry Carl for love. It fairly staggered me, as you know, when you came back from that holiday engaged to a man you’d never even liked.’ Ray was wiping a hand across his eyes, looking a little shamefaced because he had allowed his grief to escape all control. Grief? Yes, and regret that he had not realised that it was Sara he loved…

‘I’d rather not talk any more about it, Ray.’ Sara’s voice was sharper than she meant it to be, but in some vague, inexplicable way she resented Ray’s stating so confidently that she did not love her husband. ‘The thing we do have to talk about is what’s to be done for Irma. She’s taking too many tablets for one thing, and for another she must be given something to make her life worth while———-’

‘And what can you suggest?’ almost sarcastically from Ray. ‘I suggested she learn to paint and while you were away I contacted a lady willing to come here and give her some tuition. Irma flatly refused even to have a chat with the woman.’

‘She’s madly in love with you, Ray, and I firmly believe that you could help her a great deal if you wished. I asked if you spent your evenings with her. Do you, Ray? Do you play the games I bought?’

He shook his head.

‘I don’t love her, Sara———- ‘

‘You do!’ she cried. ‘You do love her! Why, you’ve only been married for seven months, so you must love her…’ Sara let her voice fade as Ray shook his head.

‘I thought I loved her, but I know now it was nothing stronger than infatuation, and had we not rushed the wedding there wouldn’t have been a wedding at all, simply because I’d have discovered my feelings and broken off the engagement. I’ve known ever since you arrived here that I was thinking about you a lot more than I thought about her—in fact your face was with me all the time I was out there, in those fields, working. Yet it never dawned on me that it was you I loved, not until Irma told me you loved———-’
'Stop!' Sara put her hands to her ears. 'Stop, I say! You love Irma—I know you do!'

'Sara, you're very sweet, and good and kind. I was bound to fall in love with you even if I was in love with

Irma in the beginning. Besides, what future is there for me, tied to a girl like that?'

Sara's eyes blazed at the callousness of his words. He was thinking about himself alone, and caring nothing for the

plight of his wife.

'You're talking about my sister! Don't you dare refer to her as "a girl like that"!

'I'm sorry. I scarcely know what I'm saying. Forgive me, Sara, and please promise you'll never stop loving me.'

She closed her eyes tightly. Why had Irma imparted that information to him? She must have been distraught, for

otherwise she would never have disclosed her knowledge.

'You're Irma's husband,' she reminded him when at last she could trust herself to speak. 'You owe her your whole

life, because of the vows you made in church. You took her for better or———'

'Oh, for goodness' sake! I've been expecting you to say that! Do you realise, Sara, that I'm not yet thirty? Am I to be

expected to spend the rest of my life listening to the self-pitying complaints of my wife?'

A terrible silence ensued. Sara, her illusions shattered, looked at Ray through her tears. Good-looking he might be—

the kind of man she had always hoped she would marry... but what was beneath the exterior? Where was the

loyalty, the duty, the love which was his wife's by right? She turned away and, without another word, went into the

house and along to Irma's room. Her sister lay very still, her pale face against the pillow drawn and faintly lined

around the mouth. There were traces of dampness on her beautiful lashes, evidence that she had wept a little before

going to sleep. Sara's mouth trembled and again she turned away, this time to go home, to her husband.

He was out; she had not really expected him to be in, because a good deal of felling was being done at present,

especially in the far plantation. Should she go to him? He would think it strange, seeing that she had no real reason

for seeking him out. In any case, why did she want to go to him? Sara found no answer; all she knew was that she

wished that Carl were here... to comfort her.

After strolling about the garden for a while she decided to take the small car and go into town. It was not that she

wanted anything, but she was at a loose end, having come from Njangola sooner than she had expected to do. It was

the first time she had been so desperate to get away, and her gratitude towards Carl overwhelmed her, because he

had made it possible for her to get away; he had provided her with a home, a precious haven to which she could fly

and where she would find that peace and tranquillity for which her heart had craved since the day she had set foot on

African soil.

The journey to Paulsville helped to soothe her nerves, this plus the quiet half hour spent in the gardens of her home;

and to make things even better she met Bernard immediately she parked the car. He had driven into town to bring

some produce which the general store had ordered from his brother-in-law. As usual his greeting was gay and light;

and then he asked about Irma, and it seemed then that his voice and manner changed and he was no longer gay, but

oddly weighted down with something akin to anguish. Sara, puzzled, but reluctant to inquire about his change, told

him frankly that she had come away earlier than she had intended.

'Irma was asleep,' she added, 'so there was nothing for me to stay for. Ray will see to her when she wakes.'

'Will he?'

'Of course,' answered Sara, surprised at the question.

'Are you going to the shops?' he inquired, abruptly changing the subject.

'I suppose so, although I've nothing to buy.'
'I've done my delivering and I was just going home, but if you don't mind I'd like to come along with you. I can carry your parcels,' he suggested, appearing to brighten up again.

'I don't expect I shall have any parcels, but come along by all means. As a matter of fact, Bernard, I feel the need for company, so meeting you was like the answer to a prayer.'

'The brand new bride wanting company?' Bernard raised his brows interrogatingly. 'Had your first tiff, or something?'

She managed a forced laugh.

'No, nothing like that, Bernard. Carl and I never quarrel.'

'You've not had much time, have you?' he countered with a grimace. 'By Jove, Sara, you were a couple of dark horses! What did Carl's mother have to say about it?'

'She was pleased, although she was very surprised, naturally.' She had been more than surprised; she had been exceedingly puzzled, and with her astuteness it was to be assumed that she knew there was a great deal she had not been told. But she accepted it all with her usual calm composure and without asking the questions that must inevitably have arisen in her mind.

Sara and Bernard had reached a bookshop and they automatically stopped.

'I never can pass a bookshop,' admitted Sara, but went on immediately to say that her husband's wonderful library was now at her disposal and she was looking forward to the time when she would be able to read some of the books.

'As it is, you're too busy looking after Irma,' said Bernard.

'Yes; but I don't mind ..Sara's voice trailed to silence as she recalled her eagerness to get away from the farm a couple of hours ago.

'It must be time-consuming for you.' Again he seemed to be affected by some inner distress. Sara ventured to ask him if anything was wrong. 'Not really.' His answer, brief and rather more curt than she would have expected, prevented Sara from saying what she had intended saying, which was that he seemed upset about something. Instead, she glanced in the window and casually remarked on the Christmas decorations which the proprietor had begun to put up.

'Three weeks,' she added. 'I never thought I'd be in my own home by Christmas this year!'

'Is it a nice, pleasant feeling to be the lady in charge of a mansion like Ravenspark?'

'It's wonderful, Ray!'

'And wonderful to be in love.' He frowned, then said, 'Are you wanting anything from here?'

'No, I don't think so.' Sara had already got her sister's present; it was an antique gold bracelet which Sara had bought a couple of years ago and which Irma had always admired. It would be far more acceptable than anything she could buy in Paulsville, Sara thought, for now that Irma was bedridden the selection of presents for her was greatly limited. As for a present for Carl—well, Sara felt that, their relationship being what it was, anything too intimate, or too expensive, would be out of place, and therefore she had ordered a book which she had mentioned buying for himself 'some time'.

'Then let's go to the Club tea-room and have tea and cakes.'

'All right.'

They sat on the verandah, at a teak table set in the shade. Bernard seemed tense and once again Sara asked him if anything was wrong.
'I've been visiting your sister,' he returned.

'Yes?' Sara's eyes flickered as she waited for what was to come next.

'She's dreadfully unhappy!'

'Yes, that's natural.' Sara looked at him across the table, noting the tightness of his lips, which was so unlike him, since he was almost always smiling or laughing. 'She's taking a long time to accept that she's the way she is. I'm hoping that eventually she will realise there's nothing to be gained by being so unhappy and then she might take up a hobby. Ray wants her to paint———'

'So she told me! He just wants her to occupy herself so that he won't have to spend any time entertaining her!' His voice had risen so high that some people at the far end of the verandah glanced his way. 'I'm sorry,' he muttered. 'I ought not to have become so heated.'

An incredulous silence followed as Sara, her eyes wide and disbelieving, stared at Bernard's flushed face.

'It's not true,' she murmured, 'it can't be!'

'It is true!' he flashed, losing his apologetic air as his voice lifted again. 'I'm in love with her!'

'Oh… God…' What a muddle! Poor Bernard! He was so charming, so honest and good-humoured, so carefree up till now, working and saving for his own little farm. And now he was in the depths of despair, in love with another man's wife… but a wife who was an invalid, who could never have been a helpmate to him anyway.

'I can't bear it when she tells me she's lonely, when she cries…'

'Does she cry when you visit her?'

'She did on Wednesday, sobbed piteously. You'd gone home, if you remember, to take a message to Carl from Ray.'

'Yes, that's right. And Irma was crying?' Sara's eyes, wide and intense, were still fixed on his face. 'She's been confiding in you?'

'Almost from the first. She's madly in love with that——— With her husband, but I'll tell you this, Sara, he isn't in love with her! Just imagine, falling out of love with her in so short a time—and only because she's crippled! If it were me—why, I'd love her all the more. I'd work for her, to provide her with all sorts of comforts———'

'Bernard, don't,' begged Sara, feeling so weighed down by other people's problems that she felt she could not take any more. 'You're crucifying me I'

Startled, he looked at her, his eyes shadowed as a tinge of guilt entered into him.

'That's a strong word, Sara.'

'I've so much———' She stopped as the dark-skinned waitress appeared at the table, notepad in hand. 'Just tea and a scone for me, please.'

'I'll have the same. Bring a pot of tea for two and a plate of scones, please.'

'Jam and cream?'

'Yes—Do you want jam and cream, Sara?' She shook her head. 'Just for one, then,' he said, waiting until the waitress had gone before saying,

'You've so much to bear? Is that what you were about to tell me?'

'I'm just as hurt as you by Irma's unhappiness, Bernard, and there are other things as well. And now you—— Oh, you shouldn't have fallen in love with her!' she cried distractedly. 'I'm going to worry about you now, and your being
hurt!' How little she had known, when she had met him and been so glad of his company, that she was going to hear his tragic confession that he was in love with her sister.

'You needn't,' he assured her. 'I shall find happiness in being with her sometimes. We're becoming very good friends and our friendship will grow with the years———'

'But, Bernard, you'll want to marry, surely?'

He shook his head emphatically.

'I shall never marry—unless I marry her.'

Sara shook her head; this was love at its most sacred.

'You'd marry her—were she free?'

'Without a moment's hesitation,' answered Bernard, and Sara knew that he really meant it.

'You say that you and my sister are very good friends. But I have to warn you, Bernard, that this friendship hasn't brought about any change in her; she's still dreadfully depressed.'

'I know it. I haven't I just said so? It's because she's in love with Ray—she worships him, but she knows, Sara, that he doesn't return her love.'

Sara said nothing; she was relieved to know that Irma had not said anything to Bernard about her, Sara, being in love with Ray.

But was she in love with Ray…? The question did not astound her as it would have done a short while ago. She had seen a very different side of Ray recently, a side that was far from attractive.

To her, marriage was forever; it carried obligations, and even though she and Carl had only entered into it as a business partnership, she would take good care of him if ever he should need her care, and she was sure that Carl would do the same for her.

He had returned when Sara arrived home; she looked earnestly into his face, half inclined to tell him everything that had happened that day. But he appeared distant and impersonal, and in any case she decided it wasn't quite the thing to tell her husband that her brother-in-law had confessed his love for her. But the burden pressed heavily upon her and she suddenly felt a great anger rising within her. She had been given this haven by Carl and yet she was unable to take advantage of the peace it offered. At first, when she had taken up this new life, there had been a lightening of the oppression that had plagued her, simply because, when she arrived home after her day spent at the farm, she was able to relax, feeling satisfied that her duty had been done and therefore she could forget her troubles until the next morning. As a result of this changed routine Sara had felt different both mentally and physically, her mind free from the continual nagging consciousness of Irma's plight, and her body not being so tired that she had craved for the moment when she could fall into bed.

'What's wrong, Sara?' Carl asked the question as they sat on the verandah after dinner, drinking their coffee. 'You look troubled about something.'

'It's Irma,' she answered, aware of a little access of gratitude towards him for noticing that something was not quite right. 'I…' She checked slowly, filled with a great yearning to unburden herself, and yet still reluctant to impart the information she had been given that day. 'I wish there was some means by which she could be made to leave that bed.'

'I've been thinking about that myself,' he returned reflectively. 'I'm willing to get her one of those wheelchairs you've been talking about. I feel that if we get it first and tell her afterwards she might be more inclined to try it out.' Carl looked at his wife, and a faint smile softened the austerity of his features as he saw the wide-eyed expression of gratitude on her face.
'Carl, you're so good and kind. Will you really buy one of those chairs?'

'Of course I will.'

She was excited suddenly, forgetting for a while all the other problems that confronted her.

'Where can we get it? How long will it take?' 'I shall have to order it, but I'll see Irma's doctor first and get his advice. Leave it all to me, Sara. It'll take a little time, though, so don't expect Irma to be moving around Njangola Farm by Christmas, will you?'

'Of course not.' She was full up, on the verge of tears. 'I'm so grateful to you, Carl,' she quivered. 'You see, although I'd kept on thinking about the chair, I really didn't know where the money would come from to buy it.' She could have added that her own savings had dwindled alarmingly since she came to the farm, because of Ray's inability to pay her anything awhile, and so her first idea of buying the chair out of her own money had had to be abandoned. Carl was speaking, telling her that gratitude was totally unnecessary; he was her husband, therefore it was his duty to do all in his power to lighten Sara's anxiety over her sister. Then he said, looking at her with an odd expression,

'Are you sure, Sara, that you haven't something else on your mind?'

The merest hesitation and then, shaking her head, 'No, Carl, I have nothing else on my mind.' He wasn't satisfied; his penetrating gaze seared into her for a space and she found it impossible to hold that gaze. She lowered her lovely lashes, picking up her coffee cup and taking a drink. To her relief she heard her husband say, 'Well, if you're quite sure, my dear.' And after a little pause, 'How about a stroll in the garden?'

She smiled then and finished her coffee. She was always ready for a stroll in the gardens of Ravenspark.

They left the verandah and made for the far side of the garden where the swimming-pool was situated. It was a soft and balmy summer evening with the purple sky flaring with constellations and the pale filigree of the Milky Way trailing into the supernal infinities of space. The bushveld—that enormous prairie of grassy scrubland—lay spread out in drowsy silence beneath an argent covering of moonglow, its distant limits misty and darkening to the horizon's edge. Mystery and magic and the primeval peace—at once sensuous and serene—added to the impression of unreality which Sara had experienced on such another occasion as this. She glanced covertly up into her husband's face, profoundly conscious of his attractions, his finely-chiselled profile silhouetted in the moonlight. Her husband…

A tenseness gripped her suddenly as thoughts shot erratically through her mind, thoughts of Carl and the pleasure she had had from his company, of Ray and her new awareness that his handsome veneer bore no relation to what was underneath, of the times she had envied her sister during her courtship with Ray, then her thoughts swept back to Carl, and that night when he had kissed her, to the holiday, to the cold-blooded proposal of marriage. And now, with the tenseness increasing, she knew a fierce, almost angry resentment that her relationship with her husband was such that any approach on her part was impossible. She had not even the right to slip her hand into his, nor to whisper any tender endearment…

What thoughts were these? Why was her heart beating overrate like this? And the yearning deep within her for some sort of physical comfort… why should it hurt so much simply because the physical comfort was denied her? She had accepted the business arrangement which she and Carl had made, and it had never even entered her head that she would ever want more than her husband was willing to give. Much less had it occurred to her that his attractions as a man would have this sort of effect on her. He turned his head, obviously sensing her interest, and she turned swiftly from her observation of his face and looked towards the pool, shining in the moonlight. But she knew he was staring at her head, knew he was curious to know why she had been staring at him. However, he made no comment, but merely walked slowly towards the pool.

'Have you been in for a swim yet?' he asked her presently, when the pool was reached and they stopped beside it.

'No, not yet. There hasn't been much time.'

'I did say, Sara, that you were to have your week-ends at home.'
'Yes, but Irma's asked me to go over———'

'Perhaps she has, but it's what I say that goes. I've been working for the past two week-ends, so I" haven't made any fuss about your going over to Njangola. But it was not what I planned—you and I having little or no time together. In future, Sara,' he went on in a voice of authority, 'you will have your week-ends at home, with me.'

'With you?' A little breathless her tone, and that racing of her heart again. 'You w-want me to be with you, Carl?'

He smiled faintly but, she thought, without humour.

'If we're to have children, Sara, then we ought to get to know one another, don't you think?'

'I see.' Her throat seemed to ache all at once, and her heart dragged within her. 'I'd forgotten—somehow—about the—the children I'm's-supposed to—to give you.' She had coloured with embarrassment, but her chief emotion was one of bitter disappointment. She had been fool enough to believe that he really desired her company during the week-ends, wanted it because it gave him pleasure to be with her. But this was not so; he was as cold-blooded as ever as regards his relationship with her. He had married her for a purpose, and he intended to see that she fulfilled the obligations which the marriage demanded of her.

He made no comment on her statement that she had forgotten about the children, and for this she was grateful. A caustic remark at this time would surely have resulted in her bursting into tears.

After standing by the pool for a few minutes Carl suggested they return to the house. It was not what Sara wanted, but she had no option other than to agree, and she fell into step beside him as they wandered back the way they had come, wandered through air filled with the honey-fragrance of flowers which, as always, gave her a sort of sensory pleasure. When they reached the verandah Carl stood looking down at his wife, an unreadable expression in his eyes. She stared, her pulse throbbing, her whole body quivering with a vague unfathomable expectancy.

'You're very lovely, Sara.' Softly-spoken words, and the lazy eyes moved from Sara's face to her hair, and then down to the gentle swell of her throat above the low-cut dress of coral lace and net. She saw a muscle vibrate at the side of his neck, saw the movement of his lips and waited, breathless, for him to voice the words hovering there. But abruptly he turned away and she knew for sure that a dark and heavy frown had settled on his forehead.

'It's time we went in,' he said at length. 'I've got to be up early in the morning; we're still felling, and will be for another week at least.'

Five minutes later Sara was standing by the window of her room, staring out into the purple night, her eyes unseeing as she dwelt on the revelation that had just come to her.

In love with Carl… The husband whose only interest in her was that of using her to provide him with a son—and other children besides, it would seem. In love. How could she have been so foolish? She did not ask herself how she had come to fall out of love with Ray, since she was now freely admitting that what she felt for him was nothing more than infatuation. He would never have done for her; she needed a man with depth to his character, a sincere man and loyal, a man who would honour the promises he had made in church. Well, she had that kind of man… but he did not love her.

A deep sigh escaped her, a sigh that was almost a sob. Another weight to carry, and this one heavier than all the rest put together. Would she ever be free of these dragging burdens? she wondered bleakly.

She opened the window and stepped out on to the verandah, sure that she would not sleep, so it was useless to go to bed. The starry night was still mysterious and romantic, the dry flat terrain of the bushveld still silvered by the moon's glorious light. Cicadas chirped in the lovely fern-like foliage of a flame tree, and from somewhere in the valley came the harsh echo of bullfrogs croaking. Closer to, a pair of eyes glowed like embers in the darkness as some small nocturnal creature crouched, still as a statue.

Sara turned at last, and entered her room. There was an ache in her heart, and yet there was a thread of hope there, too, for if she and Carl were to have children, then surely he must one day come to care for her.
CHAPTER TEN

It was five days later that Sara, arriving at the farm at her usual time of nine o'clock, found Sadie busy in the kitchen making jam when normally at this time she would be preparing Irma's breakfast in readiness for Sara to take it in.

'Has my sister had her breakfast?' Sara asked in surprise.

'She was still asleep ten minutes ago when I knocked on her door,' replied the housegirl.

Her heart jerking with fear, Sara sped along the short passage and, without even giving her customary gentle knock, she turned the door handle and entered the room.

'Oh…' Her whole body sagged with relief. Irma was sitting up in bed, looking brighter than at any other time since the accident. 'Have you only just wakened up?'

Irma smiled and said yes, she had overslept this morning.

'And I didn't take any sleeping pills,' she added with a little laugh, 'so you can take that censorious look off your face!'

Sara frowned in puzzlement.

'You managed to sleep without the tablets?' It seemed impossible; Irma had been taking them regularly ever since Sara had arrived here.

'Yes, I did.' A slight pause and then, 'I've got something else to tell you: I don't want to die any more.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' Not even by the movement of a muscle did Sara betray the profound relief that Irma's words had given her. 'What brought about the change?'

'Bernard,' answered Irma, and now Sara did betray emotion, because accompanying this one brief word was a look in Irma's eyes that sent Sara's thoughts into a ferment of conjecture.

'Yes?' she quivered, almost willing her sister not to voice the confession she was obviously going to make.

'I'm in love with him and he's in love with me.' So calm—matter-of-fact, almost, but there was an unmistakable happy tinge to Irma's voice. Sara just stared, her mind refusing to take in the added complications which this new situation would create. It was as though saturation point had already been reached and her mind could take no more.

'Get my breakfast, please, Sara, and I'll tell you all about it then.'

In a sort of daze Sara went back to the kitchen. Sadie, having heard the sisters talking, had left her jam-making and was preparing paw-paws and boiled eggs for Irma's breakfast. Sara watched as the housegirl put toast and coffee on the tray.

'There, it's ready,' smiled Sadie as she lifted the tray and handed it to Sara. 'I hope everything will be all right.'

A few moments later Sara was standing at the end of the bed, watching Irma toying with her fruit and listening to what she had to say. Sara learned that Bernard had declared his love the previous evening, when he had spent four hours with Irma, as her husband had gone into Paulsville to spend an evening at the Club.

'Bernard's confession came as no surprise to me,' continued Irma, 'because it was already evident that he was in love with me. Knowing that gave me something to think about in the evenings when I was alone here, and caused my thoughts to become concentrated on him, with the result that his image replaced Ray's altogether.' A pause ensued, thoughtful and profound.

Irma still toyed with the paw-paw but made no attempt to eat it. 'I've known for some time that Ray had ceased to love me. Well, I don't love him any more—so you can have him, Sara.'
'Thanks for nothing!' Colour—angry crimson colour—had leapt to Sara's cheeks, and as she faced her sister now her eyes were blazing. 'It so happens that I'm in love with my husband!' Silence; Irma's eyes flickered with a strange expression.

'Did you love him when you married him?' she wanted to know, for the moment diverted.

'I love him now, and that's all that matters!'

'I believed you'd married him merely as a cover-up for any activities which you and Ray might want to indulge in. I told Ray and he threatened to repeat it to you. Did he repeat it?'

'Yes, he did,' flashed Sara. 'You've got a hateful mind, Irma!'

'I'm sorry if I misjudged you. But I knew you were once in love with Ray. Why did you marry Carl, Sara?'

Another silence. Sara was so furious with Irma that she was almost ready to flounce out of the room and never enter it again. But she stilled her fury and answered the question.

'If you must know, I married Carl in order to set your mind at rest, married a man I didn't love!'

'You———!' Irma's face paled a little. 'Oh, Sara, I didn't know! Forgive me—please say you forgive me.'

'I do forgive you, simply because I love Carl now.'

Irma fell silent for a space and then, slowly and wonderingly, 'You made a sacrifice like that for me... You married another man just so I'd feel safe about Ray. And instead of feeling safe I was even more troubled, suspecting you of evil motives———' Irma put down her spoon and flicked a hand to indicate her wish for the tray to be removed.

'I've been hateful to you, Sara. I always knew, you see, that I'd taken Ray from you...'

'You didn't take him from me. I loved him, yes, but he was never mine, so you couldn't have taken him from me.'

'He loved you later, though. I've seen it, although he's tried to hide it from me, I'll give him that.' Irma frowned as if the subject of her husband was one she no longer wished to pursue. 'You say you didn't love Carl when you married him,' she said, glancing at Sara as she moved the tray without even trying to persuade her to eat something. 'Did he love you?—but he must have done or he wouldn't have asked you to marry him, would he?'

Sara put the tray on a small table and turned.

'We made a bargain, Irma. Neither of us loved the other. I'm not willing to enlighten you as to Carl's side of our bargain.' She was pale now that her angry colour had faded, and she desired nothing more than to get away. She wanted to go home, to the peaceful, uncomplicated atmosphere of Ravenspark. 'Is there anything else I can get you?' offered Sara, flicking a hand automatically to the untouched food on the tray. 'Surely you want a drink?'

Irma nodded, saying she would have a cup of coffee. She watched Sara pour it out, then took it from her. It was a few moments before she began to speak again.

'Bernard and I are intending to live together...'' A rather wry note entered Irma's voice as she went on, 'No one can accuse us of immorality, can they? It wouldn't matter if they could—in fact, I only wish they could!—but it wouldn't make any difference; we'd still go off and live together.' Irma's eyes were dreamy. Sara had seen her like this before—when she was engaged to Ray.

'Go off?' repeated Sara automatically, shaking her head. The complications seemed enormous, yet at the same time Sara was recalling how, before her accident, Irma had been more than ordinarily capable of conducting her life, and it now appeared that she could do it again.

'We're leaving Africa,' Irma said quietly. 'We're going to England. Bernard's got relatives there who are farmers. He's intending to buy a smallholding and progress gradually until he owns a fair-sized farm.'
Sara, still a little dazed by it all, shook her head again in a little incredulous gesture.

'You seem to have everything all worked out,' she observed.

'To perfection. And I don't intend to be a complete drag on Bernard. I'm going to have one of those chairs, and learn to use it. And one day I hope to drive myself about, to do the shopping and other jobs. Lots of people like me have learned to live again, and I shall do the same.' Courage mingled with the happiness in Irma's eyes. Sara's own heart felt lighter than for many months.

'I still believe you'll walk again,' declared Sara with complete confidence.

'Funny—so do I. As you've said so many times, Sara, all kinds of miracles are being performed these days in the field of medicine.'

'It seems impossible that this change in you has come about. Oh, Irma love, I'm so happy for you!' Gone was the last vestige of anger and resentment against her sister. Gone was the hopelessness and despair, gone the terrible fear that Irma would one day take her own life. 'I can tell you now, Irma, that Bernard has already told me he loves you.' Irma made no comment and Sara added, 'Does Ray know yet—about your plans, I mean?'

'I told him when he came in last night. Bernard advised me to, because we're not intending to delay. As soon as Christmas is over we shall be gone. Bernard's relatives will put us up, he says. He's writing to them immediately, telling them everything and asking them to begin looking out for something suitable in the way of a smallholding. As you know, I still have my house over there—the one Uncle left me. I wouldn't sell until I got my price, and am I glad I didn't! Ray would have got it all to put in this place! As it is, I shall sell for what I can get, and the money, put along with Bernard's, should buy us a nice little place somewhere in Wiltshire, where Bernard's relatives live.' Irma took a drink of her coffee, her lovely eyes still dreamy as she looked into the future.

'It all seems so simple!' Sara could not help exclaiming. 'When you first told me of your love for Bernard the problems seemed so colossal as to be insurmountable. But after hearing your plans the whole thing seems to be simplicity itself.'

'It is, Sara. When love is the spur it's amazing what can be done.'

Love... It did appear that once again it was to be Sara's lot to love and herself be unloved. Well, as she had said to herself the other night, there was hope, and it might one day work out that she was no longer an unloved wife. For the present, it was Irma whose happiness was paramount in Sara's thoughts. This was nothing short of a miracle, and it was rather a chastening thought that Bernard had done in a few short weeks what Sara had been desperately trying to do for months—make Irma have the will to live again.

Sara stood for a moment looking at her sister, seeing as so many times before the flawless beauty of her features, the big blue eyes fringed by long curling lashes, the mouth which of late had been so thin and petulant but which was now rosy and full and very kissable.

At last Sara spoke, asking about Ray's reaction to Irma's plans for her future.

'He was relieved, naturally.' A pause, rather strained and uncertain. 'Sara,' said Irma at last, 'he'll ask you———' She stopped, more unsure of the choice of words than before. 'To be blunt,' she said with sudden decision, 'he thinks he's only to ask you, and you'll leave Carl and run right into his arms.'

'Oh...!' Sara coloured, partly with embarrassment, partly with anger. 'Well,' she managed presently, 'he's in for a shock!' 

'So it seems. He's not worthy of a girl like you, Sara.' A small hesitation and then, 'Are you sure that Carl doesn't love you?'

She nodded, her mouth trembling.

'Yes, Irma, I am sure.'
‘He’ll love you one day; it just couldn’t be otherwise.’

‘Perhaps,’ murmured Sara, and for one fleeting moment her own eyes took on a dreamy look. ‘I hope so,’ she added, then changed the subject, telling—Irma that whatever she wanted doing then she would be available to do it for her.

‘There’ll be the packing, but little else. Bernard’s the dependable kind; he’ll see to everything regarding the travel arrangements.’ Irma drained her coffee cup and passed it to Sara, whose hand was already outstretched.

‘Sara . . .’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve been rotten with you at times, and yet you’ve never retaliated. Your patience amazes me, and although it’s seemed that I’ve been ungrateful, that I haven’t even noticed all the care you’ve given me—I have, Sara, and I thank you.’ The last three words came slowly, in a low voice which was sincere. Sara smiled a happy smile and said, ‘You’ve no need to thank me, Irma. I know you’d have done the same for me, had our positions been reversed.’

A slight pause followed this confident statement before Irma said,

‘I’d like to think so . . . but I’m not made of the same stuff as you. You threw up a job you loved, a well-paid job, to come out here and work for nothing. Yes, I’d like to think that I’d have done the same for you, but I don’t really know if I could have resigned myself—as you did—to sacrificing the whole of my life for another person.’

Sara made no comment on this; it was unimportant anyway.

‘I’ll get you the water and towel,’ she said, and picked up the tray. Five minutes later Irma was washing herself, a task which, apart from her hands and face, she had always left to Sara. When she had finished the bowl was taken away and Sara set about making the bed. At last Irma, looking very lovely as she sat there against the pillows, the pretty blue of her bed jacket matching the colour of her eyes, settled down with a book and Sara went back to the kitchen. Sadie was surrounded by jars and bottles—they were on the table, the shelves above the cupboard, and even on the chairs. All this for one man! But Sara rather thought that Ray would sell up and leave Africa. She hoped he would, and because she felt sorry for him she found herself hoping that, one day, he would find happiness.

‘I’m just going out for some fruit.’ Sadie’s pleasant voice broke into Sara's thoughts and she smiled at the girl. ‘I'm bottling some of the fruit, so we can make pies with it later on.’

Off she went, a basket over her arm. Sara began washing the pretty nylon nightie which Irma had taken off, but less than a minute elapsed before she wheeled swiftly, conscious of footsteps which she had recognised at once.

‘Ray, aren’t you working in the fields?’ she said, trembling slightly, and apprehensive too. He was staring at her with an expression of eagerness and this was reflected in his voice as he said, ‘I want to talk to you, Sara. You know what it’s about, because Irma’s been telling you everything. She said she would. Come out into the copse over there———’

He stopped as Sara shook her head.

‘There’s nothing for us to talk about, Ray,’ she told him quietly.

‘There is, Sara! We love each other! Oh, I know you’re married, but we’ll get over that———’ His words were cut again, this time by the reappearance of Sadie. She had obviously not got the fruit she went out for. ‘Come outside,’ he begged. ‘We can’t talk here.’

‘I don’t want to talk to you,’ Sara began, then paused; it struck her that they would have to talk—at least she would, to tell him that she no longer loved him. ‘All right,’ she agreed, drying her hands on a towel. ‘We’ll go over to the copse.’

As soon as they entered the privacy of the shadows she told him that her feelings had changed, and that she was now in love with her husband. Ray stared, aghast, and it was plain that the blow had struck hard. His hands moved
spasmodically, clenching and unclenching as if releasing some unbearable inner torture.

'I don't believe you,' he said hoarsely at last. 'It isn't true I You love me, we both know it. You haven't to think of Irma now, because she's got her future all nicely settled I And as for your marriage—we can easily get over that problem———

'Ray,' broke in Sara gently, 'please don't say any more. I love my husband, very dearly. What I felt for you was trivial in comparison, believe me.' Much as she despised him she had to pity him too. He was shattered, his features pale and twisted; it was clear that he had believed that he had only to call and she would come. 'I do love Carl,' she added quickly. 'I can see you don't believe me

'No, I don't believe you! It's me you love, but you're troubled now because you're married! If this had happened before your marriage you wouldn't have hesitated! But what does it matter? We can forget the marriage—live together, or you can get a divorce!' He was incoherent, mad with disappointment. 'I said you hadn't married Carl for love and I meant it! Irma saw it too!

Sara gave an exasperated sigh. She had no wish to prolong such a fruitless conversation. Ray was acting like a lunatic, and as she looked up into his twisted face she wondered why she had never realised just how weak and despicable a specimen of manhood he was.

'I must go,' she said, moving away a little.

'No! You shan't go until we've come to some agreement. You're being stubborn, Sara. As I've said, you didn't marry Carl for love. I'll never believe you love him!

Sara's patience was fast becoming exhausted. Ray, it seemed, was determined not to be convinced.

'I really don't care whether you believe me or not,' she told him curtly. 'You yourself agreed that what Irma said about my marriage as a cover-up sickened you as much as it sickened me, and yet—unless I'm very mistaken— you'd have entered into an affair with me ———— ' Sara got no further. Taken completely by surprise, she did not even struggle when Ray, catching her slender body in his arms, kissed her passionately on the mouth. She was just gathering her scattered wits together and would have sent him staggering backwards, when suddenly she felt a vicious tug at her hair and cried out in sheer agony as she was literally dragged from the copse and jerked, savagely, against her husband's hard sinewed frame.

'Oh—Carl,' she gasped, 'don't———- !'

'You little slut!' he snarled, towering above her, his eyes blazing with fury. 'Get into the car! Get into it, I say!' 

'Carl,' protested Ray, 'leave her alone!' 

'I'll deal with you later———- '

'If you'll listen a minute———- ' began Sara, then stopped, for Carl had her by the shoulders, propelling her unceremoniously towards the car which was standing in front of the homestead. The door was flung open and Sara bundled inside. Then the door was slammed so violently that the whole body of the car shuddered. Sara righted herself, sitting down in the back of the car where her husband had flung her. She put a shaking hand to her heart, because it was thudding so violently that she was actually frightened. Never had she seen fury such as this, never would she have believed that the man whose demeanour had always been one of cool unruffled self-possession could have acted with such violence, revealing a temper more primitive than the land in which he lived.

She lifted a hand to her cheek, wondering if she were as white as she felt. Her whole body was trembling and the pain in the back of her head had increased to excruciating proportions. Her shoulders, where he had ruthlessly dug in his fingers while thrusting her towards the car, were hot and sore. Her eyes filled up and within seconds the tears were running down her face and on to the spotless white blouse she wore. She was actually sobbing uncontrollably when her husband returned, his dark face harsh as thunder, his amber eyes reminding her of a tiger's—fierce and threatening.
'He's nursing a few bruises!' he snarled, thumbing the starter even before he had closed the car door. 'And you'll be doing the same ten minutes from now!' 

'Carl,' she stammered, y-you c-can't believe that—that I——— ' The words failed, stopped by the ball of fear that had settled in her throat. 

'I knew you were in love with him when I married you, but never did I imagine you'd lower yourself to carrying on a clandestine love affair with your own brother-in-law!' His fury was terrible to see; the car shot forward, slithered on a muddy patch of ground, gained speed again and was raced along the drive on to the lane. Sara at the back was jerked about until she felt physically sick—in addition to the sickness of fear that engulfed her like a deluge. 'Your own sister's husband ————-'!

'Carl,' broke in Sara, drying her tears, 'you can't think such awful things of me—you can't!' 

'I can believe the evidence of my own eyes!' 

She sagged against the upholstery. If he loved her how easy her explanation would be! She was horrified to think he would so easily condemn her, that he could believe her capable of such infamous conduct. The more she thought about it the more her fear gave way to anger. How dared he condemn her without a hearing! And as for that threat about inflicting bruises on her—well, just let him lay a finger on her!

'Out!' The car had crunched to a dizzy stop; the imperious flick of a hand accompanied the one harshly-spoken word. Unsteadily Sara managed to get out of the car. Her husband stood over her, his face full of the towering rage which consumed him. His lips were compressed, thin and cruel. In spite of her own anger Sara was actually shivering with fear. What was he going to do to her? She felt so helpless, utterly in his power. 'Into the house I' he commanded with another flick of his hand. 'Into your room—I don't want the servants to hear what I've got to say!'

Sara obeyed, wishing she could make a run for it, but admitting that such action would not get her very far. In a moment she was standing in the middle of her bedroom, wondering if she would ever live through a more terrifying moment in her life. She tried to see the Carl that she knew—the handsome-featured, arresting mail with whom she had fallen in love, but all she saw was a monster—a being she did not know. She stared at him as he stood there, with his back to the closed door, his face almost contorted with anger.

A little sob escaped her involuntarily; for some reason it acted like a spur to unleash her husband's smouldering fury and before she could take even one step backwards she was being shaken unmercifully, shaken until her teeth chattered together and her pleading cries were lost in his furious invective. Tears ran down her cheeks and by the time she was released her body, bruised and shaking, was racked by sobs. She staggered to the bed and sat down, burying her face in her hands and weeping as though her heart would break.

For so long she had carried other people's burdens, had tackled one problem after another… and now that she herself was in trouble there was no one to come to her aid. The silence was strange; she glanced up, to see her husband staring down at her, his face pale, his mouth moving in a strange spasmodic kind of way. His fists were clenched at his sides, his long lean frame stiff, unmoving. Sara's temper flared. She threw him a vicious glance and told him to get out of her room.

'I hate you,' she quivered, uncaring that she lied, or that her expression could be mistaken for one of utter loathing. 'Get out of my room, I say!'

'Your room…?' softly and yet carrying the low guttural sound of a jungle cat ready to leap upon its prey. 'Your room, did you say?'

Terror seized her, an altogether new kind of terror. It caused every vestige of colour to drain from her face. It must not be like this! Everything else had been done in cold blood—but not like this! She would not have him take her in anger!

'Carl,' she whispered through the convulsive tightness in her throat, 'you haven't listened to me.' No anger now, just pleading, gentle and feminine and persuasive. 'You've condemned me, Carl, without a hearing.' She rose unsteadily,
wincing at the cruel pain in her head. She extended a hand in an almost supplicating gesture, so strong was her desire to prevent him from committing an act which she knew instinctively would bring him bitterness and regret. 'There could be an explanation, but you haven't asked me for it, have you?' She closed her eyes for a second, to shut out that harsh implacable countenance. 'I haven't been unfaithful to you———'

'Are you trying to tell me my eyes deceived me!' he snarled, taking a step towards her. 'He was kissing you, and you were reciprocating———'

'I was not!'

'Were you intending to make love out there, in a field!' For a moment it seemed that all her good intentions would be swept away by the sheer fury which his words had created within her. But she was fighting for their future, so she crushed her anger and pleaded with him once again.

'I want to tell you everything, Carl———'

'I'm not in the mood for lies!' She looked straightly at him.

'I don't waste my time telling lies, Carl,' she returned with quiet dignity.

He stared into her unflinching gaze and within seconds Sara was letting out a long breath of relief. She had won. Her frank and honest manner had caught his attention and he was prepared to hear what she had to say. But, absurdly, the relief she felt at her narrow escape had brought on a drained, fatigued sensation and before she could stop herself she had burst once more into tears.

'Sara!' It was a cry from the heart, wrenched from Carl as with a couple of long strides he brought himself close to her and, taking her in his arms, he held her quietly, aware of her wonderment at his action, aware that her tears were ceasing miraculously, and when at length she looked up at him questioningly all harshness had left his face and she gave a little gasp of disbelief at what she saw in his eyes.

She clung to him, content to be close, forgetting for one exquisite moment that he was waiting for her explanation. He loved her—loved her! She had seen it for herself, in those eyes that, only a moment ago, had shot such terror into her.

She whispered shyly, into the cool white linen of his shirt against which her tear-stained face was pressed, 'Carl… I love you.'

Silence, profound and unfathomable. To Sara, it seemed that her husband's heart was beating a little faster than before, that a great sigh of thankfulness rose up from somewhere deep within him.

'My Sara…' His murmured words, tender and contrite, vibrated gently against her hair. 'My dear love, what did I say to you?'

'It doesn't matter.' She still clung to him, desiring nothing more than to remain there, quiet… safe. 'I know now it was jealousy—and—and I'm glad that you can be jealous.'

'I had no right to condemn you, my darling. I should have known you better than that.'

It was all she needed, for him to express trust even though he had not yet heard one single word of her excuses. She hesitated no longer, but related everything to him, standing close still, with his gentle hands unconsciously covering the bruises he had so recently made on her shoulders. She left nothing out, and as she talked he quite naturally made one or two incredulous exclamations, and once or twice he inserted a question. Sara, watching his expression as it underwent a series of changes, saw it become one of glowing fury at Ray's action in forcing his attentions on her, especially after she had told him she was in love with her husband.
'Darling,' murmured Carl when at last she had finished her narrative, 'can you ever forgive me for saying such hurtful things to you?'

'It's all over, and in any case, as I said, I know that your anger stemmed from jealousy.'

'Dearest, when did you discover that you loved me?'

She shook her head vaguely.

'I knew for sure the night we were in the garden, but I have a feeling that I loved you long before then.'

'That night,' curiously as his eyes looked deeply into hers. 'Do you know, Sara, that I almost———- ' He stopped as he saw her rising colour, then said in tones of tender amusement, 'You look adorable when you blush, my love.' He caught her to him and for a long moment she knew the thrill of his kiss, the strength of his body against hers. And when he released her she was no longer shy and blushing, for she was able to say, a loving smile fluttering on her lips,

'I wanted you that night, Carl, so if you'd asked me, then I would—would———- ' But it was too much and she shyly left her husband to say the rest, which he did, a hint of tender humour in his voice.

'——— have come to me willingly?'

'Yes, indeed!' She snuggled her head into his shoulder and for a while neither spoke. It was Carl who eventually broke the silence, speaking about Irma and Bernard and saying he hoped everything would turn out all right for them.

'As you know,' he went on, 'I was very troubled about her. You see, my love, I didn't want your life to be blighted by her committing suicide.' He looked down into his wife's lovely face. 'I know now that I must have been falling in love with you at that time, otherwise why should I have wanted to safeguard you?'

'I believed it was Irma—oh, not that you'd fallen in love with her,' she went on to add swiftly, 'but your concern.'

Carl made no comment on this, and what he said next concerned Ray.

'In my opinion he ought to leave here. He hasn't made many friends and when Irma goes he'll have no one.' Meaning of course that Carl would never visit the farm again, nor would he let Sara visit it—not that she would want to, though, once Irma had left.

'It's as well that Irma is leaving,' Carl added as if reading his wife's thoughts, 'because now that our marriage is normal your place is here, running your own home, not working all hours in someone else's. I wouldn't have allowed you to continue as you have been doing. You could have gone over as a visitor, but certainly not as a servant.' The stern inflection in his voice left Sara in no doubt at all that she would have been forced to obey him. Yes, she thought, it was a happy circumstance all round that her sister was leaving Njangola, to find a new life elsewhere.

After a little while she asked, 'Was your reason for sending me to your mother that you wanted to bring Ray and Irma together?'

He nodded.

'That was the main idea—and yet, looking back now, I feel convinced that some of my anxiety was for you, Sara. You see, I had by that time begun to see things which had escaped me before. As I said to you once, I was beginning to realise that you were more to be admired than despised. Yes,' he added reflectively, 'I feel that, perhaps subconsciously, I wanted you to have a rest.'

Sara would have continued with her questioning, for there were still one or two things to be cleared up, but Carl, deciding there were far more delightful ways of spending the half hour or so that was still to go before lunch, took her by the hand and together they stepped through the open window on to the verandah, where they stood for a while, looking out over the delightful gardens of their home. Sara drew a deep, contented breath and said, not really
meaning to speak her thoughts aloud, 'Peace at last… the peace of mind I've craved ever since I came here.' And then, turning to her husband, 'Will Irma be happy, do you think?'

'As happy as it's possible to be under the circumstances. I, like you, feel that she'll walk again one day.'

'Do you, Carl? Oh, but I sincerely hope so!'

'You haven't mentioned the chair?'

'No—and I was thinking about it. Will it arrive before they go?'

'I'll try and hurry it up,' promised Carl.

'It'll save Bernard buying one for her. They'll need all their money for the farm they're buying.' Sara paused, frowning a little. 'I do hope they can find what they want…' Her words checked slowly as she noticed the expression on her husband's face. His voice matched it to perfection as he said,

'Sara, you've just mentioned peace of mind, remember? I won't have you troubling your head any more about Irma, understand?'

She swallowed, and nodded meekly.

'Yes, Carl,' she answered in a low tone, 'I understand.'

All sternness left his face then, replaced by an expression that brought a glow of sheer happiness to her lovely eyes. She stared up at him, her lips quivering slightly, and parted in the sort of invitation that her husband could not be expected to ignore. She found herself caught in a vortex of ardour as, crushing her slender young body to him, he kissed her passionately on the mouth, the throat, and lower down where the tender curves of her breast were cupped in his hand. There was a possessiveness in his lovemaking that thrilled her, a mastery that made her feel weak and submissive, with a yearning to be conquered. And yet, conversely, she knew a feeling of importance, because a man like Carl had chosen her for his life's partner, chosen her from all others, to be his alone.

'My dearly beloved wife…' Carl's voice was vibrant and husky with ardour held in cheek. 'Why should I be so lucky as to find a treasure like you?'

She gave a shaky little laugh, with which she contrived to disguise her own heightened emotions.

'I was just thinking how lucky I was! I shall never know how you came to choose me—— ' The rest was lost for ever beneath the pressure of her husband's lips on hers. And in fact she was not allowed an opportunity of speaking for some considerable time, and when at last her husband did draw his mouth from hers for a moment or two she found she had no desire at all to speak, and she merely stirred contentedly in his arms, ecstasy flooding through her veins, unspeakable joy filling her heart.
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