Suddenly Valerie's world was changed!

Fate crossed Valerie's path with that of singing-star idol, Nicky Barratt, and for some strange reason he was reluctant to let her go out of his life.

What set her apart from his other admiring fans, she wondered. And why should he suddenly want to marry her?

She knew she could not fit into show-business life or compete with the glamorous girls who surrounded him. Yet when she learned that Nicky was using her to maintain his carefully created image, she was shattered. By then, she had fallen in love with him!
The strings of a guitar rippled and the liquid notes of a beautiful male voice filled the room. A slim, dark-haired girl paused in her work of laying the table and let the sound invade her. She shivered. It was almost as if the singer himself was entering the innermost reaches of her body. She leaned against the table, one hand resting on the surface, her head slightly bent. Glossy brown hair, worn unconventionally long, fell forward around her face, but she was unaware of it, intent only on the voice filling the room. If only she could go to Nicky Barratt's concert. All the good seats had long since been sold, but if she was prepared to line up all night she was sure she could get one up in the gods.

The song died away on a caress and the announcer's voice—phony American and full of pretended gaiety—broke the spell.

"Great, isn't he? No wonder he's already had three golden discs this year. And he's British too, so that makes it even better news. If you—"

Valerie abruptly switched off the radio and returned to finish laying the table for dinner. No matter how simple the meal, she always liked to serve it elegantly, knowing it pleased her father if she did so, reminding him of the well-maintained home that his wife had run until her sudden death a year ago. Moving a bowl of yellow roses from the sideboard on to the center of the table, she stepped back to look at her handiwork with satisfaction. The beef casserole might be the leftovers from the Sunday roast, but it was being served in a Cordon Bleu manner! Smiling at the thought, she went across to the corner cabinet and the drinks tray.

The smile left her face and she gave a mutter of exasperation. They were clean out of sherry, her father's standard predinner drink. They had opened the last bottle a couple of weeks ago and she had forgotten to buy another one. She glanced at her watch. It was far too late to go into town but she could always persuade the barman at the Taverners to sell her a bottle. Putting on her coat, she snatched up her purse and ran out of the house.

The small, Tudor-style hotel was in the center of the village, only five minutes away, and Valerie raced up the steps and across the lounge to the cocktail bar. Mrs. Mathers, the proprietress and Valerie's erstwhile employer, straightened from talking to the barman.

"Why hello, Valerie. You look as if you've just finished running the marathon!"

"I feel it." Valerie took several deep breaths before explaining why she had come.

"No problem," Mrs. Mathers said, signaling Tim the barman to get the requested bottle. "Just remember to tell your father that I came to the rescue. There's nothing I like more than having my bank manager feel under an obligation to me!"

Together the two women walked into the foyer, stepping back as a tall, ash-blond girl sauntered past, her face half-hidden by huge dark glasses. At the entrance she paused and waited for a stout middle-aged man to catch up with her.

Mrs. Mathers gave Valerie an ironic look. "What do you think of my latest regulars—been coming every other weekend for the past six weeks."

"Are they house-hunting round here?"

Many couples stayed at the Taverners while trying to find a rural retreat in this still unspoiled and lovely part of the countryside, and though the blonde did not look the country type, one could not always judge by appearances.

"Bed-hunting, more like it." Mrs. Mathers snorted, handing over the bottle of sherry. "You're too naive, my dear. That's what comes of being a stop-at-home. When are you going to come back and work for me?" she added. "Tina does her best but she's a rotten receptionist compared with you."

"I'll never be able to work for you full time," Valerie replied, "but I might manage a couple of days a week, if that's
any good."

"It wouldn't be enough during the summer season, I'm afraid. I'd need you full time then. Are you sure you're doing the right thing in staying at home? If you had a housekeeper or someone to live in and help out—"

"No. It wouldn't be the same."

"The same as what? As when your mother was alive? You're trying to put back the clock, Valerie, and you're doing yourself out of a normal life in the process. I'm sure your father doesn't want you to sacrifice yourself for—"

"It's no sacrifice," Valerie cut in again. "That's what you don't seem to realize. I enjoy keeping house. I love cooking and shopping and taking care of the garden. It may be horribly old-fashioned in this day and age, but I'm a homebody, Mrs. Mathers, and I don't believe that domestic chores will turn me into a dogsbody!"

"Then look after your own home," the older woman retorted with kindly asperity. "If you go on like this, you'll end up an old maid."

"At twenty-three, I don't think I'm exactly on the shelf. I've another three months at least before I start thinking of buying a cat and a canary!"

Reluctantly Mrs. Mathers smiled, but since she still looked ready to continue this line of conversation, Valerie quickly made her departure. There was something friendly and reassuring in having people take an interest in her life but it could also be irritating, especially if they persisted in seeing her behavior toward her father as some kind of sacrifice. And it wasn't, she thought as she walked across the foyer. She did enjoy keeping house, and if she occasionally dreamed dreams of doing so for a younger man whom she could love in a different way, well that was to be expected too. But she had no intention of marrying for the sake of status or out of fear. It would be for love or not at all.

Pushing her way through the glass door, she went down the shallow steps to the small gravel courtyard fronting the entrance. The flashy blonde and her companion were watching their cases being stowed into the capacious trunk of a Rolls-Royce. Seen at closer range the girl was pretty and, Valerie judged, about her own age. Her skin was flawless and seemed not to need its heavy layer of makeup. She was expensively dressed in a city dweller's idea of country clothes: cashmere sweater over elegant tweed skirt; and her hair, so silver blonde that it could only have come from a bottle, was drawn smoothly away from her face and on to the nape of her neck, kept there by a wide gold and tortoiseshell clip.

She must have something to do with the stage or the fashion world, Valerie thought, and cast a brief look at the man. He was turned away from her and only his beefy red neck was visible. Not a romantic-looking companion for a weekend, she decided, and wondered what kind of expediency joined the couple together. Not that one needed much imagination to know why the man fancied his young companion. It was the blonde's reason for being with him that would be more interesting to know. Was it for the sake of her career or for money or for both?

Reaching her own front door, Valerie unlocked it and went in, sniffing as the odor of her father's tobacco wafted out from the dining room. As she paused on the threshold, he turned round from the sideboard, the empty bottle in his hand.

"It's all right, I've got it," she said and held the new bottle out. "I think I'll have one too, Dad."

He raised an eyebrow as he handed her a glass. "Unusual for you. Not depressed or anything, are you?"

"Just a bit tired." She sipped the sherry and made a face. "It's a bit too dry for me."

"My dear girl, anything sweeter isn't worth drinking. But then women have no palate as far as wine's concerned." He looked at her over the top of his glasses. "Are you sure everything's all right? You've been a bit restless lately. Maybe you should get out a bit more."

She nodded. "As a matter of fact I thought of going to London on Saturday. There's a show I want to see and I could stay the night with Aunt Alice."
"By all means—it'll do you good. Which show is it?"

"The one at the Palaceum."

He grunted. "The Barrow fellow, I suppose?"

"Barratt," she corrected. "Nicky Barratt. He's there for a month."

Mr. Browne looked incredulous. "I can't understand what you young people see in him. None of these singers even
know how to stay in tune—let alone sing!"

"Nicky Barratt's got a marvelous voice. And his songs are fabulous. Why I even heard you humming one the other
day."

"Me? Never!"

"Yes you were. 'September Moon.' You were singing it while you were painting the spare room."

Mr. Browne thought for an instant, then nodded. "Didn't know that was one of his. Well, maybe he's got some talent
as a composer—I'll grant that—but I won't change my mind about his voice. In my young day he'd have been booed
off the stage."

"But this isn't your day, darling." Valerie dropped a kiss on his head and disappeared into the kitchen.

As she busied herself setting out the dishes, she wondered whether she should go to London on Saturday—which
would mean leaving her father alone for the weekend—or delay it till midweek and only go in the evening. But that
wouldn't be the change of atmosphere she needed. Her father was right. She had been restless these last few weeks,
and a couple of days away might be the fillip she needed to restore her normal easygoing spirits.

The prospect of seeing Nicky Barratt was already beginning to work its magic on her. For the last four years he had
been Britain's most popular singer-composer, and in the last year had achieved a stunning success in America. Each
month the papers featured different stories about his various girl friends who, according to one of the more sober
critics, frequently left their husbands and children in order to follow the young singing star on his many worldwide
tours. One such critic had only latterly suggested that Nicky preferred married women to single ones, and had
headlined his weekly show business page with the statement: Nicky Barratt, the little boy who prefers to play with
other boys' toys.

The article that followed had been a cruel one, though Valerie, remembering many previous stories about the singer,
could not entirely disbelieve it. Yet she had reminded herself it was the voice she enthused about, not the man, and
had tried not to admit that frequently the two had become indivisible. Would she be such a devout fan of Nicky
Barratt if he was forty instead of thirty? If he was bald and fat and not dark-headed and slim and preposterously
good-looking? Honesty had made her admit that she wouldn't, and it was this fact that she remembered as she served
dinner and sat opposite her father to eat it.

It was not until the meal was nearly over that her father said Mark Deering was coming around for coffee. A local
farmer, young, single and wealthy, he was much sought after in the county and had made it increasingly plain he had
eyes only for one girl. Me, Valerie acknowledged gloomily, and wished she could reciprocate the love he was eager
to shower upon her.

"Why don't you ask Mark to take you to the Barratt concert?" Mr. Browne suggested. "Then you could go by car and
not bother with the train."

"What a cruel thing to suggest," Valerie teased. "You know Mark dislikes pop singers nearly as much as you do!"

"He'd still jump at the chance of taking you out. I can't fathom why you don't like him."

"I do like him! But I don't love him—which is what he wants."
"You could do a lot worse."

"As you continually tell me."

"Because you haven't the sense to see it for yourself."

"You can't fall in love to order. If—"

A ring at the door interrupted her and, still slightly exasperated, she went to answer it.

On the threshold stood a broad-shouldered, stocky young man with fair, crinkly hair brushed back from a tanned face. Equally fair eyebrows marked a pair of gray eyes, and a full mouth was set above a rather heavy chin.

"Hello, Val. I wasn't sure you'd be in."

"Where else would I be at this time of night?"

"Don't sound so cross," he said mildly, coming in.

"Sorry, Mark." She squeezed his arm. "Come and have some coffee."

He followed her into the dining room, where her father's welcome made up for the warmth hers had lacked. While the two men exchanged gossip, Valerie cleared the table and brought in the coffee, then perched on the window seat to stare unseeing into the village street while her mind raced ahead to her coming evening at the Palaceum. She had seen Nicky Barratt once before, at a concert, and could still remember the magnetic and intimate quality he exuded, making every girl who watched and heard him believe he was singing for her alone. Valerie sighed, then started as Mark's voice broke into her thoughts.

"How many miles away are you?" he said. "That's the third time I've spoken."

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

"That was obvious!" He came across to join her by the window and she glanced round the room and saw they were alone.

"Where's Dad?"

"He went out for a walk."

"Tactfully leaving us alone!"

"Why not? He knows it's what I've been waiting for." His voice grew bitter. "I sometimes think you're the only person who doesn't."

"Of course I know. But it isn't any good."

"Why not?" Mark said again, and sitting beside her on the window seat, put an arm round Tier shoulders. "Why do you keep me at a distance, Val? You know I love you. If you married me you could have everything you want."

Except my happiness, Valerie thought, and wished she were more materially inclined. So many girls would be delighted at the prospect of being mistress of Manor Farm, with its whitewashed barns, browsing cattle and acres of land. She thought of Mark: generous, easygoing, dependable, and knew he would do everything in his power to make her happy. Yet she could never find happiness with him, for there was a restlessness in her, a yearning for something more exciting than the narrow life he could offer, that made it impossible for her to accept him as a husband.

"I'm sorry," she said gently. "But I don't love you and it wouldn't be fair of me to marry you."

"You haven't given yourself a chance with me. You still treat me like the boy next door and—"
"I can't help it. I've known you all my life."

"Maybe this will make you see me differently." Before she could stop him he pulled her close, forcing her face round to his. "I'm mad about you, Val. I want you so much, it's driving me crazy."

He pressed his mouth on hers, his lips warm and passionate, as though by their very urgency they could force her to respond. It was so unlike the Mark she knew that she tried to push him away. But her resistance only served to increase his passion and he held her more tightly, the warmth of his hands penetrating the thin silk of her dress, the pressure of his lips forcing her head back. Realizing the futility of fighting, she forced herself to go limp and, after a moment, he released her and stood up.

"I'm not going to apologize for that, Val. I've been too easygoing with you for too long."

"Acting the caveman won't make me change my mind. You can't make yourself love someone."

"But you can deliberately stop yourself from falling in love."

"Why should I do that?" She was puzzled. "If I loved you, I'd be proud to marry you. I wouldn't want to fight against it."

"I'm not so sure. Personally, I think you're scared of growing up. That's why you hold back on your emotions."

"I've never heard anything so silly."

"It may sound silly to you, but it's true. You've used your mother's death as a means to return to the nest and live like a little girl again—keeping house and looking after daddy!"

"And you'd rather I looked after you!"

"It would be more natural than the life you're living now. You're in a dream world, Val. Your only emotional outlet is the T.V. and radio and those damned singers you're so crazy about."

"Me and a million other girls. Are they crazy too?"

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant, and I don't care. I feel things differently from the way you do—that's one of the reasons why we'd never be happy together. I can't get enthusiastic about the milk yield and the price of hay."

"You've never given yourself a chance. All you do is fantasize about pop stars and their dirty little lives!" He strode to the door and, halfway out, turned to look at her. "One day you'll realize you're missing out on reality, and when you do, I'll be there waiting for you, whether you like it or not."
CHAPTER TWO

The star dressing room of the Palaceum Theatre was filled with flowers and the gilt-edged mirror and walls plastered with telegrams, all of which were ignored by the slim young man applying the finishing touches to his makeup and trying to turn a deaf ear to the voice of the big built man behind him.

"I tell you, Nicky, if this story breaks it will affect your record sales. You can't bring out an album called True To You and then get involved in a sordid divorce case."

"Dawn left her husband long before I came on the scene. He doesn't have a hope of putting the blame on me." Nicky flicked a speck of dust from his shoulders. "Anyway, I'm a singer, not a saint! You worry too much, Bob. Love affairs never harmed Rod Stewart's career or Presley's."

"You've got a different kind of image. It's taken a hell of a lot of hard work to create it for you and I don't want you lousing it up now."

"My private life has nothing to do with anyone else."

"Don't give me that! You know damn well that people in the public eye have to keep a watch on their behavior. As far as I'm concerned, you can have a hundred different women—as long as you're discreet about it. But are you discreet? No sir! You act like a guy who can do no wrong!"

There was no answer and the silence increased the older man's irritation. "I tell you, Nicky, you've gone too far! Even if you manage to stay out of Dawn's divorce, once she's free she'll expect you to marry her."

"She'll have a long wait."

"She'll create hell if you don't."

Nicky shrugged. "She bores me."

"She didn't bore you three months ago." Bob Vane frowned. "I don't know what's got into you. You were a nice enough kid when I found you singing with that third-rate group, but since you've hit the top..." He raised his shoulders expressively. "If you're not careful you'll do yourself a lot of harm."

"Whatever I do, people pick on me."

"That's the price of success."

"Then I'm tired of paying it. I'm not going to marry Dawn Meadows and nothing you or anybody else says can make me!"

"I don't want you to marry her!" Bob shouted. "She does! And if you don't, she'll sell her story to the press."

"So what? The publicity won't harm me."

"This time it will. For heaven's sake, Nicky, face facts. I've just got you the biggest and best recording deal of your life with Jackson Villiers, but if you're involved in a sordid sex story, he'll tear up the contract."

"He can't. It's already signed."

"He can and he will. He insisted on a morals clause. He always does."

"Then you should have turned him down."

"Turned down twenty million dollars? Are you crazy?"

"You're crazy if you think I'm going to live like a monk."
"No one's asking you to do that." Bob tried to keep hold of his temper. "All I want is for you to be discreet and remember the image you've got. It's also the image that Villiers bought. Hometown boy waiting for the right girl to come along."

"If my fans believe that of me, they're more stupid than I think. They read the papers, don't they?"

"They still believe you'll settle down when you fail in love."

"I'm always falling in love." Nicky taunted. "At least four nights a week!"

"Okay," Bob said. "Have it your way. If Villiers terminates your contract you can always sign up with someone else. You'll only make half the money, but if you don't care, why should I? I can always find myself another star to manage."

Nicky turned away from the mirror and leaned against the dressing table. "You've made your point, Bob. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Help me to think of some way of stopping Dawn from making trouble. Once she knows we're scared she'll start to lay down the law. Yet if we try and give her the brush-off, she'll get nasty." A callboy's voice quavered in the corridor and the singer stood up.

"I'm on in a minute. We'll talk about it after the show."

From her corner seat in the topmost gallery, Valerie joined in the tumultuous applause as the orchestra ended their introduction on a thunderous chord and Nicky Barratt sauntered on to the stage. Smiling his acknowledgment of their welcome, Nicky signaled to the band and, as the clapping died away, his voice, throbbing and tender, echoed into the auditorium.

Three thousand people sat enthralled, mesmerized by a melody they had heard countless times before and would want to hear countless times again. For more than an hour they were hypnotized by the magic that exuded from this slim, dark-haired young man.

It was impossible to analyze the reason behind his power; impossible to understand the quality which made everyone sit in complete, engrossed silence, giving their minds as well as their emotions into the grasp of a slightly insolent charmer.

As the lights dimmed on his last number the silence was broken: from the gallery and stalls, from the dress circle and pit, the audience began to clap and cheer, their calls growing louder and louder until the spotlights brightened and Nicky returned to the stage. He held out his hands for silence and in the hush that followed, the notes of "My Final Fling" were softly heard. Once again he held his audience captive, and so masterly was his ability that when the lights went down for the second time, everyone knew and accepted that he would not return to the stage for another encore.

In a daze Valerie stood up, then seeing the mass of surging people ahead of her, sank back on the bench.

"Wonderful, isn't he?" a voice said in her ear. "I feel as though he's singing just for me."

Valerie turned to the plump girl next to her and smiled. "I think we all feel the same. That's what makes him so exceptional."

The plump girl rose. "I always go backstage afterward and wait to see him come out. Care to come with me?"

Without waiting for a reply she started to push her way along the row. Valerie hesitated, then intrigued by the prospect of seeing her idol at close range, she followed the girl. Outside the theater the streets were milling with fans, but Valerie's companion seemed to know her way around, for she backed into the foyer and darted down innumerable corridors that finally brought them out into a narrow alleyway. Here too they were surrounded by girls, but at least they were in sight of the stage door, and the plump girl shoved her way forward, using her elbows and
feet to help her.

Valerie tried to follow suit but she could not bring herself to emulate the other girl, and she was soon left far behind, hemmed in by a mass of people who threatened to squeeze her into oblivion. Panic-stricken, she tried to fight her way but, but the road behind her was blocked and a large limousine was slowly edging its way alongside of her, with policemen trying to force a path for it to the stage door.

"There's his car!" someone screamed and immediately the crowd increased its frenzied pushing.

Gasping with terror, Valerie struggled wildly. Her coat was torn and she was flung bodily against a wall, pressed to it so tightly that she found it impossible to breathe. She lunged out with her hands, fighting for air, then suddenly felt the wall give way behind her. It was a door and it was miraculously opening. She went to dive in, but as she turned, a crowd of men surged out through it, their momentum flinging her against a burly, middle-aged man.

Hardly knowing what she was doing, she clung to him. "Help me get out of this!" she cried. "They've gone mad."

"You're one of them," he muttered and tried to push her away. As he did so he glanced at her face. Her skin was ashen and her eyes dilated with fear. "Come on," he said grimly. "I'll do what I can."

Clutching his arms around her, he bundled her in front of him along the path that was forged for them by the straining, linked hands of some dozen policemen. The limousine she had noticed a moment ago was now directly in front of them, and her rescuer pushed her in and climbed in himself. Panting, she sank back in a corner and wiped the perspiration from her face. She was still trembling and for a few moments she sat with her eyes closed, feeling the car edge its way along the street and then gain a little more speed. On the other side of her she felt someone stir, and lifting her lids, saw that apart from her middle-aged rescuer, there was also a young man in the car.

She stared at him and the color rushed into her cheeks. It couldn't be! She blinked, then blinked again. But the image remained and she knew she was not dreaming. It was Nicky Barratt. She was sitting next to the man whose voice had haunted her dreams and most of her waking moments for almost as long as she could remember. Tentatively she stared at him, seeing the narrow, firm nose and sensuous lips; the heavy-lidded dark eyes, almost closed now as they maintained indifference to her presence.

She swallowed nervously. "Wh-what am I doing here?"

"That's what I would like to know," Nicky Barratt said and looked at the older man.

"I saved her from being trampled to death," came the reply. "The crowds were pretty wild tonight."

"And she was part of it," the singer said. "I don't mind giving all of myself when I'm on stage, but I'm damned if I'll do it when the performance is over! One day my devoted fans will kill me."

Mortified, Valerie leaned toward the door. "I didn't ask to be pushed into this car. I might be a fan of yours, Mr. Barratt, but I wouldn't want to trespass on your privacy. If you'll ask the driver to stop, I'll get out."

"Relax, honey. The order came from the older man. "Don't take any notice of Nicky. He's always nervy after a show. I'm not letting you go until you've had a drink."

Remembering some of the stories she had read about the wild parties that pop stars held after their concerts, she shook her head quickly.

"I don't need a drink, thank you. I'm perfectly all right."

"You don't look it. Now, don't argue. Come and have a drink with Nicky and me, and then I'll get the chauffeur to drop you wherever you want to go. After all, it's not much to ask in return for rescuing you, is it?"

Valerie hesitated, then glanced at Nicky Barratt, who was staring through the car window, an aloof expression on his face. "Well, if you put it like that..."
"I do put it like that. And don't take any notice of Nicky. He'll soon be in form again. By the way, I'm Bob Vane, Nicky's manager. What's your name?"

"Valerie Browne."

How mundane it sounded, she thought, and sank back into the corner, wishing there was some way she could escape. Hardly had she formulated this wish, when the car edged into the forecourt of the Savoy Hotel. The commissionaire jumped forward to open the door and a throng of girls clamored around it.

"Keep back there! Keep back!" the man called testily and tried to ward off the crowd with his arms.

"Quick!" Bob Vane muttered. "Let's make a dash for it."

The three of them did so, but as the swing doors closed behind her, Valerie heard a shrill voice cry: "Who's the girl? Did you see the girl with Nicky?"

Valerie's embarrassment increased, but Nicky Barratt seemed not to have heard and stared straight in front of him as though he were alone. He really was behaving oddly. Where was the charm she had associated with him?

As though sensing what was going through her mind, Bob Vane took her arm and led her toward the elevator.

"Come on up to the suite. We'll all feel better when we've had a drink."

Hiding her nervousness Valerie obeyed, and was soon walking down a thickly carpeted corridor and into a sitting room furnished in Regency style. The wide windows, with their blue velvet curtains, were not yet drawn, and afforded a magnificent view of the Thames.

"I expect you'd like to tidy yourself," Bob Vane suggested. "I'll show you—" He broke off as the telephone rang.

"I'll get it," Nicky said swiftly and going into the bedroom, closed the door behind him.

As soon as he had disappeared, Valerie turned to the older man. "I shouldn't have come here, Mr. Vane. Mr. Barratt doesn't want strange people about the place. After working so hard, he must want to relax by himself."

"The only way Nicky relaxes is when he's in the middle of a crowd. Now go tidy up while I fix us a drink."

"Well, if you're sure——" Valerie drew a deep breath. "I've always admired Nicky Barratt's singing and you've no idea how I felt when I found myself sitting next to him."

"I can guess."

"It wasn't just hero worship," she said, aware of his dry tone. "I was thinking about his voice and the songs he writes. He knows exactly how young people think— the way they feel. His lyrics have a sensitivity that——" She stopped, annoyed with herself. "Now I'm sounding like a pop struck idiot. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You've expressed your thoughts very clearly and they'd be echoed by all Nicky's fans—if they had your ability with words."

"I think he's very talented."

"But you don't look the sort of girl who goes into hysterics when he sings, like that bunch of loonies out there."

The man went on regarding her thoughtfully. "I don't see you fitting in at a pop festival."
“I didn’t,” she said ruefully. “I felt like a fish out of water. I’m a country girl by birth and inclination. A rare avis in this decade.”

“A rare what?”

She smiled. “It’s a Latin term for a rare bird.”

“You can say that again.” He crossed the room and opened the door of the bathroom. “Come out when you’re ready.”

As the door closed after her, Nicky came out of the bedroom and flung himself on to the sofa. “Thank the lord she’s gone. Why did you bring that girl up here?”

“She hasn’t gone,” Bob said shortly, “and you’ll find out my reason if you listen for a minute.”

“Don’t give me any guff about being nice to my fans.”

“I’m suggesting you be nice to yourself.”

“To myself? I don’t get you.”

“Then it’s time you did. This is serious, Nicky. I spoke to some of the newspaper boys this evening and they bombarded me with some pretty tough questions about Dawn. I told them you’d never been serious about each other—that you were just good friends and all that jazz—but they just wouldn’t swallow it.”

“What did you expect?” Nicky grinned. “They aren’t fools.”

Bob ignored the interruption. “I told them you were in love with another girl and that you’d been using Dawn as a cover.”

“A cover for what?”

“For your romance with a nice, innocent girl from the country.”

Nicky stared at him without speaking, then he flung back his head and roared with laughter. “A girl from the country? You’ve got to be kidding! Next thing you’ll be telling me is that you’ve got her hidden in your pocket.”

“In the bathroom, as a matter of fact,” came the reply. “So take that grin off your face and listen to me. I came out with that story on the spur of the moment, but when I saw the way those boys reacted to it, I knew I’d hit the jackpot. The only trouble was that there didn’t happen to be any nice, innocent girl from the country, and I was beating my brains out trying to figure out what to do, when little Miss Browne fell into my arms.”

Nicky’s mouth dropped open. “You can’t mean—” He stared at the bathroom door and Bob nodded.

“That’s just what I do mean. When that kid pushed against me in the crowd tonight, I don’t know what made me pull her into the car with us. I haven’t much sympathy with these screaming Janes, as you know, but she looked different somehow. It wasn’t till I was talking to her just now and she was raving about you—wait a minute,” he said as he saw the expression on Nicky’s face, “not in the way you think. I told you before she’s not one of those sexy bits who scream themselves into a frenzy when you sing. She’s got dignity, that kid, and she has a genuine admiration for your voice and your songs. That’s what gave me the idea. She’s not bad-looking and she’s obviously as simple as they come—just the sort of wife your public would adore.”

“Wife!” Nicky shot out of the settee. “Now I know you’re out of your mind!”

“Keep calm,” Bob said soothingly. “I’m not suggesting you marry her.”

“Thanks!”

“I’m only suggesting you get engaged to her until we get Dawn Meadows out of the way.”
"And then what?" Nicky asked. "Even supposing this girl's crazy enough to agree to do as you say, how will she react when I tell her to go? She could blackmail us, Bob."

"She's not the type. Take it from me. Anyway, there's no reason to tell her the truth. Let her think you've genuinely fallen for her! She'll be flattered as hell. And by the time you're ready to ditch her, Dawn will be yesterday's news."

Nicky wandered over to the mantelpiece and frowned at his reflection in the mirror. "If she's the sort of girl you say she is, we can't pull a trick like that on her."

"Why not?" Bob reached for a cigar. "What's she got to lose? She'll have a wonderful time and she'll get herself a load of publicity."

"She probably doesn't want any publicity."

"All girls like publicity—even this one. And all of them would fall flat on their faces to be given a whirl by Nicky Barratt."

"Maybe so," Nicky replied. "But I don't like it and I won't do it. Give her a drink and get rid of her."

Bob chewed on the end of his cigar. "If she goes, so do I."

"Come again?"

"You heard me. I meant what I said, Nicky. I discovered you and I pushed you to the top. If you do as I say, you'll stay there. If you don't, you'll lose your Villiers contract."

"So what's wrong with Columbia or Decca or E.M.I.?"

"What's the difference between ten and twenty million dollars? Damn it, Nicky, listen to me and do what I say. You can just about save your skin if you romance this kid along. All she has to do is to say she met you a couple of months ago—before Dawn came on the scene."

"Suppose she refuses?"

"She won't if you make her believe you've fallen for her."

"I can't do that."

"If you don't, I'm through with you. It's your last chance and—"

Bob stopped short as Valerie came back into the room. In her plain navy coat and dress she looked out of place in the opulent room, but as the two men watched her they noticed the symmetry of her features and her clear, porcelain skin.

"How are you feeling now?" Bob asked heartily.

"Much better, thanks."

"Good. Come and talk to Nicky while I fix the drinks. What would you like?"

"Some orange juice, please."

Bob looked startled but turned to the sideboard without comment and Nicky waved his arm at the sofa. "Sit down, Miss—what's your name?"

"Valerie Browne."

"Well, sit down, Miss Browne."
Nicky stressed the rhyme but his grin disappeared as she did not react, but settled herself on a corner of the settee and crossed her legs decorously at the ankles. They were slim ankles and beautifully shaped legs, he noticed, and thought cynically that there was nothing wrong with Bob's taste in women.

"What did you think of the show?" he asked.

For the first time she looked animated and her eyes glowed. They were the largest eyes Nicky had seen and the most unusual shade of violet blue. They owed none of their luster to makeup either. In fact as far as he could tell she wasn't wearing any, not even powder. It was incredible.

"I thought you were wonderful," she said sincerely. "I've got all your records at home, Mr. Barratt."

"Call me Nicky," he said easily. "Are you a member of my fan club?"

"No, I'm not. I'm afraid I don't see the point of fan clubs. I like listening to you sing but I never get the urge to collect your pictures or pull a button off your suit!"

He chuckled. "It's good to know I'm safe with you!"

She smiled and took the glass of orange juice Bob was holding out.

"Where do you live?" Nicky asked.

"In Sussex. In a village called Kerring. I don't suppose you've ever heard of it."

"Nicky loves villages," Bob interrupted. "He's a great guy for that kind of relaxed living."

Nicky Barratt swung round to the mantelpiece again and Valerie eyed Bob Vane dubiously.

"I thought you said he could only relax when he was in a crowd?"

"I was talking about after he's given a performance. Than he does like to have lots of people around him. But for day-to-day living he's a country boy at heart. Aren't you, Nicky?"

"Sure I am." Nicky's face was still averted. "I'm crazy about village life. Everyone hobnobbing with the vicar while the retired major tries to have an affair with the postmistress's daughter!"

Valerie laughed. "Actually our major has just married the postmistress herself!"

"There you are!" Nicky exclaimed. "What did I tell you?"

Suddenly the door burst open and a crowd of men stomped in. Within a moment there was pandemonium. Waiters appeared with sandwiches and coffee; a young man set up a bar and began to dispense drinks; a fat man commandeered the piano and thumped out the latest hit tunes and somebody else switched on the radio full blast.

"They're Nicky's group." Bob Vane murmured to Valerie.

"They do the backing for all his records and most of his shows. They're a noisy lot but they're good-hearted, and they think the world of Nicky."

Before she had time to reply he was called to the other side of the room and she remained where she was on the settee, the empty glass still in her hand. More people started to come in: men in well-cut suits with flashy ties; daringly dressed girls and a spattering of celebrities. Valerie watched Nicky greet his visitors with easy familiarity and guessed that this was a nightly procedure. She sat there a long time but nobody took any notice of her. It seemed that both Nicky and Bob Vane had forgotten she existed. Suddenly she could bear it no longer. She knew that in her country-made dress she was as out of place in this gathering as an onion in a petunia patch, but that was no reason for these people to treat her as though she were an inanimate object. Standing up, she reached for her handbag and walked out of the room and down the corridor.
She was almost at the end when she heard someone running and calling her name. Startled, she looked around and
saw Nicky Barratt.

"You can't be going so early?" he asked.

"I'm surprised you noticed."

"Sure I noticed."

"Well you could have fooled me!" Anger flushed her cheeks and made her eyes sparkle. "I didn't want to come here
in the first place, Mr. Barratt—it was your manager who insisted. But since I did come I think the least you could
have done was to introduce me to your friends—not ignore me as though I was a—" she searched in her mind for a
symbol "—as though I was an antique piece of furniture."

"That's exactly what you are. I couldn't have put it better myself."

For an instant Valerie gaped at him, then her hand shot out and gave him a stinging slap across his cheek. He fell
back, then stepped forward, his eyes glittering.

"Why, you little-"

Not waiting to hear any more, Valerie raced swiftly for the stairs, not pausing until she had breathlessly reached the
lobby. So much for her evening with Nicky Barratt.
CHAPTER THREE

As she jolted in the bus toward Bayswater, Valerie stared unseeingly through the window and tried to force her mind away from the scene that had just taken place. How could she have smacked the face of the famous Nicky Barratt? It was fantastic. But then the whole evening had been a fantasy. The only trouble was that her behavior at the end of it had turned it into a nightmare. If only she hadn't lost her temper when he had agreed that he had treated her like a piece of antique furniture. Yet thinking about it again made her hackles rise once more, and had he been sitting beside her, she would probably have hit him again. Yet the worst thing of all was the letdown she had suffered. No longer was Nicky Barratt a talent and personality she would worship from afar. She had come close to her idol and seen his feet of clay.

It was nearly one a.m. when she reached her aunt's house, and she let herself quietly in and tiptoed toward the stairs.

"Is that you, Val?"

Only then did Valerie see a line of light under the drawing-room door, and realizing her aunt was still up, she opened it and went in.

Mrs. Pafford, a small, plump woman with gray hair and a smooth pink face, looked up from her chair. Her spectacles had slid to the tip of her snub nose and she pushed them higher as she spoke.

"I was getting worried about you, dear. I thought you'd decided to wait at the theater for tomorrow's performance!"

Valerie smiled. "There isn't one on a Sunday." She hesitated, reluctant to tell her aunt the strange events of the evening.

"Well?" the older woman prompted. "How was the show?"

"Wonderful." Valerie sat down in front of the fire. "But I don't suppose you'd have thought so."

"On the contrary, I like Mr. Barratt's songs. I think he's a very talented young man." Mrs. Pafford smiled at her niece's expression. "Don't look so astonished, my dear. Appreciating a good melody isn't only the prerogative of the young."

"I wish Dad could hear you say that."

"Your father always was old-fashioned. Even as a young man your mother and I used to call him a fuddy-duddy!"

Valerie giggled and Mrs. Pafford smiled indulgently and rose. "Now you're in, I'll go to bed. Can I get you something to drink first?"

"No thanks, darling. But I'd be happy to make one for you."

Her aunt shook her head and the two of them went upstairs. "I do wish you'd come here more often, Valerie. It's lovely having you with me."

"It's lovely to be here. But I don't like leaving Dad."

"He's more self-sufficient than you think. Besides, you can't build your life around him. You'll get married one day and then he'll have to manage without you."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. Meanwhile let's decide what we should do with ourselves tomorrow." Valerie regarded her aunt. "Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

"I'd like to window-shop."

"On a Sunday? At least wait till Monday—then you might be tempted to buy something!"
"That's what makes Sundays safer."

Valerie kissed her aunt good-night quickly and went into her bedroom. If only her well-meaning friends and relations would stop trying to change her attitudes or her clothes. Why didn't they see she was perfectly content the way she was?

Wriggling out of her dress she walked over to the dressing table and began to unscrew the pearl studs from her ears. Her reflection stared back at her in the mirror: pale, slim, with soft dark hair falling on either side of a rounded face. She half turned her head. Her face wasn't quite rounded, her cheekbones were high and her chin delicately pointed. She had good bone structure in fact, and though she could never compete with the stunningly lovely girls who had been in Nicky Barratt's suite, that didn't mean she should be dissatisfied with her appearance. Or was she the exact opposite? Too smug, perhaps. Too self-righteous and self-satisfied. A homebody who enjoyed being unfashionable and dowdy. Defiantly she tossed back her head. Well, what if she did? She had found her niche and she was happy in it. She would never want to mix in a pop star's world, any more than a pop star would wish to mix in hers.

With a sigh she finished undressing and climbed into bed. The sooner she forgot about this evening, the better it would be for her peace of mind.

Unused to late nights, Valerie overslept the next morning and it was noon before she and her aunt set out to window-shop in Knightsbridge. It was disquieting to see the beautiful clothes and it made her realize how narrow she had become. Working at the Taverners had at least kept her partially aware of the outside world, but in the past two years she had closed in on herself to an alarming degree.

She thought of this off and on throughout the rest of the day, and she was still thinking about it when she reached Kerring Cross the next morning. She had done some food shopping in London, finding the choice marvelous and, laden with parcels, she staggered along the platform to the exit.

She was crossing the cobbled square when she heard the tooting of a horn and, looking round, recognized Mark's blue station wagon parked on the opposite side of the road. He jumped out and came toward her.

"Hello, Mark. Are you meeting someone here?"

"Only you. I've been waiting an hour. Your father said you'd be back on the early train." He took her parcels and dumped them in the back of the car, then took his place beside her.

"You shouldn't have bothered coming to meet me, though I'm awfully glad you did."

"It's no bother. It's my pleasure." He glanced at her and then turned his eyes back to the road. "It's always a pleasure when I can see you, Val. Besides, I wanted to talk to you. Since the other night I've been-"

"Mark, don't! Not again. What I said to you still stands. I haven't changed my mind."

I don't expect you to—at least not yet." He touched her hand lightly. "I just wanted to apologize for my behavior. I'm afraid I rather rushed you."

She could not help smiling. "After knowing me all my life! What a silly thing to say."

"Maybe I am silly." He frowned. "Still, you know the old adage—slow but sure wins the race."

Their eyes met for an instant and the old familiar intimacy was reestablished between them.

"I'm glad we're friends, Mark. Let's keep it that way."

"For the time being only. I'm not going to make any promises about the future. I love you, Valerie, and I'm willing to wait until you realize I'm the only man who can make you happy."

She did not answer and stared at the road unwinding in front of her. Was she being a fool not to marry
Mark? Although she did not love him she was very fond of him and she knew how deep his feelings were for her. But was it enough on which to build a marriage? Unbidden, a picture of Nicky Barratt flashed into her mind, his face pale, the marks of her fingers standing out clearly on his cheek. Unlike Mark, he was not the sort of man on whom a woman could rely. Yet how magnetic he was—how vibrantly alive. And how cruel.

With a sigh she refocused on Mark, noticing his hands clenched on the wheel and a muscle twitching nervously in his cheek. Her throat contracted with compassion but it was no good; he would never be able to make her pulses race or her heart beat faster, and no matter what he said, a marriage without mutual love could never work out.

With a feeling of relief she saw they had reached her house, and as the car pulled up outside the gate, she swung open the door and got out. "Care to come in for some coffee?"

"I have to get back. My new manager started this morning and I'd like to be around for the first week."

Relieved by his refusal, she lifted her hand in farewell. "Thanks again for coming to collect me. It was sweet of you."

Humming to herself, she entered the house. Although she had only been away two days, it bore the indefinable air of neglect. There were many drooping flowers in a cut-glass vase, ashtrays full of burnt tobacco and an array of dirty dishes that would have done credit to a regiment, let alone one solitary man. If she had ever wanted proof of being needed, it was here in plenty. Discarding her suit for a voluminous wrap-around apron, she busied herself cleaning the house and preparing the lunch, managing to erase both Mark Chariot and Nicky Barratt from her mind.

It was only when her father returned home and they were sitting down to a preluncheon drink that she recalled the strange events of the night before.

"I expected you to be full of your trip," Mr. Browne commented. "Was this Barratt chap as good in the flesh as you expected?"

"Better." With an effort she smiled. "His new show is marvelous."

"Lots of noise and flashing lights I suppose?"

"You're confusing your singers, Dad. Nicky's the one who doesn't stomp and scream around the stage."

"Is that so?" Mr. Browne took his rebuff in good part. "Well, he's still not my type, although he's obviously yours. You look much better today than you did on Saturday."

"That hasn't anything to do with Nicky Barratt."

"I didn't think it had. It's the trip to London I was referring to. Why don't you go and spend a week with Alice?"

"And leave you alone?" Valerie raised her eyes to the ceiling. "If this morning's a sample of what you can do to the house after a weekend_________________________ "

"You fuss too much. Anyway, I wouldn't attempt to look after myself for that long. I'd ask Mrs. Jakes to come in. She managed all right when you were away last summer."

Valerie's reply was drowned by a violent screech of brakes outside, and pushing back her chair, she went to the window. A silver-gray Lotus had pulled to a stop by the gate and as she watched, the car door opened and a young man stepped out. Astonishment kept her rigid and she went on staring at the tall, slender figure in light gray flannels and impeccably cut dark gray sports jacket. What had brought Nicky Barratt here?

"Who is it?" her father asked.

Without replying she ran from the room and stood on the doorstep as the singer came up the path.

"Hi," he called. "So I've found you at last."
"What do you want?" "That's not a very friendly greeting! Aren't you pleased to see me?"

"I'm surprised," she said dryly. "How did you find out where I lived?"

"It was easy. You said you lived in Kerring, so I drove to the station and mentioned your name to the porter. He told me your address at once."

"Why do you want to see me?"

"Study a couple of biology books," he grinned. "They'll give you the answer! Besides—" his hand went to his cheek "—I'm still smarting from that right hand of yours."

"I'm sorry about that," she said stiffly. "I owe you an apology."

"You sure do. You misunderstood me completely. When I agreed that I'd regarded you as a piece of antique furniture, I only meant that I'd been comparing you with all those cheap phony articles in my suite last night. Excluding Bob and my players, of course, you were the only thing of value that was there."

Uncertainly she regarded him. His eyes held hers, dark brown and intent, with little flecks of gold in them that gave them an unexpected glitter.

"Well, Miss Browne, aren't you going to ask me in? It's the least you can do after I've driven all this way to see you."

Conscious that he was laughing at her, she held the front door wide and he walked past and stood in the hall.

"You'd better come in here." she said, and led the way into the drawing room. Seeing it through his eyes, eyes that she knew were accustomed to palatial hotel suites, she felt it looked small and cramped, with too many ornaments and too much furniture.

"Nice little place you have here," he remarked.

"There's no need to be hypocritical!" she flashed.

"I wasn't."

"Yes, you were. You don't think this is a nice house at all. After what you're used to, this must be like a hole in the wall!"

"Stop it!" He stood in front of her, the mocking laughter gone from his eyes. "I may be used to living in luxury hotels but that doesn't mean I don't get I n od of them. If you only knew the number of times I've wished for a place like this. A house that's a home and not a showpiece."

Valerie turned away and nervously straightened an ornament. "I'm sorry. I had no right to be bad- lompered. I suppose it's because you make me nervous."

"You don't look a nervous type." Once again there was a note of mockery in his voice and she swung around.

"I'm not a nervous type, Mr. Barratt. I'm just nervous of someone like you. You're a stranger to me— not only you yourself, but your whole way of life."

"You know nothing of my life. The rubbish you read about me is just—rubbish." He caught her hand, squeezing the fingers so hard that she winced. "I can sec it's going to be an uphill battle to win your friendship."

"What do you want my friendship for?" Angrily she pulled her hand away. "Don't you think this joke has gone far enough?"

"What joke?"

"Coming here like this and pretending you want to be friends with me. What game are you playing? I don't
understand you, Mr. Barratt. We've nothing in common."

"We've everything in common."

His expression was determined as he put his hands on her shoulders and swung her around to face him. "You like my voice, my songs, and so do I! If you can think of a better basis for friendship than that, tell me!"

In spite of herself she smiled and he smiled back at her. It was amazing how it altered his expression, making him look far less sultry and younger.

"That's better," he said. "Now you can offer me some coffee and we can have a chat."

"Wouldn't you rather have a drink?"

"Not this time of the day. Or do you think I always have a glass in my hand?"

"I wasn't making any innuendos," she said quietly. "But last night I couldn't help noticing that water wasn't a liquid with which any of your friends seemed to be acquainted."

For a moment he looked annoyed, then he smiled again. "You've got a razor-edged tongue, haven't you? I hope I can prevent it cutting me to shreds." He turned his head as the door opened and Mr. Browne came in.

For a moment the two men stared at one another, then Nicky moved forward, his hand outstretched. I

"I take it you're Valerie's father. I hope you don't mind me barging in like this?"

"Not at all. Any friend of Valerie's—" Mr. Browne stopped short. "Your face looks familiar. Have you been here before?"

"It's Nicky Barratt," Valerie said hastily, and then because she was not sure if her father understood the significance of the name, she repeated it.

"Nicky Barratt," Mr. Browne murmured and then looked thunderstruck. "You don't mean you're the singer chap my daughter's always raving about?"

"I didn't know she raved about me," Nicky grinned, "but thanks for saying so! After last night, my ego could do with a lift."

Mr. Browne looked at his daughter in bewilderment and Valerie, knowing an explanation was due, searched for the right words.

"I—I met Nicky Barratt last night. I didn't mention it because there—there was nothing to tell. But Mr. Vane—Mr. Barratt's manager—rescued me when I got caught in a crowd of fans outside the stage door. They gave me a lift in their car and took me back to the Savoy Hotel for a drink."

"You were lucky not to end up in a hospital," her father said irritably. "I thought you had more sense than to get mixed up in a crowd of screaming teenagers."

"All's well that ends well," Nicky intervened easily. "But I thought I'd drive down today and make sure your daughter was feeling fine after her little adventure. And I can see she is." His smile held a hidden meaning and Valerie avoided his eyes and left the room, murmuring something about making the coffee.

As she set the cups on a tray, she could not help wondering what lay behind Nicky Barratt's visit. She refused to believe he had come here simply to see her. As she moved across the hall she saw her reflection in the mirrored hall stand. Pale and slim in a cotton dress that had seen service over many summers, she knew that the plainest girl in Nicky Barratt's suite last night had looked more attractive than she did now. Yet he had traveled sixty miles to see her. Pushing the incredible thought away, she went into the drawing room and found both men installed in armchairs, chatting like old acquaintances.
"I don't know much about your kind of work," her father was saying, "and personally I've never been able to stand —"

"Daddy!" Valerie interrupted hastily. "Wouldn't you like your pipe?"

"I've got it in my pocket, dear." Mr. Browne turned to the younger man again. "As I was saying just now, your type of singing doesn't—"

"Daddy!" Valerie repeated. "Your tobacco. Shall I get your tobacco?"

Mr. Browne frowned. "No, no, I've got it here. I do wish you wouldn't keep interrupting me. You'll make me forget what I was going to say."

"I rather think that was the intention." Nicky said dryly. "But you've said enough for me to realize you're not partial to singers of my type."

Mr. Browne looked discomfited and, recollecting his position as host, made the amende honorable. "I can't stand the majority of 'em—that's true enough—but at least you sing melodic songs! And your voice isn't raucous!"

"It's an adequate one for the kind of use I give it. But to be honest, I've never been able to understand the reason for my success."

With a bang Valerie set the tray on the table. It nauseated her to hear him talk so deprecatingly about himself. The one thing she had learned in the past twenty-four hours was that Nicky Barratt was anything but modest! She poured the coffee, aware of the men speaking behind her. Evidently the Barratt charm did not only extend to women: there was no question but that her father had thawed considerably to him. She handed round the cups and as Nicky took his, he let his hand rest on her fingers.

"How about coming for a run in the car?"

"I can't. I have to fix dinner."

"Nonsense. It'll do you good to get some fresh air," her father interrupted. "And bread and cheese will suit me fine for tonight, after the enormous lunch you cooked."

"There you are," Nicky said. "All your arguments have been cut from underneath you. Get your coat and I'll let you take me to a nice farmhouse for tea."

Sitting in the luxurious sports car, Valerie had to pinch herself to make sure she was not dreaming. But the trees whizzing past them and the breeze blowing her hair away from her face were real enough and she sighed contentedly.

At once Nicky glanced at her. "I've never had a girl refuse to come out with me before. It was quite an odd feeling."

"Perhaps I'm an odd girl."

"Or one who's clever enough not to run after me."

She saw the meaning behind his remark and reacted to it with anger. "My reluctance wasn't an act, Mr. Barratt. I didn't want to come out with you. I didn't see the purpose."

"You may not have one," he said lightly, "but that doesn't mean that I haven't." He moved one hand from the wheel and took a gold cigarette case and a lighter from his pocket. "Light one for me, will you?"

Nervously she put a cigarette between her lips and fumbled with the lighter. She inhaled and felt her eyes water as she tried not to cough. "I'm afraid I'm not very proficient at this," she stammered, and handed him the lighted cigarette.
He put it in his mouth and as his lips closed around it, she was aware of the intimacy of the action. In all the years she had known Mark, he had never asked her to light a cigarette for him in this way.

"It's funny," she said, stumbling over the words, "but I feel as if I've known you for years. I suppose I have in a way. I've followed your career almost from the moment you began."

He was so long replying that she turned to look at him. His mouth was set in a straight line, his dark eyes narrowed so that no expression was visible in them. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking and she realized that though she might know many intimate things about him—the shaving lotion be used, his favorite foods, his hobbies—he was still a stranger to her in many other ways. He was far more worldly than any man she had yet encountered. He was also considerably more mixed-up! Last night he had been boorish and rude, but today he had driven sixty miles to see her. Which behavior bespoke the real man? It was a question to which she could find no answer.

"Penny for your thoughts." His voice startled her and she sat up straight.

"I was wondering whether we should go for a walk," she lied.

"A walk?"

"Yes. The Downs are lovely at this time of the year." She glanced down and could just make out his elegant suede shoes. "But I don't think you're dressed for the country."

"Of course I am."

A few moments later they drew to a stop in a narrow lane and he helped her out and strode beside her along the road until they came to a stile.

"If we climb over this we'll get to the Downs," she said.

He looked at the stile. "Can you manage it?"

"Of course, I'm not wearing a tight skirt."

He grinned. "I was forgetting you are a country girl."

He watched as she clambered over and then followed. His foot went straight into a patch of mud and streaks of it spattered his trouser leg. He muttered under his breath and made futile attempts to shake the mud off.

"I'm awfully sorry," Valerie apologized. "I didn't realize it had been raining here this morning. We'd better go back on the road."

"Not now, we won't. Nobody's going to call me chicken!"

She laughed and, conscious of his hand clasping her elbow, walked by his side across the meadow, her feet sinking into the thick, soft grass.

"Look," she said, pointing at the hedge. "Ragged Robin. Isn't it pretty?"

"Where?" He peered in the direction of her finger. "I can't see a bird."

She tried not to smile. "Ragged Robin's a flower." She walked to the hedge and touched the tall stems with the pink, divided petals.

He stared at it. "I can see I'd better keep my mouth shut, otherwise you'll think I'm ignorant."

"Only when you're in the country," she said demurely. "I'm the one who's ignorant in town. Do you know I couldn't name a single restaurant or theater without looking it up in a paper?"

"That's the best news I've heard. These young girls who've been everywhere and done everything are the biggest
bores in the world."

She tried not to read more into his words than he might mean. "Naïveté can be equally as boring."

"Not if it's coupled with intelligence."

"And I'm really very intelligent, of course," she mocked.

"Intelligent, honest and lovely."

Color seeped into her cheeks and quickly she began to walk again. In silence they climbed uphill, their feet slipping on wet grass and knotted tree roots. At the top they paused and leaned against the trunk of a massive oak to survey the countryside below them. Undulating pasture land rolled away to the sea, which could lie seen sparkling in the distance, while half a mile to the right an untidy mass of trees, all whorls and spirals like a child's drawing, changed from green to blue as they receded into haze.

"It's worth the climb, isn't it?" Valerie said.

"What is?"

"The view." She studied him "Don't you like it?"

For the first time he stared around him. "Oh, the view? Sure, it's great; haven't seen anything like it for years. But now we've admired it, let's get some tea."

Faintly chilled by his obvious lack of appreciation of the scenery, she set off down the other side of the hill. "There's a farmhouse on the way to Dovewell. It's only about a mile from here."

"Okay. Let's go to the car."

"I'm afraid we can't go there by car. It's across the fields."

"Across the—" His voice lifted and with an effort he lowered it. "Okay, let's go."

"We can have tea at home if you'd prefer it. Or we can go to the Taverners. It's the hotel in the village."

"I saw it as I drove up to your house. A mock-Tudor affair, isn't it?"

"Not mock," she replied.

"I still don't fancy it." He began to stride along. "If we have tea in the village you're bound to meet people you know, and for the moment I'd like to keep you to myself."

Satisfied, and trying not to be, she walked beside him. They reached level ground and skirted a narrow ribbon of river, then crossed a wooden bridge to where an old farmhouse, shadowed by a group of elms, nestled in a hollow of the Downs. A handwritten notice pinned to one tree bore the word 'Teas', and a few wrought-iron tables were laid ready with bright yellow china.

Valerie settled on a chair beneath a mulberry tree, the dark fruit already ripening in the sun. They were the only visitors and as a white-aproned woman came out to serve them, Nicky hastily donned a pair of dark glasses.

"If it's too sunny for you," Valerie said, "we can move into the shade."

"No, no, I like the sun. But I don't want to be recognized."

She smiled. "You look far more conspicuous in those than you do without them."

"Maybe. But I'd rather be a conspicuous stranger than a recognized celebrity." He half hid his face as the woman approached them. "You order."
Valerie shrugged and, conscious of the woman's stare, looked down at the menu. Although his dark glasses stopped him from being recognized, anyone could have guessed he would be more at home in the West End than in the countryside.

"Would you like one of our special teas?" the woman asked. "We've some lovely new-laid eggs and home-baked wholemeal bread. Or there's scones with homemade butter and cream, if you'd prefer it."

From the corner of her eye Valerie saw Nicky's mouth drop open. When he had suggested tea, he had probably been thinking in terms of Lap Tsan Tchoo Song and almond biscuits. An imp of mischief made her ask for the special tea and, still keeping a straight face, she ordered scones too, and homemade strawberry jam.

"Why did you go and do that?" Nicky asked as the waitress disappeared. "She'll be sore as hell if we leave it all.

"I'm sure you won't leave it. You can't drive back in London without a decent meal. You've got a performance tonight, haven't you?"

"I never eat before a performance. Only afterward."

"But that isn't till midnight!"

"I'm used to it," he shrugged, then shook his head. "Heck, it's years since I've sat down to a meal railed tea."

"You were the one who invited me out for it," she reminded him, and almost felt sorry for him as the woman returned with a laden tray: shiny boiled eggs in yellow eggcups, thin brown bread, wholemeal scones, strawberry jam and bright yellow farm butter: i he whole to be washed down by strong tea, brewing in a massive china teapot.

"You mean we've got to eat all this?" Nicky demanded in dismay, when they were alone again.

"Some of it, at least," she replied. "And next time be more careful when you issue invitations."

He pulled a face. "You ordered this on purpose!"

"You catch on quickly," she answered in his own vernacular and saw his mouth tighten.

For a second he was poised on a knife-edge, then the humor of the situation struck him and he started to laugh.

"You're not as dumb as you look, Val. When I__ " He colored, seeing his faux pas. "I'm sorry. I guess dumb isn't the word I meant."

"How about naive?"

"Yes, that's it. Naive."

Almost guiltily he began to eat. Although he had professed himself uninterested in food, once he started, he demolished far more than his share, piling his bread thick with jam and passing his cup to be replenished three times.

"This is the tastiest meal I've had in years," he said, wiping buttery fingers on a fine lawn handkerchief. "I think I'll tell Bob to fix something like this every afternoon."

"It wouldn't taste the same in a hotel."

"I guess not. Still, it'll give me an incentive for coming down to the country. Not that I need any incentive to come and see you."

"Don't," she said quickly.
"Don't what?"

"Don't say things like that. I know you don't mean it."

"I do. I do want to see you again."

"I can't think why." she said slowly. "We're poles apart. And please don't give me all that nonsense about physical attraction. You know far prettier girls than me."

"Prettiness on its own can soon become a bore. I'm sorry if that sounds trite but—"

"It isn't trite," she interrupted, "but the life you've led doesn't make me believe you think that way."

"You don't know how I think," he said abruptly.

"Sometimes I'm not even_____ Damn it, Val, why go on about my past? I'm here, aren't I? Surely that means something?"

"Yes, it does," she admitted. "But I don't know what."

He was momentarily silent, his dark eyes searching her face. "It means I want to be with you, Val. That I lind you intriguing and refreshing and—and lovely."

"I'm very ordinary."

"You're not. You don't make the best of yourself, that's all. With different clothes and hairstyle and some makeup, you'd be astonished at the change."

Resentment flared in her. "I don't want to change, thank you very much. If you don't like me as I am, ilien go back to London."

"But I do like you," he said softly. "I just tried to make you see that I don't consider you to be ordinary." He looked down at the empty table. "Now I'll drive you back to Kerring and on the way we'll stop at n madhouse for a drink."

Conscious of her faded cotton dress and woolen cardigan, she shook her head. "I'm not dressed for going out."

"Sure you are. Anything goes in these country places. Let's get Old Mother Hubbard to give us the lull and we'll get weaving."
It was almost dusk by the time they reached the Lotus, and shadows pointed long fingers across the lane as they drove toward Kerring. Some few miles on the outskirts of the village the lights of a roadhouse winked at them, and Nicky nosed the car to a stop in the empty driveway.

"It doesn't look as if there's anyone here," he said. "All the better if we have the place to ourselves."

Nervously Valerie followed him through the lighted entrance, wishing she were a million miles away. "Are you sure you won't be late for the theater, Mr. Barratt?"

"Quite sure, Miss Browne." He squeezed her arm. "The name's Nicky. How many times must I tell you?"

Still keeping hold of her, he led her into a rectangular room with peach mirrors and pink-shaded lights. Along one wall there was a bar and in the far corner stood a record player with a pile of records on a table close at hand.

"Two martinis," he said to the barman, and sauntered over to scan the records. He picked out three and placed them on the turntable. "That should do to get on with," he said and held out his arms.

Nervously Valerie went toward him. "I'm not a very good dancer."

"Neither am I," he said into her ear. "But this is the only way I can think of to get you close without scaring you to death!"

Blushing, she lowered her head and he pulled her against him and began to move across the small floor space, cleared for dancing.

"You're so fresh and unspoiled," he whispered. "I've been waiting to hold you like this all day."

With an effort Valerie refused to let herself be carried away by the mood of the moment or the sensuous music throbbing in the background. To Nicky Barratt she was a passing fancy, a girl who, because she refused to be conquered, made him the more determined to conquer.

We've nothing in common, she told herself. No matter what he says, our paths are too divergent ever to meet successfully.

"Relax," he ordered and gave her a little shake. "I'm not going to eat you."

It was nearly seven o'clock before the silver-gray car slowed down outside the Brownes' house, and almost before it stopped, Valerie jumped out. Not for anything did she want Nicky to feel he had to suggest seeing her again. Despite all his honeyed words, today had been an incident in his life, not to be repeated. By tomorrow—with another female in his sights—he would have forgotten her completely.

"Thanks, Nicky," she said gaily. "I've had a marvelous time."

"So have I. When can I see you again?"

"I—I don't know. I don't come to London very often and I—I'm sure you're too busy to come down here."

"I certainly am." His voice held a trace of irritation.

"But if the mountain won't come to________ You know the rest of it, I suppose?"

"Yes, but."

"So when can we meet?" Still she hesitated and he glanced at his watch and frowned. "I can't stand around pleading with you, Val. As it is I'll have to drive like hell to get back in time for the performance." He seized her by the
shoulders. "I must see you again soon. I'd show you why if I weren't convinced there were prying eyes behind every window in the street!"

She blushed. "I—I'm always here, Nicky. If you really do want—"

"I want," he cut in swiftly, and pressed his lips on hers.

It was a gentle, undemanding kiss, yet it evoked in her a wild desire to respond, a treacherous moment of passion that she was afraid might give her away. How could this man whom she had met for the first time yesterday arouse such a desire in her when Mark, whom she had known all her life, leave her completely cold?

"Please go," she whispered. "You'll be late."

He stepped back, triumph in his eyes. "I'll be down tomorrow. But earlier, so that we can have lunch together."

"I always have lunch with my father."

"Tell him you're having it with me for a change."

Arrogantly, without waiting for her answer, he climbed into the car and roared away.

For the next ten days the silver-gray Lotus was a familiar sight in the village. When the weather was fine, Valerie and Nicky drove to the coast or farther into the country. If wet, they stayed at home and played records. He always left soon after her father returned from the bank, and she wondered if it was because he felt uncomfortable with a man who so patently regarded him as different from anyone he had known. Yet her father had, until six years ago, been manager of a large bank in London and had commuted daily, so he was not totally unused to men of Nicky's type. Yet there was no doubting the constraint between the two of them, and she decided it was because her father still regarded Mark as her boyfriend and saw Nicky as the interloper.

As for her own feelings, she was still too afraid to think about them. She lived only for the moment, savoring the pleasure of Nicky's company and seeing each new date with him as an added bonus—another memory to be stored away and brought out to shine in her dull future.

Only occasionally did she wonder why Nicky never asked her to meet him in London; surely he must be tired of traveling to Kerring? Yet he never suggested it and she decided it was because he wished to keep his friendship with her a secret. Yet even this thought was not a happy one, for it brought other questions to mind, and one evening as he was driving her home after spending the day with her on the Downs, she began to mull over them and feel very sorry for herself.

"What's with you?" Nicky slowed the car. "You've been sighing like the wind in the trees for the past ten minutes."

"It's nothing."

"Don't give me that. You aren't the moody type, Val. Something's bothering you and I want to know what it is."

She glanced at him, as always warming to his dark good looks. His slim body hid enormous strength, as she had found out when he had tried to kiss her too intimately and she had made an attempt to resist him. Yet after his first effort to make her kiss him the way he wanted, he had accepted her rebuff and had not tried to kiss her at all. Perhaps this was the reason for the dark thoughts that had overtaken her.

"I was wondering how much longer you'll want to go on seeing me." she confessed.

"Why? Getting tired of me already?"

"I thought it might be the other way around. You may get tired of coming down here." There, it was out and she might as well say the rest of it. "It can't be much fun for you having to drive down here all the time and then rush back for your show."
"So?"

"So I... I... I'm surprised you've never asked me to come to London."

"I see." He obviously did, for he drove the next couple of miles in silence. "Why do you think I've never asked you
to come up to town, Val?" he asked at last.

"I don't know."

"Little liar." His tone was indulgent. "Come on, tell me why you think I've kept you hidden. Because you do, don't
you?"

Hearing him say her thoughts aloud made them seem unworthy ones, and she would have given a great deal never to
have let him know how she had felt.

"Well, yes," she admitted. "I—I thought you—you might be ashamed of me."

"Ashamed?" He was so honestly incredulous that she immediately knew this was not the reason. "Or perhaps you
were... were afraid I wouldn't fit in with your friends."

"I don't have any friends—apart from my backing group. And they're not personal friends really. No, my reason for
keeping you hidden was a selfish one." His glance was sharp, as if defying her to disbelieve him. "Once we're seen
around together we'll be the butt of every news snoop in the country. I was trying to put off that evil day. But if
you'd rather come to—"

"No, no, I wouldn't." She was so happy that his reason was such a simple one that she could have wept for joy.
"Let's leave things the way they are. Now I know why, I can—"

"No, Val. You're right. I can't keep you hidden forever. Bob thinks it's—" He stopped, then said: "Come up for the
show tomorrow night and we'll go out afterward and celebrate."

"Celebrate what?"

"That we've known each other a fortnight. I've no show on Sunday so we can really have a night out tomorrow."

She thought quickly. "I'll have to let my aunt know I think it'll be all right to stay with her."

"I'll fix you a room at the Savoy."

"No, I—I—if I can't stay with my aunt, I'd rather come home."

"You'd be quite safe at the hotel," he said irritably. "I don't intend to rape you!"

"I wasn't afraid of that. But Dad's rather old-fashioned and—"

"So are you." His good humor had returned. "It's time you got with this century, Val. Not all couples wait until
marriage before they make love to one another."

"I realize that. But I still prefer to wait until I'm a Man's wife before I..." She could not go on, painfully conscious of
her vulnerability where Nicky was concerned. What would she do if they were engaged mid he wanted to make love
to her? She closed her id to the question.

"What time shall I come up tomorrow, Nicky?"

"I'm not free till after the show. I'm recording all day at the studios."

"Shouldn't we leave it till the following Saturday, then?"

"Certainly not, you're coming up tomorrow, so slop arguing. I'll leave a ticket for you at the box office, and when
you've seen the show, come along to my dressing room."

Valerie's pleasure at the evening ahead disappeared as she examined her wardrobe and the one dinner dress it contained. She longed for something more with-it than pink crepe, and wistfully thought of black silk or misty violet blue, the same color as her eyes. But it would be extravagant to buy something she would have little call to wear again, for she was unlikely to last much longer in Nicky's life. He did not take out the same girl for long. It was part of his stock-in-trade to be seen around with lots of different, glamorous females.

Depressed, she climbed into bed. Being with Nicky in the country, away from his show business friends and jet-set hangers-on, she felt close to him. But once in London, she would again feel a nonentity. Yet it would be cowardice to telephone him and say she was not coming. Sooner or later she would have to see him in his own milieu, and if she could not fit into it, then she must have the courage to admit it and get out of his life.

A quick telephone call ascertained that it would be all right for her to stay with her aunt, and she caught the first train to London after lunch. As they pulled out of the railway station she glimpsed Mark's blue station wagon crossing the small bridge and felt a pang of disquiet at her behavior toward him. Still, she had not encouraged him to fall in love with her, and had gone out of her way to make it clear she could never be his wife. It might be painful for him to know she was going out with someone else, but it should at least make him realize she meant what she said. Pushing him from her mind, she settled back in the corner and for the rest of the journey contemplated the evening ahead.

Mrs. Pafford was delighted to see her niece and incredulous to learn the reason for her visit.

"Going out with Nicky Barratt? I didn't even know you knew him."

With assumed nonchalance Valerie went into an explanation, conscious all the while of her aunt's growing dismay.

"I hope you're not going to get hurt in the end," the older woman said.

"Why should I?"

"Do you really need to ask that question?" You're not a stupid girl, Valerie."

"I'm sorry." Valerie flushed. "But for the moment I don't want to think about the future. Nicky's giving me a wonderful time and we're good friends."

Quickly she turned for a final look in the mirror. Now that she was wearing the pink dress it looked better than she had imagined. The delicate color echoed the pink that heightened her cheekbones, and her dark hair, brushed until it gleamed like a raven's wing, curled under at the ends to frame her face. She might not look as soignee as the girls with whom Nicky usually went out, but at least he needn't be ashamed of her.

With unexpected extravagance she decided to take a taxi to the Palaceum, and she shivered slightly as she sat back on the cold leather seat. It had been raining earlier and the streets gleamed darkly wet, the lamps seeming to loom twice as large in the misty air. September was fast drawing to a close and winter would soon be here. As they turned down the narrow street that led to the theater, she saw the pavements thronged with young people still hoping to obtain a seat for the show.

With difficulty the taxi maneuvered to the theater entrance. "I hope you've got a ticket," the driver said, as she paid him. "You'll never get in otherwise."

Valerie looked at the man's florid face and wondered what he would say if she told him Nicky Barratt himself had arranged for her to see his show. Smiling at the thought, she fought her way toward the foyer, whose entrance was guarded by a commissionaire.

"No seats left," he said brusquely. "You can't get in without a ticket."

"Nicky Barratt's left one for me," she explained. "I just want to collect it."
"Oh—this way then." He opened the door and she slipped through.

At the box office she collected her ticket, thrilled to see it was in the fifth row of the stalls. What a difference from the last time she had seen Nicky perform, when she had been so far away from the stage that she had felt like a fly on the ceiling.

A buzzer sounded and she hurried down the stairs to the auditorium, taking her seat as the orchestra crashed into a crescendo of ear-splitting trumpets and drums and the curtains swung apart for a juggling act. Nicky was not coming on until after the interval and Valerie wondered if he would send word to her to go around and see him backstage. But he did not do so and she remained in her seat, self-consciously aware of being alone.

At last the interval was over, the house lights were lowered and the curtains pulled back to show a stage bare except for the group of four musicians hidden in the corner: "my only friends," Nicky had called them. The audience went silent, the very air trembling with excitement that burst into screams as a tall slender figure in a white dinner jacket sauntered on to the stage.

Caught up in the emotion round her tears filled Valerie's eyes. Until tonight she had managed to think of the Nicky she knew as being different from Nicky Barratt the singer. But seeing him in front of her and hearing the wild applause, the two suddenly became indivisible. The man and the singer were one complete whole, and with this realization, the differing emotions they aroused in her also fused. Nicky was not a man who could be divided. If one loved him, one did so for his talent as a composer, his marvelous voice, his personal charm. This meant one had to accept the differing lifestyles that were part of such a complex character—accept and not try to change them. If change were needed, it would have to come from herself. She clasped her hands. She dare not think such foolish thoughts. She had only known Nicky a couple of weeks; in a couple more he might have gone from her life. Pushing away the thought, she listened as he went into the familiar refrain of his current hit record and then into all the other songs that were associated with his name. For forty minutes he held the stage alone, and when he sang his last number, the audience would not let him go, cheering and screaming and demanding an encore.

Only the playing of the National Anthem stilled the audience, though there were still a few hysterical shrieks of "Nicky, Nicky!" emanating from the balcony.

As the anthem died away Valerie made for the nearest exit and approached an attendant.

"Would you please tell me how to get backstage? I want to see Mr. Barratt."

"So do a million other girls. You go out through this door here, turn left and left again. That'll bring you to the stage door."

"I don't want the stage door. I want his dressing room. Mr. Barratt's a friend of mine. He's expecting me."

The attendant looked disbelieving and, not stopping to argue, Valerie ran into the foyer, where she found the commissionaire who had let her into the theater. Breathlessly she explained what she wanted. "You know Mr. Barratt left me my ticket, and I promise you he's expecting me."

"That's all right, miss. Hang on a minute and I'll take you around myself."

Thankfully she followed him back into the auditorium, and through a door marked Fire Exit. It led along a narrow corridor and brought her around to the side of the stage. Thick electric cables snaked over the floor and she picked her way carefully past them.

"Take the corridor facing you," the commissionaire said behind her. "Then it's the third dressing room on the right."

Smiling her thanks, Valerie obeyed the instruction and apprehensively tapped on the door. Nobody answered and she leaned close to it. A great deal of noise could be heard coming from inside, and she turned the handle and went in. The room was full of people and Nicky was nowhere to be seen. For a moment she wondered whether the commissionaire had misdirected her and was about to step back when she heard her name called and saw Nicky's manager pushing his way toward her.
"Thank goodness you've got here. We expected to see you during the interval."

"I wasn't sure if Nicky wanted to see me then. He never—"

"Wanted to see you?" Bob gave a broad grin. "If you haven't the right to be with him, who has?" Still talking, he pulled her forward. "I'd like you to meet some of the press. You'll be seeing a lot of them in future."

"Who is she, Bob?" a man asked.

"A special friend of Nicky's."

"Aren't they all?" someone else questioned sarcastically.

"This one's extra special," Bob replied.

"How long have you known Nicky?" a hard-faced woman asked, thrusting herself in Valerie's path.

"A long time," Bob answered for her and, catching Valerie by the elbow, pulled her over to a door almost hidden by a vast bouquet of flowers.

"Go in," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "and lock the door behind you."

Wondering where she would find herself, Valerie did so, and saw she had entered a small room, little bigger than her own bathroom. It was overpoweringly hot and brilliantly lighted, furnished with two chairs in front of a long table on which was an array of cosmetics, a small sink and a screen. But it was the man brushing his hair in front of the mirror on whom she focused her attention.

"Nicky! Thank goodness I've found you."

"Hello, darling." He swung around. "I've just finished changing. You shouldn't have come through the main dressing room." He pointed to another door. "If you'd come in this way you could have bypassed the crowd outside."

"I wish I'd known. All those newspaper people make me nervous."

"They're okay when you get to know them. The main thing is to keep your cool with them." He pulled forward a chair. "Sit down, honey. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thanks." She was aware of the bright lights shining full on her face and glanced at herself in the mirror.

"There's no shine on your nose." Nicky smiled. "You look perfect. Now tell me how you liked my show."

"Surely you don't need to ask? You were wonderful."

"I like to be told. It gives me reassurance."

"I wouldn't have thought you needed it."

He turned back to the mirror and picked up his hairbrush.

"All performers need it. You keep telling me how good I am and I'll keep telling you I love you."

She flushed. There was something about Nicky's conversation that gave her the feeling he was playing a part. Or was he always so brittle after a performance? Quickly she reminded herself that he was found to seem different from the young man who spent his days with her in the country.

Suddenly he swung around and pulled her to her feet.

"Don't look so scared, Val. You're going to enjoy yourself tonight, I promise you. I bet you've never been to the Candlelight Club?"
"I've never even heard of it!"

He squeezed her shoulders. "Come on then, we've got to face the lions before we can go."

She looked behind her. "Can't we just sneak out?"

"Bob would kill me! Publicity's important, Val. It helps sell my records and keeps my name in front of the public."

In the dressing room once more, Valerie saw yet another side to Nicky and marveled at his diversity of character. She had seen him gay and moody, tender and quick-tempered; now he was a mixture of wit and bonhomie, easily parrying the pertinent and impertinent questions flung at him. They mainly concerned his love life and, embarrassingly aware of the glances cast in her direction, she wished she had arranged to meet him anywhere but here.

Suddenly he caught her hand and pulled her toward the door. "That's all for now, folks," he called over his shoulder. "But come around to the hotel in the morning. I might have some news for you."

Closing the door quickly on the fresh barrage of questions, he raced her down a stone passage and up a narrow flight of concrete steps.

"This is one exit the fans don't know about," he said as they reached the roof and clambered down a steel staircase to a backyard.

"Where does it lead?" she asked, groping her way after him.

"Into a dress factory!" He unlocked a wooden door and Valerie found herself in some kind of storeroom. A few more hallways were crossed and they reached another door.

"I hope you won't get hauled up for breaking and entering," she teased, half seriously.

"You've got to be kidding! Bob fixed up these arrangements for me with the owner. I give him a couple of seats for all my concerts and he gives me this safe conduct pass!"

Another turn of a key brought them out into a cul-de-sac, that was almost filled by a black limousine.

"Your chariot awaits," Nicky grinned, and pushed her unceremoniously in.

"Why didn't you use this exit the other night?" she asked, remembering how she had nearly been crushed to death when he had emerged from the stage door.

"It isn't good to hide from your fans all the time. I only do it when it's strictly necessary."

She felt a momentary depression and wondered whether she were the reason he felt it necessary to avoid his fans this evening. But to think this way would spoil her evening, and since this might be her last one with him—suddenly she saw his asking her to London as his way of saying goodbye—she vowed to make the most of it.

The Candlelight Club was everything she had imagined: large yet intimate, with subdued lighting from gas tapers and music coming from a small combo. Waiters hovered discreetly round them as the maitre d'hôtel led the way to a table in an alcove.

"I ordered the meal in advance," Nicky explained. "I want this to be an evening you'll remember."

As if she would ever forget it, Valerie thought, dancing dreamily in Nicky's arms as they relaxed between one mouth-watering course and the next.

As time sped by, she realized he was making a conscious effort to entertain her, telling her about his life before he became a celebrity, recounting incidents that had occurred during his rise to fame. All the anecdotes were amusing and she wished he felt close enough to her to tell her of the hard times he must have had: the years of singing in the
Northern clubs; of doing one-night stands up and down the country; years which he glossed over lightly. In spite of all she had read about him and all he was telling her own, there was still another side to Nicky, a part of him which he refused to give away.

"Tell me the rest of it," she said softly. "I'm sure it hasn't all been as easy as you make out."

"It wasn't difficult," he said at once. "Even when I was poor, I had fun."

"What about your life before you started singing?"

"I had no life then." He signaled a waiter and a magnum of champagne was wheeled to the table, forestalling anything else she might have said.

Valerie raised her eyebrows. "We're not supposed to drink all that, are we?"

"Why not? This is a celebration."

"Of what?"

"Wait and see."

Golden liquid bubbled and Nicky raised his glass high. His shirt cuff was pulled back and she noticed the dark hairs on his wrists. His lean face held a brooding expression and his thin, sensitive lips were compressed into a straight line. In the flickering candlelight she noticed a vein throbbing in his temple and had a sudden premonition of fear. Quickly she picked up her own glass.

"Don't drink yet, Val. I want to ask you something." He bit on his lip, then seemingly forced himself to relax.

"What's wrong, Nicky? You look strange."

"I feel strange," he said soberly. "Will you marry me?"

Her glass tilted and champagne spilled on to the tablecloth. "You can't be serious," she gasped.

"I was never more serious in my life." He caught her hand. "You've got to marry me, Valerie. You've got to say yes."
CHAPTER FIVE

The pale light of dawn was edging the horizon when Valerie and Nicky left the club. The chauffeur had long since been dismissed and as Nicky drove through the deserted streets, Valerie saw they were not going in the direction of Bayswater.

"There's no need to go back yet," Nicky said in answer to her protest. "I'm taking you to the hotel. We can talk better there."

"But we've been talking all evening!"

"Not alone." He turned his head and smiled at her and her resistance melted.

Leaving the car in the courtyard outside the hotel, they went up to the corner suite that was Nicky's home when he was in London.

As the door closed behind them he pulled her into his arms and pressed his mouth on hers. Valerie's body quivered to his touch and she would have fallen had he not been holding her tightly.

"You're so innocent," he whispered. "It'll be fun teaching you to make love." The softness left his mouth and his lips became more demanding, arousing her to a response that frightened her.

Anxiously she tried to draw back. "Nicky, don't!"

"Why not? I want you." His grip increased and she felt herself lifted and carried over to the wide settee. "You're so sweet," he murmured. "I never knew how much until now."

Her arms stole around his neck. Her eyes were closed but she felt his breath on her cheek, his eyelashes fluttering lightly upon her skin. Once more his mouth found hers and this time she did not resist him. How could she when she loved him so much? His hand moved over her body, caressing her shoulders and then cupping her breasts. Only then did she make an instinctive withdrawal, stilling the movement as his fingers pressed harder on the swelling curves.

"I won't hurt you," he whispered. "Just let me feel you… your warmth… your softness."

With a murmur she complied, not resisting when he pulled at her zip and lowered the front of her dress. Heat engulfed her as he felt his eyes upon her. She gripped his hand, pressing her body close to his and exulting in the tremors that racked him as he flung himself on top of her.

"Val," he gasped. "Val…not here…not now. Come with me." He pulled back and went to draw her up. She felt the cool air on her breasts, was aware of her half-dressed body and was suddenly engulfed by shame.

"Nicky, no. I can't."

"Don't be silly."

"I can't. Please understand, darling. I can't." For a brief instant he remained motionless, his face flushed, his eyes gleaming like jet.

"All right," he said huskily, "but you can't say we're not on the same wavelength."

"I never did say so. Oh Nicky, I didn't know it could be like this."

"Nor did I. I never realized that______' The words died away and he gave an exultant laugh. "This really does call for a celebration drink! What will you have?"

"Nothing, thanks. I've already had too much."
He walked over to the sideboard and came back with two glasses. "Have a brandy, it'll do you good."

Obediently she took the glass and sipped it. Her eyes smarted with tears as the spirit coursed down her throat and she set the glass on the table beside her.

"It's terribly late, Nicky. Don't you think we ought to be going?"

"There's plenty of time yet," he said easily and sat down in an armchair.

"But it's nearly four o'clock. Aunt Alice will be getting up soon! Please take me home."

"Why don't you stay here?"

"Stay here?"

He saw her expression and said quickly: "There are two bedrooms in the suite, you know. Bob sometimes stays with me. So you needn't share my bed if you don't want."

"You know very well that I want to," she said, coloring furiously, "but I have never… I mean I haven't…"

"I know that." He was casual to the point of indolence. "But you've got to do it some time, haven't you? I mean you're not saving it forever!"

His words hit her like a douche of cold water, shattering her mood and making her afraid. "You're very crude," she said shakily. "Does it come naturally to you or is it force of habit?"

Bright spots of red stained his cheeks, but when he replied his voice was regretful. "It was unforgiveable of me, Val. But you're right, of course. It is force of habit. In the world I mix in, virginity isn't prized."

"It seems to be despised," she retorted. "And I can't think why you should want to marry me. Or is it the only way you can get me into your bed?"

The red heightened in his face but his expression was one of dawning admiration. "I'd forgotten your razor tongue, Val. But you're wrong in your assumption. If I want a bedmate I can get them by the dozen. But I don't. I want someone whom I can"—he hesitated, as though searching for the right words—"to whom I can relate," he finished. "Who sees me as a friend and a companion—not just a meal ticket and sex object." He set down his glass of brandy. "Now seems like a good time for me to take you home. Come on, sweetheart."

In silence they left the suite and returned to the car. The street lamps were turned off and the day was looming gray. To the left of them the Thames flowed sluggishly and a river boat hooted mournfully in the distance. Nicky drove swiftly through the silent streets, his face set in lines of concentration, and it was not until they drew up outside the Victorian house where Mrs. Pafford lived that he spoke.

"I'm going to be pretty busy for the next couple of weeks, Val. I've an album to record and a charity show to do."

"You mean you won't be able to come down to Kerring?"

"I could—but I'd rather not. It's a three-hour drive there and back. Why don't you spend a few weeks in town?"

"I don't like to leave my father."

"Would you rather leave me?"

"Of course not."

"Then fix it up. It's important that you're here with me. I want to have you with me, darling. You're engaged to me, remember?"

"I can't believe it."
"You will once you get a ring on your finger and your picture in the papers."

She caught her breath. "Can't we keep our engagement a secret?"

"What for?" He put his hand on her cheek. "You'll soon get used to the publicity. You might even be asked to write about your life with the famous Nicky Barratt!"

She shuddered. "I'd never do that. I want our personal life to be private."

"Nobody in the limelight has a private life. That's the penalty of fame."

"We'll have a private life," she said decisively.

"Don't kid yourself." He helped her out of the car and walked with her to the front door. "I won't be able to see you until tonight," he added. "Jackson Villiers is flying in from New York this morning and I'm lunching with him and Bob."

"But-"

"I can't help it, sweetheart. I didn't know about it until late last night. But I'll call you the minute I get away."

"Don't," she said, then quickly added as she opened the door, "I think I'd rather go home and tell Dad about us. I'd hate it if it leaked into the papers before he heard it from me."

"You've got a point there. And while you're home, make arrangements to come straight back. I want you to be with me."

With a brief kiss he returned to his car and drove away, and Valerie tiptoed quietly upstairs. A church clock struck six and she kicked off her shoes and stood beside the bed. There did not seem much point in going to sleep.

Slowly she unzipped her dress and put on a dressing gown, then settled on the bed, with the eiderdown around her feet, to think of the future: a future with a man whom she would have to share with a million other people. She sighed. Was Nicky right when he said they would have no private life? It was a terrifying prospect. Yet a future without him was even more terrifying.

It was noon before she returned to Kerring, having first told her aunt she was going back because Nicky could not see her while Jackson Villiers was in London. She made no mention of her engagement to him—feeling she wished her father to be the first one to know—nor did she refer to the possibility of staying in town for a few weeks: before that was decided, she had to arrange for someone to take care of her father.

As she had anticipated, he was working in the garden when she arrived, and she quickly checked to see he had put the casserole she had left him in the oven—he had, but had omitted to turn on the light—then went out to greet him.

"Good gracious," he exclaimed, seeing her. "Had a quarrel with your singer?"

"The exact opposite." She took the opportunity her father had given her and said: "He's asked me to marry him and I said yes."

"You___" Emotion robbed Mr. Browne of his voice, though he quickly recovered it. "But you hardly know him!"

"Enough to know I love him."

"Nonsense. You've been swept off your feet by his position and fame."

Valerie frowned. "I can't help being flattered by the fact that he's a celebrity, but that has nothing to do with my loving him. In fact, it almost counted against him to begin with."

"I'm not surprised. Dash it all, you weren't born yesterday. You know the life he leads. You just have to pick up a paper and—"
"That was in the past, Dad. It's Nicky's future that concerns me."

"A leopard can't change its spots."

"He can if the spots were painted on!"

"Is that what you think happened to Nicky? He never gave me the impression of regretting anything he did."

"He doesn't regret it. But a lot of it was just done for publicity. You mustn't believe everything you read in the papers."

"I don't. I'm not that foolish. But neither would I discount it all."

Her lips trembled, and the emotional tears she had held at bay since Nicky had proposed to her threatened to fall. Seeing the shine in her eyes, her father dropped his trowel and put an arm round her shoulder.

"I want what's best for you, my dear, and if you think your happiness lies with Nicky Barratt, then_____ But don't rush into marriage. Give yourself a chance to know him better. Stay in London with your aunt, if you like."

"That's what he suggested," Valerie said quickly.

"At least he showed some sense." Mr. Browne grunted.

Valerie laughed. "I'll go and see Mrs. Jakes this afternoon and ask her if she'll come in and look after you. If you find you can't manage, telephone and I'll come back."

"That's one thing I won't do," her father asserted. "I want to give you every chance to get to know this fianc6 of yours."

In a matter of hours Valerie had settled things satisfactorily at home and then hovered by the telephone, waiting for Nicky to make his promised call. But none came, and when eight o'clock had passed and there was still no word from him, she decided to make the call herself. No matter how long his discussion had been with his new recording company, it could not have lasted until now. Thankful she had made a note of the private number that would connect her directly to Nicky's suite, she dialed the code. Almost at once it rang out, and went on ringing without being picked up at the other end.

She was on the verge of putting down the receiver, when she heard Nicky's voice.

"The singer is busy," he drawled. "Call again."

"Nicky!" Her voice was frantic. "It's me—Valerie."

There was silence.

"Nicky?" she said hesitantly. "Are you still there?"

"Sure I'm still here-. I was—" He stopped and she heard muffled sounds, as if he had put his hand over the mouthpiece and was speaking to someone else.

"I can call back if it's not convenient," she said.

"No, no, tell me what you want."

"I—I just wanted to let you know I can come up to London. You do still want me to, don't you?"

"Of course. Will it be tomorrow?"

"No. Not till Tuesday. I'll be catching the three-fourty-five and will go straight to my aunt's."
"I'll pick you up at the station."

"There's no need."

"Silly." He sounded indulgent. "There's every need. I—" He broke off and she heard laughter in the distance.

"Is there someone with you?" she asked.

"Only Bob." He lowered his voice. "I'll see you at the station. Watch out for the dark glasses!"

Before she could reply the line went dead, and some of her pleasure died with it. She was certain that the laugh she had heard had been that of a woman. Yet Nicky had said he was with Bob.

Still, that didn't mean Bob hadn't brought some girl up to the suite. It was funny, but she didn't even know if the man was married. She tried to picture the woman he would like. Someone vivacious and worldly, she thought, who would accept his erratic hours and peripatetic life style. On the other hand he might prefer someone quite out of character—the way Nicky had done.

Nicky. Her husband. It was an unbelievable thought and she hugged it to herself. The one thing she must never do was to be jealous of him. To be surrounded by adoring girls was part of his life, and she had to remember that despite the glamour with which he was surrounded, he had chosen her.

True to his word he met her at Victoria Station on Tuesday afternoon, his greeting so ardent that all doubts fled.

"It seems ages since I saw you," she whispered. "I can't believe I'm going to be with you completely for the next two weeks."

"You'll believe it when you've seen my show ten times running!"

They laughed and ran to the car, avoiding a bunch of teenagers who had suddenly become aware of Nicky's presence. They barely reached the car in time, and Nicky swiftly shot into the stream of traffic even as a grubby hand was reaching for the door handle.

'Shall I take you straight to the hotel?' he asked.

'I'd rather leave my things at Aunt Alice's first. She's expecting me." He turned the car in the direction of Bayswater and she snuggled close. "I'd like you to meet her. I've told her we're engaged."

Nicky glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "How did your old man take it? I bet he wasn't too pleased."

"He was surprised," she said cautiously. "He felt we hadn't known each other long enough."

"I hope you reassured him?"

"I tried."

"That's my girl." He pressed her knee. "It's good to see you, Val. I've missed you."

"Not as much as I've missed you." She caught his hand and pressed it to her cheek. "I love you so much, Nicky."

"Don't say that too often or I'll begin to believe it!"

He stopped the car outside the house. "Are you sure you won't drop your bag and come with me?"

"I can't. It would be rude. Why not come in for a few minutes?"

"Aunts aren't in my line. I'll go back to the hotel and you can follow as soon as you're ready."

Hurt, Valerie stepped out of the car. "Very well. I'll be along about six."
He opened his wallet and handed her a five-pound note. "Get a taxi, honey."

Valerie drew back as if he had slapped her. "I can afford to take a taxi without you paying for it."

Nicky stared at her in astonishment. "If that's how you feel___ But you're the first girl I know who's ever refused money."

"Then I don't think you've known many nice ones!" she said quietly, and marched up to the front door.

Nicky watched her for a moment, then he let in the clutch and drove away, the look of surprise still on his face.

Aunt Alice opened the door to Valerie's knock, her face wreathed in smiles. "Congratulations, darling. Your news was the biggest surprise of my life." The twinkling eyes looked beyond her niece's shoulder. "Isn't Mr. Barratt with you?"

"No."

Valerie followed her aunt into the dining room and looked at the laden table with dismay. There were dishes piled with sandwiches, scones, and a large walnut cake delicately wreathed with icing.

"I wish you hadn't gone to all this trouble," Valerie said. "Nicky wanted to come in but he—he had to rush back to meet a reporter." How glibly the lie came to her lips, Valerie acknowledged, and determined it would be the last she would make for her fiancé, not the first.

"Never mind," her aunt said. "We have to eat, even if he doesn't!"

It was not until they were both on their second cup of tea that the older woman again referred to her surprise at the engagement.

"I always thought you'd marry Mark. So did your father."

"And everyone else in Kerring. That's probably why I didn't."

"You always were an obstinate girl!" her aunt said dryly. "But you've certainly done the unexpected this time. I hope you weren't swept off your feet by all the glamour?"

"The glamour almost swept me away from him," Valerie answered slowly. "Nicky's life is so exciting that I was afraid he'd find me a bore."

"What a way to talk! Don't tell me you've got doubts already?"

Aunt Alice did nothing to disguise her concern. "Are you sure you shouldn't have waited to get to know him better?"

"I know I love him." Valerie said quickly. "Getting to know him will come later."

"It should be the other way around."

"Not with a man like Nicky. He has to trust you before he can show his real feelings."

"Has he shown them to you?"

"Some." Valerie pushed back her chair. "I'd better go up and change. I don't want to be late."

It was six-thirty when she gave her name to one of the receptionists at the Savoy and was allowed to go upstairs to the suite that was Nicky's home when he lived in London.

Bob Vane was the only occupant of the sitting room, and he came forward to greet her, his rugged face beaming at the news.
"It's great to see you, Valerie. Congratulations. I'm delighted at the news. Come and make yourself comfortable. You're one of the family now."

Valerie looked round the opulent but impersonal room. "Families have homes."

"This is Nicky's home. You'll get used to it." He settled her in a chair and without asking, handed her a glass of orange juice, watching from beneath lowered lids as she sipped it.

The silence between them lasted so long that Valerie began to feel uncomfortable and tried to break it.

"I—I'm glad you're pleased that Nicky and I are engaged."

"Why shouldn't I be?"

"Because I___ " She hesitated, and then decided to be frank. "Because I'm not the glamorous sort of girl he usually goes around with."

"Nicky's got enough glamour of his own without having to marry it. It's time he—" Bob stopped abruptly. "Heck, what nonsense we're talking. Nicky may have more material things to offer than most men, but you've got the qualities that count. You're real and honest and you're a lady."

Valerie warmed to the compliment but at the same time felt there was something strange about it; something out of keeping with the worldly businessman she knew Bob to be. After all, he had only met her a couple of times. How could he be so certain she was the right person for Nicky?

Before she could air her questions, Nicky himself came in. He was already dressed for the charity show he was giving, and his bronze velvet dinner jacket brought out golden glints in his brown eyes and enhanced his pale skin and black hair. But there were lines of strain on either side of his mouth and she knew a longing to cradle him in her arms. Forgetting her shyness, she ran up to him, and as he pulled her close she felt the tension in his body.

"Oh Nicky, I'll try so hard to make you happy," she murmured.

His eyes gazed into hers, dark, glittering and unfathomable. Then she could no longer see them for he bent his head and found her lips.

"Well, well," a light voice trilled behind them. "Rehearsing for your new film, darling?"

With an exclamation Nicky stepped back and Valerie came face to face with the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. She was tall and exceptionally slender, with long, dark red hair and creamy skin. Her eyes were heavily made-up, the long lashes thick with mascara, the lids the same blue as the dilated irises. But I he classical mouth did not owe its crimson to any artifice, nor did the full breasts that thrust forward through the gauzy material of a dress that Valerie, ignorant though she was of fashion, immediately recognized as a Yuki.

"Dawn!" Nicky exclaimed. "How did you get here?"

"I put on my pointed hat and flew in on a broom-stick," the girl drawled. "I'd have banged the handle (>n the door if I'd known you had company."

There was a tense silence and Bob stepped forward. "Valerie isn't company. She's Nicky fiancée."

"She's what?" Dawn looked at Bob Vane as if he were an insect she would like to crush. "If this is your idea of a joke then—"

"Let me talk, Bob," Nicky cut in, and stepped closer to Dawn, as if wishing to shield her from anyone else in the room. "I tried to call you on Sunday but you were out of town."

"What difference would it have made if I'd found out on Sunday or today? Whenever I'd have been told, I'd have disbelieved it. You can't play me for such a fool." The slender figure sidestepped the man and blue eyes raked
Valerie. "You don't expect me to swallow her as your girl friend, do you?"

"She's my fiancée," Nicky stated flately.

"And what am I? Your maiden aunt?"

"You were no more to Nicky than any of the other dozen girls he's been seen around with in the past few months," Bob intervened, showing his command of the scene by the firmness of his tone. "Nicky had to keep quiet about Valerie because her father wanted her to be sure she was doing the right thing. And because neither of them wanted the news to leak out, Nicky had to go on leading his old life."

"Poor Nicky!" The redhead spat out the words.

"And poor Bob if you think I'll believe such a story."

"It's true and there's nothing you can do to disprove it." Bob turned his head. "Go on, Valerie, tell her yourself."

There was a rushing sound in Valerie's ears. She wanted to shout that it was all a lie and that she didn't want to be a part of it. But Nicky was looking at her stoically, his eyes saying what his tongue dare not utter. Either she trusted him and went along with what he and Bob Vane wished, or she walked out of his life here and now. She took a step forward and stopped.

"It's true," she said in a high voice that didn't seem to belong to her. "Nicky and I have been secretly engaged for two months!"
CHAPTER SIX

Looking back on the scene with Dawn Meadows, Valerie realized that her first conscious feeling had been one of amazement. Why had Nicky wanted her to lie about the length of his engagement? It was obvious that he and the redhead had had an affair, so surely it would have been better for him to have admitted he had fallen for another girl without realizing it was happening. Yet he had done the exact opposite—made himself out to be a dishonest lover to one girl and a liar to his fiancée.

Valerie's one desire was to find out the reason for his behavior, but with Dawn still staring at him in helpless rage, he had muttered, "The Festival Hall," and rushed down the corridor to the elevator.

Left alone with the two girls, Bob had taken charge of the situation by pushing Valerie into the bedroom with the injunction: "You'd better tidy up before coming with me."

Realizing it was an excuse to get her out of the way, she had remained by the dressing table, staring at her reflection in the mirror but only seeing a pair of bright blue eyes gazing at her with venom.

A few moments later, or it might have been half an hour later—looking back on it she was never quite sure of the time—Bob had come back to escort her to the concert.

Only when she was sitting in a box and heard the sound of Nicky's effortless voice did a semblance of feeling return to her. But feeling brought fear, and she forced her mind to blankness again, unaware of the rest of the concert, and only returning to life when she found herself in the suite at the Savoy, being introduced to a crowded room as Nicky Barratt's fiancée.

After a moment of stunned silence they were bombarded with congratulations, but soon all attention was given to Nicky and Valerie was ignored as if she were not there.

It was then that she began to reassess the scene with Dawn, and depression weighed so heavily on her that her eyes blurred with tears. She dabbed them surreptitiously with a handkerchief. Not that she need have worried about being noticed; if she stood on her head and screamed no one would even hear her. She was reminded of the first evening she had met Nicky. Then she had been a girl whom Bob had picked up; now she was Nicky's fiancée. Yet the treatment she was receiving was almost identical.

Slowly her depression turned to anger and she stood up. She might be unfashionable and unsophisticated but that was still no reason for her to be ignored. Above the heads of the crowd she say Nicky's dark one and tried to attract his attention. But he was laughing and joking with some members of the band, and finally she pushed her way over to him.

"Nicky! I'd like to talk to you."

He swung around. "There you are, honey. I've been looking all over for you."

"With your eyes closed?"

His lids flickered but he reached out and drew her close to his side. 'Excuse me, boys," he drawled, "but my old lady needs some attention."

There were a few ribald remarks that made Valerie's face burn, but Nicky pretended not to hear them and led her into his bedroom. Only as he closed the door did the smile leave his face.

"Don't ever talk to me like that again in front of my friends," he stormed.

"Like what?" she asked coldly.

"Like you can tell me what to do. Nobody can. Understand that? Nobody."
She sensed that his extreme anger came not from what she had said but because it had triggered off a reminder of a more painful incident in his past. If only she knew more about that past it might give her a clue as to the person that he was today. Not the taunting, sexually disturbing man who commanded the slavish adoration of numbers of fans—but both men and women—but the inner person who needed such adoration, who could brook no orders and seemed unable to relate to anyone except a mass audience.

"I—I think our—our engagement was a mistake," she choked. "I'm not your kind of girl. I never can be."

Instantly his arms came around her, pulling her close until her head was against his shoulder.

"Don't say that," he said fiercely. "You're upset and you don't mean it. It's because of Dawn, isn't it?"

Dawn! Valerie pulled away from him. There were other things that upset her too, but the redheaded girl was the most important one of them.

"I—why did you want her to believe we'd been secretly engaged for two months? Why was it necessary to lie to her?"

"Bob thought it would be better publicity to say I'd had a heck of a job persuading you to marry me."

"Why?"

"Because ninety-nine girls out of a hundred would jump at the chance. And for you to hesitate about it would make a better story."

Valerie's disquiet ebbed slightly. "Was that the only reason?"

"What other reason could there be?" He came close to her. "You're not jealous of Dawn, are you? You once said my past didn't matter to you."

"Is she past?"

"Is she—Oh Val!" With an incoherent murmur he pressed her body to hers, running his hands down her spine to keep her tightly against him. "You're the only girl in my life now. Don't you know that? I won't pretend there was nothing between Dawn and myself, but it was only for a short time and it was over long ago."

Valerie burrowed her face into the side of his neck. She wanted to believe Nicky—if she didn't, they could have no future—yet……

"Hey, there!" he said softly. "You shouldn't get worked up about someone like Dawn," he went on. "Can't you tell what sort of girl she is?"

"Can't your The question took him by surprise, and in the silence she repeated it more forcibly.

"Sure I knew what kind of girl she was," he said finally. "But she's no different from the rest of the girls who follow me around. That's why I love you. Don't you know that?"

It was more the answer she wanted, and the hurt and doubt that had gripped her all evening at last released its hold on her.

"I want to believe it, Nicky, but I still feel so unsure of you… and so unsure of being able to fit in with all your friends—\---------"

"To hell with my friends! They've got to fit in with you. You're the important one in my life now, and if you don't know it yet, you soon will."

He went to kiss her but she evaded his mouth, too emotionally worn out to respond to him.
"Please Nicky, I want to go home. I'm not used to such late nights and I—I have a headache." He looked hesitant, and guessing he did not want to leave his friends, she said, "Don't bother seeing me home. I'll take a taxi."

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Positive. But how much longer will this party go on? You've had a strenuous evening and—"

"Don't start bossing me, angel. You're my fiancée, not my wife!"

She smiled, but as she was driven home she remembered the comment and vowed to be more careful. Nicky was used to having his every whim obeyed. She must never let him think she was trying to give him orders. Yet he mustn't think he could rule her either. She sighed. There was so much they had to learn about each other—so much.

To Valerie's surprise Nicky telephoned her before ten o'clock the next morning. He sounded happy and lighthearted and made no reference to the previous night.

"It's a wonderful day," he said, "and my recording session's been put off, so how about getting dressed and I'll call for you in an hour?"

Agreeing happily, she raced upstairs to change into something suitable. It was a typical autumn day, the sky deeply blue, the leaves on the trees a burnished gold. It would be lovely if Nicky took her into the country but she would go with him wherever he took her. He must never feel she was trying to coerce him into doing anything he did not want.

Quickly she slipped into a blue denim dress and jacket. It was two years old but it still looked good. Even so she needed to buy some new things. If Nicky was recording tomorrow, she would use the time to go shopping.

A horn sounded outside and she ran downstairs. Her aunt was coming out of the kitchen.

"You haven't had your breakfast, Valerie!"

"No time. I'm going out for the day. Nicky's beeping for me now."

"Bring him in, dear, while you have a cup of—"

But Valerie did not wait to hear any more. She knew Nicky did not want to meet her relations and she was determined that on this day in particular they were not going to quarrel over it. Stifling her guilt, she ran down the path.

"You're always prompt," he said as she slipped into the seat beside him. "I like that in a girl. Mostly they dither in front of the wardrobe for hours."

"I've nothing to dither over," she laughed. "My choice is too small."

"Then get a bigger choice." He eyed her swiftly. "You'd look good in floaty things, Val. Go and see Jackie Burns. She does great gear. I buy a lot of my clothes from her too."

"But she's a dress designer!"

"She makes my shirts," he grinned. "Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm not the type for dresses." He put his hand on her leg. "Want me to prove it?"

"I'll take your word for it!" She snuggled closer. "Where are we going?"

"Wait and see."

Obediently she complied, content to sit beside him as he headed toward Heathrow airport. He was a steady driver and, as always, she was surprised by his courtesy on the road. But this, she knew instinctively, was the innate Nicky, not the brash, self-confident man who could walk on to a stage and dominate an audience that had gone wild with
enthusiasm.

Soon the airport lay behind them and still they headed west, passing Staines and Maidenhead before branching off the main road and making their way along narrow lanes that brought them out to the river. Large and beautiful houses fronted much of it, their gardens running down to the water's edge, where boats were frequently moored. She wondered if they were going to visit some more of his friends and tried not to feel despondent at the idea. What could be nicer than for Nicky to relax in somebody's garden and perhaps swim in the river? Yet if only they could have spent the day alone.

"Here we are," he said, and with a start she saw he had come to a stop where the road had narrowed into a footpath, and that the footpath led to a small jetty where a gleaming white cabin cruiser was moored.

"Like it?" he said. "It's mine."

"Yours? Oh Nicky!" She was out of the car and running across the wooden planks before he could stop her.

"Hey, wait for me," he called. "I've got to lug this damned basket!"

She swung around and saw him struggling with a huge hamper. Contritely she rushed to help him.

"Don't tell me you brought a picnic as well?"

"What then? You seem to enjoy your food better than my kisses!" He grinned wickedly. "Though I'm hoping that today you might prove me wrong."

Bubbling with happiness, she grasped an edge of the hamper, though he immediately pushed her hand away and carried it by himself.

She waited for him to board the cruiser first, though she had to dig into his jacket pocket to find the key that would unlock the cabin door. Stepping inside, she found a beautifully furnished saloon and an excellently equipped galley.

"Get busy, woman!" Nicky ordered. "I'm hungry"

"It's fantastic here," she murmured. "I'd no idea you had a place like this."

"It's a secret." He wiped a napkin across his mouth. "You and Bob are the only two people who know of it."

"Why don't you come here more often?"

"I mightn't be able to keep it a secret then. And once the crowd found out about it, they'd want to bring their birds here.." His eyes twinkled. "I love it when you blush. You're so different from the other girls I've known. I can't believe you've actually lived in the same century as me."

"Same century but a different place,' she quipped. "The show business world is not the whole world."

"Don't I know it! I'm learning a lot of things from you, Val. I never thought I would, but_____ " He rose and stretched his arms above his head. "I'm beginning to feel a bit cramped. Let's go on deck."

She followed him up the companionway and they stood at the rail and looked out over the river at the trees dipping their foliage into the water on the far bank.

"It's so peaceful," she murmured. "This is the sort of life I like."

"It's the sort of life you should have. I can't—"

He stopped abruptly and she looked at him. "What are you trying to tell me, Nicky? That you're sorry you asked me to marry you?"

"Of course not. What a crazy thing to say."
"Then stop worrying about my not fitting into your world. It may be hard for me, but it would be much harder for me to live without you."

"I wish you loved me a little less."

"What a thing to say!"

"I'm sorry, Val." He rubbed his cheek against hers. "What I really mean is that I don't want to be possessed."

"Possess is the wrong word," she said quietly. "What you mean is that you want to love me and go on living your own life."

"You're very clever for an innocent girl, aren't you?" he said, his voice so low that she could barely hear what he was saying. "But there's no point my pretending I'm an ordinary sort of man. I'm a pop star, and pop stars are a race apart. While we're at the top of the charts everyone grovels around us, but the moment we start slipping, our adoring public will grind our faces in the dust."

"Don't say such a thing."

"It's true."

"It isn't—not for you. You're more than a pop star. You're a composer, Nicky. You write wonderful songs. If you never sang again you'd still be famous for the music and lyrics that you write."

"You really believe in me, don't you?" He gathered her into his arms. "You've built up a special image of me and you refuse to see me any other way."

"I see you as you are—as you could be."

"Don't give me any of this 'could be' stuff. Take me as I am, Val."

"I do," she said huskily, turning up her face to his. "I will."

For an answer he placed his mouth on hers, kissing her with an intensity that left her breathless. Yet there was another emotion underlying his lovemaking: a tenderness she had not felt before: a need, a longing, a fear.

Later, as they sat together in the cabin, he spoke of his past, telling her much more than he had previously done. She learned that his parents had died when he was six and that he had been brought up by an aunt and uncle. 

"Not because they had any affection for me," he said, "but because they considered it their Christian duty. They never stopped telling me how lucky I was not to have been sent to an orphanage." He gave a bitter laugh. "I think I'd have been better off if I had."

"Were you so unhappy?" she asked softly.

"Unhappy?" He pondered on the word. "I guess I was, although as a child I never realized it. You see, I had enough to eat and decent clothes to wear, but what I didn't have were the things that children need—things like laughter and affection—like knowing you're wanted."

"At least you'll know what to give your own children," she said huskily. 

"My own kids?" He looked astonished. "I've never thought about having any. I'm not sure I want them."

Words rushed to her lips but she held them back, sensing that now was not the time to discuss it further. She had to know more about Nicky's life—about his hopes and dreams, his sorrows and fears.

"What happened when you left school?" she asked.

"I ran away and got a job with a band. My aunt and uncle told me never to see them again and______ " He paused.
"I never have. Lord, when I think of the years of grind before I got to the top! I played one-night stands in every part of the country and then I toured the Continent, going from one sleazy dive to another. I was on the verge of chucking it in when Bob spotted me. From then on I never looked back."

"You owe him a lot, don't you?"

"No more than he owes me. When we met, I was a small-time singer and he was a small-time promoter. We both made each other. Bob regards me as a meal ticket—nothing more than that. And I prefer it that way."

Valerie said nothing. She was deeply moved by all Nicky had told her and saw beneath the brave words to the lonely little boy he had been.

But she dare not voice her thoughts: he was not ready yet. Later, when he had grown to accept her love, when he was more at peace with himself, she would be able to tell him.

She caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. "I'm glad you told me about yourself, Nicky. One day I hope you'll realize that not all families are the same."

"I don't intend to find out," he retorted. "I'm not a family man."

"When you marry me I'll be your family."

"For as long as I'm a success."

"Naturally," she said demurely. "I'll spend all your money and then leave you when you're an old has-been!"

With a groan he buried his face in her hair, his hands tugging at the silky mass. "You're so honest," he whispered. "So transparent and sweet."

His lips roved along the slender column of her throat then explored the hollows of her neck. But they did not stop there long, drawn quickly—as she knew they would be—to the tantalizing curve of her breasts. Skillfully he removed her dress and brassiere and began to massage her breasts, arousing her to such a fever pitch of desire that she pulled him completely on top of her.

"Nicky," she gasped. "Oh darling."

"Let me," he panted. "I can't stop. I—" He gave a heaving, convulsive shudder and was then motionless.

Afraid to disturb him she lay still. Although she did not touch him she knew that his skin was wet. Gradually his breathing slowed down, then he drew away from her, straightened up and went instantly to the bathroom. Shakily she put on her clothes. She was still trembling with emotion which, unsatisfied, bubbled inside like a hot spring, and she pushed open the porthole and drew several deep breaths. She was shattered at how close she had come to total surrender, and knew that only Nicky's own control had stopped it from happening. Love for him coursed through her like a mercury through a hot tube, and she put her hands to her face. Behind her the door opened, and she half turned and saw Nicky. He was pale and subdued, his expression impossible to define.

"I want to th-thank you," she said haltingly. "If you hadn't stopped I'd have… have… and then I'd have regretted it. You were very understanding and I love you so much for it."

"Don't!" he said sharply. "You've got it wrong. I didn't stop because I was such a saint but because I lost control too soon. Damn it, Val, are you so innocent that you don't know what happened?"

"I___ " She could not go on and her silence seemed to infuriate him.

"Until now I've never had to control myself with a girl. They've been only too willing to give me what I want. But with you I had to hold back all the time. And I wasn't used to it. So when I finally had a chance of taking you, I made a fool of myself!"
Unable to face him, she turned back to the porthole. If anyone was a fool, it was she. A blind, stupid fool. What she had seen as a mark of respect, Nicky had shown to be his lack of control. She waited for her anger to increase, but unaccountably the humor of the situation began to impinge on her, blunting her hurt and enabling her to see the situation with less involvement and therefore more clarity.

"You are a fool, Nicky Barratt. You just threw away your only chance of making me think you respected me. Aren't you sorry?"

"Nq. Because I do respect you—too much to kid you that I'm such an angel." He came to stand behind her. "I wanted you very much—I still do—but I'm not going to try any more. A few kisses, maybe, but no heavy petting. Next time I wouldn't lose my control, Val. So it's better if we keep it cool. I know you want to wait until you're married and I...I... Do you understand me, Val?"

"Yes, my darling, I do."

She leaned against him and his hands stole around her waist, moving up and then dropping back. "I've never felt this about a girl before," he muttered. "I can't figure it out."

"It's love," she said huskily. "You're so new to it, you haven't recognized it."

"Love," he repeated, half to himself. "Funny. I never___ " The rest of his words were lost as he swung her around and found her mouth.

It was dark when they returned to Bayswater, and parking outside the house, he suggested she did not come to see his second charity show, but meet him afterward.

"But I love to watch you," she protested. "I get so puffed up with pride that I think I'm going to burst!"

He laughed. "Maybe you'd like to give your aunt a ticket?" Valerie hesitated and he laughed again. "I can see she's really a lot like your father—not one of my fans."

"It isn't that," Valerie said quickly. "But I'd like her to meet you properly, not just to see you on the stage. Please come in, darling."

"No." He put his hands on the wheel. "Let's get this straight. I've nothing against your family as long as I don't have to meet them—understand?"

"No, I don't! You can't expect me to cut myself off from my relations, and that's what I'll have to do if you keep acting like this. I don't want to make excuses for you all the time. It's dividing my loyalties and it's wrong. Do you expect me never to have anything to do with my aunt and father again, simply because they—"

"Your father's different," he cut in. "But I don't intend to get caught up in a dreary web of aunts and uncles. Be reasonable, Val."

"You're the one who should be reasonable. If you had any feeling for me you'd understand the position you're putting me in. Aunt Alice is the only aunt I've got and I don't intend to hurt her. I'm not the sort to pick people up and throw them down again when it suits me—even if you are!" Jumping out of the car, she slammed the door behind her and ran up the path.

She had her key in the lock when his hand came round her waist.

"Don't quarrel with me, Val," he said in her ear. "How can I go on stage and give a decent performance when we've just had a row?"

Instantly she was contrite. "Oh Nicky! What a selfish beast I am! I'm sorry."

She pulled his head down and kissed him gently, half expecting him to say he would come in with her. But in this
She had misjudged him, for he merely waited until she had opened the door before returning to his car.

"See you at the theater," he called.

"See you at the theater," she said, and watched him drive away.

Wryly she entered the house. Nicky had won this argument as he had won every argument they had had. What sort of future did it auger when she was the only one to give in?

At the theater that night she sat alone in a box. Hearing the thunder of applause she knew a moment of unreality that it could be herself, Valerie Browne, who meant more to him than any other girl in the world!

She shivered and wished for a moment that someone from her own life—her father or aunt or even Mark—could be with her right now to share her happiness and dispel the unreal feeling that had taken possession of her.

After the concert she went around to Nicky's dressing room. She hoped he would suggest they have supper on their own, but he was in high spirits and gregarious and, not wishing to provoke another quarrel, she returned with him and the usual gaggle of hangers-on to the hotel.

Their engagement was still news and the suite was swarming with reporters and photographers. For what seemed an eternity she had to pose for pictures, and even after the glare of flashbulbs was dispelled, there were still all the questions to be answered.

"How did you first meet Nicky, Val?"

"Have you always been a fan of his?"

"What did he say when he proposed?"

"When are you getting married?"

Nicky or Bob replied to most of the questions, saving Valerie the necessity of having to make up answers. However the strain was unpleasant and she was delighted when Bob finally shooed everyone out by saying Nicky would meet them all in an hour's lime at Waltz—the latest, most expensive discotheque in London.

"Thank heavens they've gone," she muttered, collapsing onto a chair.

"This is only the beginning," Bob said. "There'll be lots more interviews, you know. With the weeklies, the monthlies, the women's magazines, the musical papers. You're news, Valerie."

"Nicky's news. Not me."

"You too. You're the girl he's chosen to marry and his fans will want to know why."

Valerie also wanted to know why when she saw a picture of herself and Nicky on the front page of one of the daily papers the following morning. Next to it was a photograph of another newly engaged couple—a racing ace and a model—and compared with this girl, Valerie knew herself to be dowdy, out-of-date and—far worse—smug about it. How could Nicky have fallen in love with her? And how could she have been so complacent about her appearance? She had good features and a good figure and she had thought that was enough. Now she knew it wasn't. Good features should be highlighted and a good figure shown to advantage.

"I'm going to buy some new clothes," she announced to her aunt at the breakfast table.

"You said that the other day."

"But this morning I mean it. And different clothes from the ones I had in mind."

"There are some nice shops on Bond Street."
Valerie hid a smile. Bond Street and Knightsbridge had been her original choice of venue; now she remembered Nicky telling her of other places—Jackie Burns, for one. She thought of her bank balance and wavered, then grew resolute again. She owed it to Nicky to look her best: and not country best at that, but contemporary best. So she'd blow all her savings. So what! Once she was Nicky's wife she would have more than enough money. Thinking of last night's party and the enormous bill which Bob had paid—on Nicky's account no doubt—she was determined to watch the financial side in the future. Nicky deserved security and he wouldn't get it if he allowed dozens of spongers to cling to him.

She pushed back her chair and rose. "I'm off. When I come back, you'll see a new me."

"I like the present one."

"She'll be hidden inside the new one, darling. But that'll be our secret!"

It was an exhausted, happy, penniless young woman who returned to Bayswater at six o'clock that night. Her aunt's astonished gaze had confirmed the success of her new hairstyle, and her mirror, later that evening, confirmed the success of the first of her new dresses.

"Do you think Nicky will like it?" she asked, pirouetting round on high heels in front of her aunt.

"He won't know you. You look like Miss World. Only better!"

Valerie peered at herself again, seeing the resemblance. "Better than Miss World?"

"More character in your face, my dear. Beauty alone can often be dull."

Valerie touched her hair. It had been cut slightly and reshaped completely, so that it swung around her face like brown satin. The expert advice of a beautician, recommended by the hairdresser, had taught her how to make the best of her features: not by heavy makeup, even though it was the current trend, but by underplaying everything except her mouth and eyes.

"Your skin is flawless," the woman had said. "An honest-to-God English rose. So leave it and just play up those violet blue orbs."

Jackie Burns had been equally adamant in not allowing Valerie to slavishly follow fashion. Upon learning she was Nicky Barratt's fiancée, a tidbit immediately regaled to her by the salesgirl who had just dealt with Valerie, the designer had rushed from the upstairs workroom and immediately supervised the new wardrobe.

"I only have a limited amount of money to spend," Valerie had protested nervously. "I need masses of things and I can't afford to buy more than one of your dresses."

"You can't afford not to buy my dresses," Jackie Burns had stated. "I dress all the stars here, and you've got to compete with them. Nicky's a darling boy and I want him to be proud of you. I'll open you an account and you can pay me later."

Though she tried to argue, the designer was adamant and, because in her heart Valerie agreed with the whole idea of making Nicky proud of her, she. succumbed to the suggestion and spent the rest of the day being fitted with one lovely garment after another. Lucky she was stock size, and the adjustments necessary—a smaller waist and fuller bust— were all easily done.

"I've never seen you in red before," Mrs. Pafford said, bringing Valerie back to the present. "It suits you."

The admiring glances that followed Valerie's progress backstage after the show that night confirmed her aunt's compliment, and it added a spring to her step. Her hips swung provocatively, and the chiffon drifted about her shapely legs, while soft ruffles curled invitingly along the contours of her breasts. She had sex appeal. The eyes of the men showed it.
As she reached Nicky's dressing room she heard voices and frowned as she recognized the shrill tones of a woman. She hesitated, then pushed the door open and walked in. Standing with her back to Valerie, her hands clenched at her sides, was Dawn Meadows, and facing Dawn, his eyes glittering with anger, was Nicky.

"I absolutely refuse!" he shouted. "You can go to hell first!" Hearing the door open, he glared at Valerie. "How dare you come barging in without—" He gulped. "Valerie! Good lord! I didn't recognize you."

Dawn turned and looked at her. Then with an exclamation she rushed out.

Nicky turned to the dressing table and poured himself a whisky from a small flagon. He drank it at a gulp and then eyed Valerie.

"No wonder I didn't recognize you. What have you done to yourself?"

"Never mind that now." Valerie's pleasure in her appearance had left her and she felt nothing but uncertainty. "Why were you quarreling with Dawn?"

"It was nothing important."

"I could hear you shouting when I was outside the door."

"It was nothing," he repeated. "Merely a difference of opinion."

"About what? Nicky, I have to know. What's going on between you and that girl?"

"Nothing. It was over long ago." His voice was flat as he spoke the words and he turned his back on her and poured himself another drink.

She stared at him. He was lying but she knew from the obstinate set of his shoulders that he had no intention of telling her the truth.

"I'm going back to Bayswater," she said. "Nothing seems to be your favorite word at the moment, and that's what there is between you and me—nothing!"

Wrenching open the door she slammed it hard behind her and ran out of the theater.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Her aunt's comment, when she learned what had happened, did nothing to dispel Valerie's misery.

"I don't see why you're so surprised by his behavior," she commented. "After all, there's far more that you don't know about him than you do! You've barely known him a month and for most of that time you've been together in an artificial atmosphere. You haven't spent more than half a dozen afternoons alone with him and you've never seen him among your own friends."

"He doesn't like meeting strangers," Valerie explained. "He has to see so many people in the course of his professional life that________" Her voice trailed away as she realized the lameness of her excuse.

"I'm not a stranger," Mrs. Pafford said, "yet you've never brought him to see me. I take it for granted you're not ashamed of introducing him to your family, so it would appear the fault lies with him."

Overcome with anguish Valerie flung her arms around her aunt's shoulders. "Don't ever think I'm ashamed of you," she said fiercely. "Nicky's the one to blame. But it's because of his background—the rotten home life he had as a child. I promise you he'll be here for tea tomorrow."

"Don't make a promise for somebody else," the answer came.

"I am," Valerie said firmly and before her aunt could say anything more, she kissed her good-night and left the room.

Although she had made no arrangements to see Nicky the next day, Valerie telephoned him in the morning and, as she waited for him to answer, felt her hands tingle with nerves. Would he be angry at the way she had rushed off last night? Would he mention Dawn? Her thoughts were interrupted by his voice, sleepy and thick, at the other end of the line.

"Hey, what's the idea of waking me up at this unearthly hour?"

"It's ten o'clock," she said quickly, "and I wanted to catch you before you went out."

"I've no intention of going out," he said. "But what got into you last night?"

"Do I need to tell you?"

"If you're angry about Dawn, then forget it. She doesn't mean a thing to me."

"Then why were——" Valerie stifled the rest of the next question. "All-right, Nicky. Let's forget it."

"That's my girl. How about meeting me for lunch?"

"Fine. We can have it here."

There was a short silence and when he spoke his voice was flat. "You mean at your aunt's?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, honey, no dice: I told you before that families bug me."

"I know what you told me, Nicky, but it's not good enough."

"It is for me," he said with finality. "So be a good girl and get off my back. Where shall we go for lunch?"

"I don't know where you're going—and I don't care—but I'm lunching here. So you can take Dawn Meadows with you instead!" Banging down the receiver, she stared at it through tear-blurred eyes.
Although she sympathized with Nicky's feelings toward his own relations, it was childish of him to apply it to hers, and she knew that had the positions been reversed she would have sacrificed her own desires in order to please him. Nicky had never had to put himself out for anyone; since he had achieved fame he had been the one whom people had tried to please. Small wonder he found it so hard to change! She sighed and wondered if their only chance of happiness lay in her giving in to him all the time. Yet if she did, they would have no partnership, merely a domination. A good marriage had to be based on equal give and take, and though it was true that Nicky would do all the giving where material things were concerned, on the emotional level they would give equally, and surely that was the most important?

All morning she waited in the house, half expecting him to call her back. But the telephone remained silent and she resolutely refused to be the one to give in. Unless the quarrel was resolved to her own satisfaction, it would have repercussions on the rest of their life together; and if it could not be resolved, then it was better they part now.

To occupy her time she made a meat pie for lunch, while her aunt turned out one of the blackberry and apple tarts for which she was famous. Not haute cuisine fare, perhaps, but as tasty a meal as any Nicky would be having. Drat the man. She wasn't going to stay indoors moping. She would have a brisk walk before lunch.

Flinging on a coat she opened the front door, stopping in astonishment as she saw the slim dark-haired man walking up the path.

"Nicky!"

"Don't look so surprised. I thought I was invited to lunch?"

With a cry of delight she flung her arms around him. "Oh darling, I'm so glad you came!"

She pulled him inside and hugged him again. He wore dark brown slacks and a cinnamon-colored sweater in finest cashmere. His hair had the glossiness of a raven's wing and his eyes were gleaming with mischief.

"Never thought I'd come, did you?"

"Of course I did," she lied. "I knew you were too logical and intelligent not to know I was right!"

He slapped her behind and she squealed, a sound which brought her aunt rushing from the dining room where she was laying the table. Seeing her visitor, the woman hesitated, and Valerie put her arm through Nicky's and drew him forward. "This is Nicky. He's come to lunch."

"I hope you won't mind taking potluck with us?"

"Potluck be blowed," Valerie snorted and turned to him. "Aunt Alice made you her special blackberry and apple pie. It's famous throughout the whole of Sussex."

"I'm a pushover for pies," he smiled at the older woman, "though to be honest, I came here to meet you—rather than the pie!"

"How nice of you to say so." Aunt Alice gave no indication that she knew of his earlier reluctance, and led him into the drawing room for a drink.

Lunch could not have been bettered. The food was excellent and Nicky was at his most charming. He laughed at Aunt Alice's jokes, and carefully answered all the questions she put to him about his work and life-style, frequently sending her into gales of amusement at some of his descriptions of his early touring days.

Coffee finished, he pushed back his chair. "If you'll excuse me for a moment, Mrs. Pafford, I'd like to show you something."

He went out of the house to his car, not the usual large limousine but a rakish-looking sports one, and returned with a case from which he extracted a guitar. It had the patina of age and looked as valuable as Valerie guessed it to be.
"You're not going to play it here, are you?" Mrs. Clifford asked, looking at it as though it were a snake.

Nicky chuckled. "Don't worry! I promise not to bring the ceiling down!"

Without more ado he sat down and plucked the strings. A delicate chord trembled in the air, and as it died away, he started to sing. Valerie listened enchanted, unable to believe that the liquid notes she was hearing came from the pale slim throat of the man she loved. This was a Nicky no one had heard publicly, and she could not credit that Bob had never persuaded him to sing in this way. With another delicate chord the song came to an end, and Nicky rested his hands lightly on the guitar strings and looked at them.

"I hope you liked it?" he asked with a diffidence Valerie had never associated with him.

"It was beautiful," Mrs. Pafford replied. "I had no idea you sang like that."

"I don't. My fans want a different style from me! What about you, Val? Did you like it?"

"It was…" She sighed. "I can't find the right words. Why don't you record a whole album with songs like that? Just you singing and the guitar as your accompaniment."

"I've been toying with the idea."

"Did you compose the song, Nicky?" Mrs. Pafford asked.

"Yes. It's not like my usual numbers, but I'm quite pleased with it."

"It's a most talented composition," came the firm reply. "You could earn your living as a composer even without singing."  

"I may even do that too," he agreed. "One day I'll give up my live performances and concentrate on records and composing for myself and other singers." He glanced at his watch. "I hate to leave but I have a meeting at the theater. Are you coming, Val?"

She nodded and, moments later, was in the car with him.

"Where would you like to go?" he asked.

"I thought you had an appointment at—"

"I only said that in order to get away."

"I see." She bit on her lip. "I had the impression you liked my aunt."

"I do. But enough's enough." Seeing her expression, he added quickly: "Don't worry, honey. I'll come along with you whenever you say the word."

She smiled, but could not dismiss her uneasiness. Nicky had not only been at his most charming this afternoon, but had behaved as if he were enjoying himself.

Yet from the way he spoke she realized the whole thing had been a chore, undertaken only to please her. What a strange person he was, this man she was going to marry. And how she wished she could understand him better.

The next week passed in a whirl of outings. They spent part of each day together, either in the afternoons or the evenings, and most nights were given over to parties, where the drink flowed more easily than conversation, and girls seemed to change hands as frequently as the men who took them changed shirts.

Valerie still loathed the falseness and immorality of it all, but was able to hide it more adeptly. Her new hairstyle and clothes had helped her to lose much of her initial shyness and she was no longer left to sit by herself on the
outskirts of the group. But she was always glad when the parties were over, and often left while they were still in
progress. She refused to think what would happen if Nicky did not change his mode of living after they were
married, and hoped that then when he possessed her wholly, the restlessness which seemed to drive him would
abate.

One evening, ten days after she had come up to London, her aunt called up to say someone was waiting to see her.
She was changing to see Nicky, who was calling to take her to a concert—someone else's this time—and then out
for a dinner a deux—a treat he had suggested without any prompting from her, and one which had given her hope
for their future.

"I'm sick of having people around us all the time," he had said. "I want you to myself, Val. Just you. Nobody else."

Now she rushed downstairs, hoping he had not sent someone to tell her he had an unexpected appointment that had
to be met. But the person waiting to greet her was Mark, and she stared at him wide-eyed.

"Good heavens, what a surprise."

"Same here." He took her hand and looked her up and down, from her shining head with its shorter hairstyle, to her
slim body in a pleated organza extravagance, "You look so glamorous, I hardly recognized you!"

"I could say the same." She took in his dark blue town suit and his weather-beaten face under its thatch of thick
blond hair, now slicked smooth. "What brought you here?" she added.

"I came for the Agricultural Show and thought I'd look you up. If I'm intruding, I'll—"

"Of course you're not," she said quickly. "I'm delighted to see you."

There was an awkward silence, during which she surreptitiously glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, a
movement which he interpreted correctly. "I won't keep you if you're going out," he said. "I only came to see if you
were happy."

"What a question to ask a newly engaged girl! Of course I'm happy."

"You look beautiful, Valerie, but you don't have a glow about you."

"What a load of rot." Angrily she spun around and went to the door. "You're only saying that because you're
jealous!" She stopped short. "I'm sorry. I had no right to be so cruel."

"It isn't cruel to speak the truth. Leastways not in this instance. I am jealous. You know how I feel about you. You
can't expect my feelings to change just because you've got engaged to Nicky Barratt. You've always hero-
worshipped him, so I suppose I should be glad for your sake that you've got what you want." He strode over and
cought her hand. "But are you sure it's what you still want? Do you fit into his way of life the way you would have
fitted into mine?"

"No," she admitted, "but I'm still happier with Nicky than I'd be with you. I don't want to hurt you, Mark, but I've
got to be honest. I hate to see you wasting your life because of me."

She looked at him, her eyes full of tears, and before she could stop him he enfolded her in his arms and pressed his
mouth on hers.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" an angry voice exclaimed and they both drew apart as Nicky strode in.
His brows were drawn together in a frown and his eyes sparkled with fury.

"Darling!" she exclaimed. "I didn't hear you ring."

"That was obvious!"

"Don't be angry with Valerie," Mark said. "What you saw just now was my fault."
"Really?" Nicky drawled. "I suppose you're going to tell me she didn't give you any encouragement?"

Valerie's face flamed but before she could answer, Mark stepped forward, as angry as Nicky.

"No, she didn't! And watch what you say."

"You should watch what you do," Nicky said coldly. "I presume you're Valerie's bucolic boyfriend."

"Nicky!" Valerie's voice rang through the room. "Don't talk like that. Mark's a dear friend of mine and—"

"Then I'll leave you to continue your friendship. I'm obviously in the way."

"Don't be silly. I know you've some excuse to be annoyed, but there's not need to behave like a boor."

"How do you expect me to behave when I come in and find you in another man's arms?"

"It wasn't like that!"

"You mean there was more that I missed!"

"How dare you talk like that? If that's what you think of me, you can go."

Without a word he strode into the hall and left the house.

She took a pace forward, stopped, and then turned to Mark with a forced smile. "It looks as if you're stuck with me for this evening—unless you've already got a date?"

"I'd nothing planned." He looked deeply troubled. "I don't want to make trouble between you and your fiancé. Would you like to go after him and—"

"No. Too many people run after Nicky Barratt. It's time he learned to control himself and to trust me. If he doesn't know I'm not like his erstwhile girl friends, then perhaps I'd better be erstwhile too."

The rest of the evening—although she did her best to pretend she was enjoying herself—passed in a haze of misery. One moment she regretted her decision to go out with Mark and wished she had not been so hasty with Nicky, and the next moment she knew she could not have done anything else. How strangely Nicky had behaved. He professed to be sophisticated yet he had taken such exception to another man kissing her. Not that she blamed him for being jealous—on the contrary—but it was his rudeness to Mark which she resented.

"Val!" Mark interrupted her thoughts. "I've been speaking to you."

With an effort she concentrated on him. "What did you ask me?"

"Whether you wanted to dance."

Forcing a smile to her lips, she preceded him onto the floor. Mark had chosen a delightful Italian restaurant in Mayfair, but it only served to remind her of how much she longed to be with Nicky. Tonight had promised to be one of their rare evenings alone, and now here she was spending it with another man.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning before she finally said good-night to Mark, and she was crossing the hall when the telephone rang. Heart pounding, she ran to answer it before it awakened her aunt. It would only be Nicky who would call at this late hour, and she tried to keep her voice cool.

"I've been trying to get you for hours," he said as she spoke.

"I've been out with Mark."

"And ruined our evening."
"I'm sorry."

"So am I. Especially as it was our last one."

"Last one?" She felt her scalp prickle.

"Last one for a month." he added. "I'm leaving for New York at noon."

"But how—why so suddenly?"

"It's not so sudden. It's been in the offing for months, but Bob couldn't finally fix it until he'd got me cleared of a couple of engagements here. Luckily he was able to rearrange my bookings, and I'm off to the States to record a new album."

"I see." She drew a shaky breath. "I wish you'd told me before you rushed out of the house."

"I was too angry," he said honestly. "But it's over now." He yawned audibly. "Get some sleep, Val, and come over later."

The phone went dead and, feeling equally dead, she went slowly up the stairs.
CHAPTER EIGHT

All night Valerie tried to court sleep, and when she eventually gave up the attempt and rose, it was not yet seven o'clock. Slipping on her dressing gown, she went down to make some tea, then carried the tray upstairs. Passing her aunt's room, she quietly peeked in, and the alacrity with which Mrs. Pafford sat up told Valerie she too had long since been awake.

"So you couldn't sleep either," she smiled, handing her aunt a cup of tea.

"I'm afraid so. I kept thinking of you and your silly quarrel with Nicky."

"He phoned me at one o'clock this morning," Valerie said, "and told me he's going to America."

"Because of you?"

"Of course not! To record a new album of songs. It was all arranged very suddenly."

"How long will he be away?"

"A month."

"Did he ask you to go with him?"

Valerie shook her head. "It would be very expensive."

"Peanuts!" Aunt Alice said inelegantly. "If newspaper reports are anything to go by, he's a millionaire. I hope it isn't your silly pride that's preventing you going with him?"

"It has nothing to do with pride. It's just that he hasn't asked me to go!"

The older woman digested this remark. "Then you must suggest it yourself," she said slowly.

"I wouldn't dream of it!"

"Don't be so stiff-necked, my dear. If Nicky were my fiancé I wouldn't let him out of my sight."

"You mean you wouldn't trust him!"

"He's a virile young man, Valerie, and he's surrounded by beautiful girls and other young men who have very loose morals. He needs someone like you to be with him. If he didn't, he wouldn't have fallen in love with you."

Valerie did not know what to say. More and more she was doubtful whether she and Nicky had a future. There was something about his attitude toward her that puzzled her. At times he seemed eager to have her with him and at others he acted as if she were a hair shirt. But when she tried to question him to ask why she irritated him, he always laughed and said that he was the one at fault.

"You're too nice for me," he had said only a few days ago. "That's the whole trouble, Val. I'm not sure I can live up to you."

No sooner were the words out and he had seen her stricken face, than he had withdrawn them, and their tiff had ended—as it always had done until last night—in kisses and reassertions of his love for her. Yet alone—as now—her doubts returned.

"I'm seeing him before he leaves," she murmured. "He may say something about my coming with him then."

As always it gave her a thrill to enter the hotel and see the admiring glances that followed her as she crossed the foyer and made her way to Nicky's suite—the only girl who had the right to do so unannounced. And how many thousands of them would give their eyeteeth to be in her position? Reminding herself of this, she entered the sitting
"Is that you, Val?" He called from the bedroom, and wordlessly she ran through and flung herself into his arms. What did pride matter when the man she loved was flying thousands of miles away from her in a matter of hours? Nicky's kiss was satisfyingly ardent, though brief, and he hastily returned to his packing.

"Let me do it for you," she offered.

"It's nearly done."

"You're a very tidy packer," she said admiringly.

"I've had plenty of practice."

"Don't you ever long to settle down in one place?"

"That's not my life-style."

She tried to envisage herself in his, and failed dismally. Something of her feelings must have penetrated his absorption, for he placed a pile of shirts on the top of his case and gently pulled her into his arms.

"I'm not saying we'll travel around forever, sweetheart. But until I've made my bundle, beggars can't be choosers."

"You a beggar?" she laughed. "You could afford to stop work this minute and live comfortably for the rest of you life."

"But singing and traveling is my life—for the next few years. After that, we'll settle in one place."

Happiness overwhelmed her. "Do you know that's the first time you've said 'we'?"

"Is it?" He pulled back and stared into her face, his eyes moving over every feature. "That just goes to show how insidious you are—worming your way into my life until I suddenly find I can't do without you."

"I should hope not! I'm the girl you love, remember?"

For an answer he began to kiss her, lightly at first, then with deepening passion.

"Oh Nicky, I wish you weren't going away."

"It's only for a month." He rested his cheek on hers, then pushed her back. "Hey, if I don't finish my packing I'll miss the plane."

Methodically he made a final survey of the four cases on the king-size bed, then closed the lids and locked them.

"Will you go back to Kerring?" he asked absently.

"Yes. There's no point staying in London without you."

"Don't go out with your farmer friend again. I was mad as hell at you last night."

"I was pretty mad at you," she confessed. This was the first time Nicky had referred to Mark and she was determined they were not going to quarrel about him. "I've known Mark all my life and I was very hurt by your attitude last night."

"I was hurt to see you kissing him."

"Actually, he kissed me. He—he won't do it again."

"You're damn right he won't! You're not going to give him the chance. I won't have you going out with him, Val. Is
Had Nicky asked her gently there would have been no problem.

How could there have been when she had no desire to go out with any man other than him? But there was an edge to his command she did not like, and she reacted to it.

"I won't go out with Mark if you won't go out with any other girls while you're away."

"What does that mean?" he snapped.

"What do you think it means? You'll be away a month and you'll be surrounded by doting dolly birds. I don't want you to date any of them."

"I can't stop them hanging around me. And if I go out at night, I can't sit and eat by myself."

"You've got Bob and the boys from the group."

"And they've all got their girls! What am I supposed to do—play fifth wheel?"

"You could play at being a loving fiancé," she retorted, inflamed by the knowledge that though he demanded something specific from herself, he was not willing to offer her the same. "Or maybe you aren't my loving fiancé?" she continued.

His eyes narrowed, giving him a calculating look that turned him into a stranger. "No woman tells me what to do, Val. I'm my own boss. Either you take me as I am or… or "He stopped.

"Or break off our engagement?" she finished for him. He gave a sharp, indrawn breath, then made a visible effort to relax.

"Don't be crazy. Why should you say a thing like that?"

"I thought you were the one who was saying it."

"Well, I wasn't. Our engagement is important to me. I—" He stopped, and again there was a strange look on his face. "You know, Val, I wish we could have—"

But whatever he wished was not to be voiced, for Bob breezed in, followed by the luggage man.

"Hello Val, you look a sight for sore eyes." He waved to the cases. "All set to go, Nicky? We're running late."

He strode back to the sitting room and Nicky gave Valerie a rueful smile. He still looked as if he wanted to say something important, but Bob called him again and it was as if a shutter came down over his face.

"I must go," he said hurriedly. "Don't come to the airport to see me off. I hate farewells." He held out his arms.

"Nicky, for God's sake!" Bob called again.

Nicky's arms dropped and he made for the door. "Goodbye, sweetheart. See you soon."

Left alone in the middle of the room, Valerie remained motionless for a long while. She could not believe Nicky had gone, and though she knew it was only for a month, she had a strange feeling she had lost him forever.

The next afternoon she returned to Kerring. She had only been away a few weeks, yet she felt as if she were coming back after an absence of years. And in terms of experience it was years. It was not only outwardly that she had changed, but inwardly too. She was no longer quite so innocent and unworldly; no longer able to believe that love made the world go round.

Her father was not yet home but Mrs. Jakes, the temporary housekeeper, emerged from the kitchen as she let herself
into the hall. She was a tall, angular woman whose correctly waved hair was indicative of her character.

"Good afternoon, Valerie. Mr. Browne isn't home yet. But I'm expecting him any minute."

"Good." Valerie smiled at the woman. "I hear you've been managing very well. My father says he feels quite spoiled."

"He's an easy man to take care of."

Mrs. Jakes glanced back to the kitchen. "The dinner is in the oven and there's a trifle in the refrigerator. I usually stay and serve it to your father but —"

"There's no need for you to do that now. I'm sure you'd just as soon go home."

Mrs. Jakes slipped on her coat. "Will you want me to work out the week? I've no objection to coming in as long as I won't be in your way."

"Of course you must finish the week," Valerie said quickly. "I don't see why Dad should be the only one to sample your home-baked bread!"

Looking pleased, the woman left, and Valerie glanced into the oven, sniffed appreciatively and then wandered into the sitting room. The house had been kept in perfect order while she had been away and there was nothing for her to do until her father came home.

She thought of the questions he would want to ask but which he would be too considerate of her privacy to do, and knew that sooner or later she would tell him herself of her doubts. But not yet; not until she had come to a more definite conclusion.

Later that evening she gave her father an encapsulated account of her stay in London, laying emphasis on Nicky's visit to Bayswater and glossing over the unexpectedness of his departure to America.

"And now I'm back to take care of you," she concluded, "and all the rest seems like a dream."

"Hardly a dream, my dear. Nicky won't be gone forever. You'll soon want to share your life with him."

She was surprised. "Are you rushing me into marriage? I thought you were the one who wanted me to take my time?"

"I still do. But I'm being realistic. Nicky doesn't need to save up to get married and I can't see him having a long engagement. In his kind of circle they don't usually have any!"

"Or marriages either," she said dryly. "That's what's worrying you, isn't it?"

"I'm not worried for myself, Valerie. It's your happiness that concerns me."

"Nicky and I aren't... I mean I haven't..."

"Good." Her father concentrated on his dessert. "To get back to the housekeeping... I think I'd like to keep Mrs. Jakes on. You've looked after me devotedly since your mother died and I've always felt guilty about it."

"That's nonsense. I've enjoyed doing it."

"Well, you shouldn't. Even if Nicky hadn't come on the scene, I was going to put a stop to it. You're young and you should have a life of your own—not spend it taking care of your father."

"You've got everything worked out," Valerie said, half-pleased, half-dismayed. "You're making me redundant!"

Her father chuckled. "And a good thing too. You're far too glamorous now to go back to the duster and the sink."
"Do you like the new me?"

He surveyed her casual shirtwaist, the pure silk material not in the least casual, and her subtle makeup and carefully disarrayed hair.

"I always knew you were a beauty," he said gruffly. "Was it Nicky's idea?"

"All my own. I think he was rather surprised by the change in me." She thought back to his easy acceptance of it and wished he had shown more delight. But there were many things she wished Nicky would do. So many

That night in bed she mulled over all her father's comments. He was right when he said Nicky did not need to save up to get married. Yet Nicky himself had never even suggested a date. He had been quick enough to try and presume on the marriage vows.

She trembled at the memory of that passionate interlude on the cabin cruiser. Since that day he had never allowed himself to get so aroused. Surely that indicated how much he loved her? Or how little?

Sharply she sat up and turned on the light. She looked around the room and tried to restore her chaotic thoughts to order. If she had such doubts about Nicky's love for her, she must do something about it. To live in limbo was untenable. As soon as he returned from America they would talk things out.

The next week went by on leaden feet and Valerie had to invent things to keep herself occupied, spending each afternoon tramping the Downs. With Mrs. Jakes in charge of the house she dared not do more than look after her own room; even to suggest menus for their evening meals had to be done with tact. She toyed with the idea of going back to work full time at the Taverners, but knew that until she had settled her future with Nicky it would not be fair to do someone else out of a job.

She wrote to him every other day: describing in detail her solitary wanderings, each sentence pregnant with longing for him, but all she received in return was one brief note saying he was working eighteen hours a day in the studio, and was longing to see her.

Ten days after his departure he telephoned her. She was out at the time and desolate at having missed his call.

"He said he'd phone you again," Mrs. Jakes sympathized. "But he wasn't sure when."

It was an announcement in the next Sunday's paper—one of the tabloids which Valerie deliberately bought in order to keep track of the pop star world—that she first learned that Nicky might be staying in America far longer than a month. "England's Golden Boy signs picture deal with M.G.M." ran the center spread headline, while the story beneath it gave details of the great plans being made for Nicky's future. No wonder he was too busy to telephone her again. If the Sunday news was to be believed he might soon be too busy even to see her.

That afternoon she walked farther and faster than usual, her feet keeping tempo with her feverish thoughts. But nothing could calm them, and it was only the sight of a girl walking ahead of her and limping badly that brought her back to a saner mood. Hurrying forward, she came abreast of the girl, who was about her own age, with long fair hair and a pleasant if unremarkable face, now wrinkled with pain.

"Have you hurt yourself?" she inquired.

The girl turned wide gray eyes on her, her most lovely feature. "It's my ankle," she gasped. "I twisted it coming over the field. Terribly stupid of me but—ouch!" She clutched at Valerie's arm.

"Put your arm round my shoulder and hang on," Valerie said firmly. "Do you think you can manage to hop to the main road? It's not far and we can get a bus from there or flag down a car."

"I'll try—it's awfully good of you."

Slowly they made their way the hundred yards to the main road, but it was hard going for the girl's ankle had swollen to twice its normal size and was giving her a great deal of pain. But eventually they reached it and were
lucky enough to stop a car whose driver Valerie knew and who offered to take the injured girl wherever she wished to go.

"I'm staying at the Manor Farm," she explained.

"With Mark?" Valerie asked, surprised.

"With his mother actually. Do you know them?"

"Very well."

"I'm an old friend of the family," the girl went on. "Sheila Stewart."

"Of course—I remember now. You used to live here when you were a child."

"That's right." Sheila turned eagerly in her seat and Valerie noticed that her rather plain face had lit up, making her look almost pretty. "I used to live at the Thatch Close—the red house on the other side of Kerring. Mark and I used to play together as kids. At least he used to let me tag along with him. He was six years older than me, you see—"

She stopped and winced.

"You'll soon be at the farm," Valerie said reassuringly, "and Dick and I will help you into the house."

"I'm so glad I met you both." Sheila smiled at Valerie and the driver, a burly man who ran the village grocery shop. "That's part of village life, I suppose: having people around when you need them."

"They're also around when you don't," Dick grunted, and both girls laughed.

Reaching Manor Farm, Valerie was relieved to see Mark by the door. Taking in what had happened, he lifted Sheila bodily from the car and within moments had her in the sitting room, settled on a sofa, while Mrs. Chariot, tall, plump and motherly, bustled about giving orders for the girl's comfort.

"I'll be pushing along," Valerie murmured.

"Not before tea, you won't," Mrs. Chariot said, and glanced at her son who had skillfully bandaged Sheila's foot. "Don't you think you should have called the doctor?"

"It's only a simple sprain. Sheila trusts me, don't you, old girl?"

Sheila nodded, then lay back with her eyes closed, trying not to show she was still in pain. Valerie studied her. She was small and slim, and her skin had the translucent paleness of poor health. Her light brown hair was as fine as silk; and though she was not pretty, there was something appealing about her. The gray eyes suddenly opened and stared directly at Valerie.

"Don't try to remember me," she smiled. "I left here when I was ten. My parents divorced, the house was sold, and Mother and I settled in Birmingham."

"From the sublime to the ridiculous," Mark grunted.

"Not for Mother. She was a Staffordshire girl. She went back to her roots."

"How can anyone have roots in Birmingham!"

Sheila laughed. "Well, she found happiness there, didn't she?"

"Indeed she did," Mark grinned, and looked at Valerie. "Sheila's mother met a Canadian businessman who came over for a Birmingham Trades Fair, and married him ten days later!"

"What a lovely story," Valerie exclaimed, turning to Sheila. "Are you going to Canada too?"
"No. I'd feel in the way. I'll go for a holiday, of course, but not for the first year."

"That's why Sheila's here." Mrs. Chariot came into the conversation as she came back into the room wheeling a laden tea trolley. "She got a bad dose of flu and is here to recuperate."

"I bumped into Mark a couple of weeks ago," Sheila explained. "When Mother left for Canada I decided to move to London. I'm a secretary at the Farmers' Union and I attended the Agricultural Show at Earls Court."

"She recognized me among the cows!" Mark grinned. "Then fainted in my arms."

"Flu," Sheila explained again, "and when Mark told his mother, darling Mrs. Chariot insisted I come here to recuperate."

"There's nothing like country air for putting you on your feet again," Mrs. Chariot said firmly.

"Providing she doesn't keep spraining her ankles," Mark teased, "or I'll think she doesn't want to stand on them!"

"How clever of you to guess that I want to stay here." Though Sheila spoke lightly, her face was flushed. "But heartbroken, though, to leave you. My boss only gave me two weeks' sick leave."

"You'll stay here till you're quite well. If your boss doesn't like it, let him get another secretary."

"But I like my job."

"You like the country too. You said so."

Feeling vaguely embarrassed, Valerie rose. "I'd better be going," she said. "Goodbye, Sheila. I hope your ankle will soon be better."

"Thank you—and thanks for your help. If you hadn't come along I'd still be struggling along that lane!"

Mark followed Valerie into the hall. "I'll drive you home."

"It isn't necessary."

"I daresay," he said doggedly. "But I'm still driving you."

She did not argue but followed him to the car.

"Well," he said as they bowled along the drive, "everything all right between you and Nicky?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"He was rather angry the last time I saw him."

"That was nothing. He soon recovered his temper."

"He's in America, isn't he?"

"Yes." Quickly she changed the subject. "Sheila's a nice girl. It was lucky you recognized her in London. She looks as if she needs a good holiday."

"She does. Her father's dead and her mother—from what I can make out—is more interested in her own welfare. Sheila pretends otherwise, of course. She's a loyal kid."

"Not so much a kid. She's my age."

Mark shrugged. "I still think of her with pigtails. She's cut her hair short and makes up her face a bit, but I'd have known her anywhere."
She glanced at him curiously. It was obvious Sheila was in love with him yet he seemed unaware of it. What idiots some men were, she thought irritably; they seemed incapable of seeing what was under their noses.

Mark pulled up in front of her house and she jumped out. "Can I see you again?" he asked.

"Not in the way you mean. It isn't fair to you."

He nodded, gave a slight wave of his arm and drove off. Wryly Valerie unlocked the front door. Mark had taken her refusal with unusual grace. Perhaps he wasn't as unaware of Sheila as he believed. With a sudden, illogical pang of jealousy she banged the door shut.
CHAPTER NINE

For the next week it rained incessantly. The countryside looked like a vast river. The grass was completely hidden beneath gray, muddy-looking water, the trees bent under the weight of rain, and those people brave enough to venture out walked with hunched shoulders and hands thrust deep into the pockets of their raincoats.

Standing by the sitting-room window, Valerie peered through the streaming panes and thought it could not have been wetter when Noah built his ark. She shivered and turned back to the fire. There had only been one more short note from Nicky, written in the studio itself, a scrap of paper torn from a music cue sheet.

"Sorry I missed you when I telephoned," he had scrawled. "I've lots to say but hate writing. If I _____"

The next few words had been scribbled out, and he had just put his signature and a P.S. saying: "I miss you."

As a love letter it had a lot to be desired, but it was all she had, and she took it out of her pocket and read it for the hundredth time. Did he really miss her? She longed to believe him but found it difficult. Dash it all, she thought mutinously, she found it impossible. If he meant it, why didn't he ask her to fly out to him?

"Valerie?" It was Mrs. Jakes bringing her a mid-morning cup of coffee. "How about a coconut biscuit too? I've just made some."

"No thanks." With an effort Valerie made herself smile. "I must watch my figure."

"You've no cause to. You've lost weight. I'll bring you one in." The woman disappeared, returning with plate of biscuits in one hand and a letter in the other. "Post's just come," she explained. "This is for you."

She seized it eagerly, her heart sinking as she saw it did not have a New York postmark. "Belfast," she read, and wondered who could be writing to her from there.

When her father came home to lunch he was confronted by an excited girl he had thought never to see again. Had that confounded fiancé of hers finally picked up the phone and called her again or had he had the sense to send her a ticket to join him? Neither, it seemed. For though Valerie was indeed going to New York, she was doing so on her own decision and with her own money.

"A legacy," she had exclaimed the moment he had walked into the hall. "Five hundred pounds from Emily Trant." She waved the cheque in the air. "I can't believe it. But it's true. Look."

"I will if you'll stand still." Mr. Browne studied the check. "It seems in order."

"Of course it's in order. Her lawyers have said so. She died a year ago and left me this money, but her estate took some time to settle. She was mother's cousin, wasn't she?"

"Second cousin. We haven't seen her for years."

"Wonderful Emily Trant," Valerie said. "I hope she won't mind me spending the whole lot in one go."

"One go?"

"To America," Valerie said.

"Ah." There was a pause. "Wouldn't it be wiser to invest the money?"

"I am investing it. If you see what I mean."

"Yes," Mr. Browne said slowly. "I suppose I do. Have you told him yet?"

"No, I want it to be a surprise."
"Do you think that's wise? Personally I always like to let people know what I'm doing."

"If he knows he might tell me not to come."

"If he does, you'd at least save your money."

"But not my peace of mind. Please, Dad, don't let's discuss it."

Forty-eight hours later, Valerie walked out of the T.W.A. terminal at John Kennedy Airport and took a yellow taxicab to the New York Hilton.

She refused to think of the meeting ahead of her, and made herself concentrate on the scenery. How immensely tall the skyscrapers were; the films she had seen of them gave one no real idea of quite how high fifty floors could be. The drive into the city had been a swift one, the motorways—called freeways, so her driver had informed her—being twice as wide as British ones and four times as busy. But once over the Triboro Bridge and in Manhattan they had crawled along. There were traffic lights at every intersection and so many pedestrians that she wondered if it were a special occasion.

"Today is quieter than usual," the cabby said in reply to her query. "Now you know why so many Americans like to live in Europe!"

She was still smiling when they reached the hotel, though it died as she saw the bevy of porters and the speed with which they took her luggage away. Hurriedly paying the driver, she dashed after her cases.

She was met with the same detached speed at the reception desk, and was soon being escorted to one of the many banks of elevators that served the teeming floors. Her head was in a whirl. This wasn't a hotel: it was a planet. It had its own shops on the lower floor, its own series of restaurants, nightclubs, bars. One could live and die here without anyone knowing.

Her room on the twentieth floor was well furnished, clean and impersonal. A large television stood in one corner and she eyed it. Had Nicky known she was coming, this room would have been full of flowers, sent by Bob, though. Nicky was not the thoughtful type.

She glanced at her hands. She did not even have a ling from him. Neither her aunt nor her father had commented on it but she had been aware of their surprise and had made what excuse she could.

"Nicky thinks engagement rings are old-fashioned. He wants me to have jewelry, but we'll go out and buy it together as soon as he has more time."

"I may never have a ring from him now, she thought dispassionately. That's what I've come here to find out. It was strange that she was so cool about it all, as if it no longer mattered to her. Except that it mattered so much that the only way she could maintain her composure was to deny all emotion. Valerie Automaton Urowne. That's what she had to be for the next hour.

Methodically she unpacked. It was four o'clock American time, nine o'clock her own, and she was feeling hungry. Nicky did not leave the recording studio till after six and that meant she had several hours to kill. She was too keyed up to rest, and instead went in search of a light meal.

She ended up in the cheapest of the restaurants: the Hilton equivalent of a Wimpey Bar, where a portion of one could have served three, and the price should have served to feed a family for a day. But it was tasty and it revived her, and after a second cup of coffee she wandered round to stare into the windows of the shops.

On the ground floor again, she almost wished she had not come, or at least stayed in a smaller hotel. This one was so large and busy that it was like being at Victoria Station in the rush hour. Everyone looked confident and happy; the well-dressed women with their elegant figures, the well-groomed men with just that oddness about their clothes that made it impossible to mistake them for Englishmen: self-assured little girls with polished nails—miniature editions of their mothers—and small boys with slicked-back hair and bow ties.
Inexorably the time neared six-thirty. Valerie's nervousness increased and she debated whether to telephone Nicky's suite or to go there unannounced as she had originally planned. Hesitation kept her captive and the hour showed seven before she gained back her courage and took the elevator to the twentieth floor. What a good thing she knew the number of Nicky's suite.

The silence of the carpeted corridor, heated to Caribbean heat, was a relief after the melee downstairs, and she felt slightly better as she walked toward the door of 2066. Not giving herself a chance to think, she rapped on the door. There was no answer and she rapped again, louder this time. Surely Nicky had left the recording studio by now? Tentatively she turned the handle. To her surprise the door opened and, drawing a deep breath, she went in. She had a quick impression of green brocade, thick pile carpet, deep armchairs and bowls of flowers. But it was not until she was in the middle of the room that she saw she was not alone. A girl was sitting on the window seat, half-hidden by a curtain. Her slim legs were drawn up beneath her and a cigarette dangled between her crimson-nailed hands. Hearing Valerie's gasp, she moved, revealing red hair and a heavily made-up face.

Dawn Meadows! Valerie stared at her, unbelieving and speechless.

"Well, well," the girl drawled. "I didn't know you came over with Nicky."

"I didn't—I've only just arrived." Valerie's tone was cold.

Dawn shrugged. "I've come to see Nicky too. I've as much right as you have."

With an effort Valerie controlled her trembling.

"Where's Nicky now?"

"Probably trying to dodge you the way he's been trying to dodge me the last two days!"

"I doubt that. He didn't know I was coming. But now I am here, I hope you'll leave."

"Cut the act," Dawn said rudely. "Your baby-faced innocence doesn't fool me. I never did believe you'd been engaged to Nicky for two months. Two minutes, more likely! He just made the whole thing up in order to try and get rid of me."

Valerie could no longer control her trembling and she sank down on a chair. "I'm sure that isn't true. If Nicky stopped liking you he needn't—"

"Liking me?" Dawn's metallic voice rose and she jumped off the window seat. "He was crazy about me. He was only happy when he was with me and he was with me all the time! But as soon as my husband said he was going to divorce me, Bob forced Nicky to cool off."

Valerie was bewildered. "What did it have to do with Bob?"

"Nothing," Dawn snapped. "Except that he doesn't fancy me as Mrs. Barratt. Once I was, he knows damn well he'd get his walking papers!"

"I don't believe Bob can tell Nicky what to do- certainly not in his private life. If Nicky stopped seeing you, it's because he stopped loving you."

Dawn gave a shrill laugh. "Maybe you are innocent after all! You must be, if you believe that!" Her expression changed, grew sullen. "Nicky's never stopped loving me. He was all set to marry me when that big oaf talked him out of it."

"How could he marry you when you were already married?" Valerie demanded.

"He was going to be cited in my divorce case and he didn't give a damn. Then Bob started to play the heavy father role and told him it would ruin the new image he was trying to build up for him. And also upset Jackson Villiers, who's a religious maniac. So it was either a new recording contract or me—and the contract won. Nicky only got
engaged to you as a means of giving me the brush-off. You don't imagine he'll marry you? Why, he's probably forgotten you exist! That's why I came here. His new contract is signed and he's already cutting his first album for Villiers. He won't need to act pious anymore and he needn't be scared of Bob."

Listening to the monologue of spite, Valerie wanted to be sick. But she forced herself to show a semblance of calm. She must not allow this vindictive girl to influence her. Nicky had not had a blameless past, he had told her so himself, and it would be unfair to judge him on Dawn's word alone.

"I think you'd better go," she said aloud, and pointed to the door. "Tell me where you're staying, and if Nicky wants to get in touch with you—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Dawn screamed. "I'm staying right here."

"Then I'll phone for the floor detective and ask him to remove you." Valerie did not know from what T.V. episode she had dragged up this piece of dialogue, but with bitter triumph she saw it was working.

Dawn's skin grew blotchy beneath its veil of pancake, and her eyes were pinpoints of hate. "Nicky's mine, you little fool. You may think you've got him but—"

"Get out!" Valerie ran to the telephone and lifted it. "Get out now or I'll call the detective."

"Don't bother. I'm going. But you can tell Nicky I'll be at the Plaza, waiting for his call."

The door slammed behind her.

Valerie groped her way to an armchair and fell into it. She could not take in the full meaning of what Dawn had told her, yet she knew it had tolled the bell on her own future with Nicky. He did not love her—had never loved her in fact—and had only asked her to marry him as a means of ridding himself of unwelcome publicity over Dawn. It couldn't be true! No man could be so cruel! In the light of this knowledge so many things fell into place: Nicky's changeable moods toward her; his ability to act the lover one moment and a brother the next; his disregard at leaving her behind in England and his lack of telephone calls. How easy it would have been for him to have spoken to her each day if he had wanted to hear her voice. But he hadn't wanted to. It had all been a pretense.

The door opened and she looked up dully as Nicky and Bob came in.

"We'll have to—" Nicky was saying and stopped dead as he saw the girl facing him. For a moment he stared at her as though seeing a ghost. "Valerie! What—when—how long have you been here?"

"Too long," she said expressionlessly. "It was all a mistake. I should never have come."

She rose and he ran forward and caught her closely. "What's wrong, Val?"

With a gasp she wrenched away from him. "Leave me alone. Don't ever touch me again!"

"What's wrong?" he repeated. "You're not making any sense."

"I'm making too much sense. I know everything, Nicky. I know why you got engaged to me in such a hurry and why you pretended we'd known each other for two months. You can stop pretending, do you hear? Dawn's told me everything."

"That bitch!" Bob burst out. "When did you see her?"

"Just now." Valerie looked at the manager with contempt. "She's staying at the Plaza. I'm sure you'll both want to speak to her."

"I never want to speak to her again," Nicky said before Bob could answer. "She means nothing to me, Val. You've got to believe that."
"Do you also want me to believe you loved me when you asked me to marry you? That you didn't do it in order to save your reputation and your contract with Jackson Villiers?"

"That was the reason to begin with," he said, "but it isn't any more. I love you, Val. I—"

"Don't lie to me!" Her voice rose on a scream. "Haven't you lied enough? Do you have to go on making it worse?"

"Don't blame Nicky," Bob said urgently, coming between them and elbowing the younger man out of the way. "The whole thing was my idea. If Nicky had been named in Dawn's divorce, he'd have had to marry her. And he never wanted that. He only—"

"Shut up, Bob!" It was Nicky speaking, his eyes on Valerie's stricken face. "Can't you see you're making it worse? Leave me alone with Val. There are things I want to say that—"

"I don't want to hear them," Valerie cut in. "I wouldn't believe you if you told me my own name! You're a liar and a cheat and I never want to set eyes on you again." She went to step past him but Bob put himself in the way.

"You can't leave like this, Valerie. We've got to talk things over. I know you're feeling hurt and angry and I'd feel the same if I were in your shoes, but you've got to be reasonable about it. We'd every intention of telling you the truth. In fact only the other day Nicky said to me that—"

"Bob!" Nicky thundered. "Can't you see you're making it worse? Leave me to talk to Valerie alone."

"No," Valerie cried, tears streaming down her face. "I'd rather listen to Bob. At least he's got the decency to stop pretending."

"Sure I'm not pretending," Bob soothed. "All I want is just for you to understand why we did it."

"I know why. Dawn was more than explicit." "It was more than the Villiers contract," Bob said.

"There was a film contract in the offing too. And right now Hollywood is going through a roses and confetti boom, so it was important to keep Nicky clear of scandal. To have him cited in a divorce case would have ruined his chances, and when you practically fell into my arms outside the theater, it seemed as if Fate were telling me what to do. We only want you to go on with the engagement for a few more months. Once Dawn is divorced we—"

"Why can't her husband still cite Nicky?" Valerie asked, marveling that she could be so logical when all she wanted was to throw herself on the floor and scream.

"Because Nicky never stayed with her any place that her old man can prove. She was either in his suite or on the boat."

"Bob!" Again it was Nicky, and the look he threw Valerie was one of anguish. "Val, let me talk to you alone, I beg you."

"You don't need to beg," she said coldly. "Bob's doing it for you!" She eyed the manager. "Have you anything else to say?"

"Only that I'd like you to see things through. Don't turn on us now. Think of the millions of people who believe in Nicky—who get pleasure from his songs and his voice. You don't want to destroy all that, do you? Villiers could still tear up the contract, and if he did, the Hollywood one could be affected too. All I'm asking is for you to wait till Nicky is halfway through his first picture. Once he is, there'll be so much money at stake that the movie moguls will stick by him if he murdered his mother!"

"How well you put it," she said, and knew from Bob's face that her sarcasm meant nothing to him. He saw things only in terms of profit and loss; and he was determined that the loss would never be his or Nicky's.

"Please agree to it, Valerie," Bob pleaded. "You're not vindictive. I knew it the minute I set eyes on you."
She looked at him for a long while in silence. "You're a ruthless man, and clever," she said at last. "I'm beginning to understand how you managed to talk Nicky into doing what he did."

"Then you'll see it through?"

"Yes."

Nicky gave an exclamation and she met his eyes steadily.

"It's not because I've any feeling for you," she said bitterly. "It's because I don't want all the thousands of girls who believe you're as wonderful as your voice to know how despicable you are!"

Nicky's pale skin went paler but he did not reply and she stood up.

"Where are you going?" Bob asked.

"To my room."

"Have a little chat with Nicky first. He's not Public Enemy Number One, you know. It's not his fault the girls throw themselves at him."

"Of course not," she agreed. "He makes a big sacrifice every time he takes one of them to bed."

Bob chuckled, saw her expression and fell silent. Quickly he walked out, leaving the two alone.

Nonchalantly Nicky sauntered over to a tray of drinks. "What will you have?"

"Nothing."

He poured himself a large whiskey and leaned against the table and sipped it. He opened his mouth as though to speak and then closed it again.

"Don't bother trying to think of something to say," she said coldly. "There isn't anything I want to hear."

"You enjoy thinking the worst of me, don't you?"

"Is there any good that I can think of?"

His eyes glittered. "You said you loved me. Were you lying as well?"

"I loved someone who doesn't exist. The real Nicky—if there is a real one—is a plastic cutout with a Ciod-given talent."

"At least you recognize the talent."

"It's the only thing you have. Take it away and you cease to exist."

With an imprecation he slammed his glass on to the table. "Now listen to me! What's done is done and it's no good crabbing about it. But if you're going to go through with this pretense, you've got to put a decent face on it. I won't force my attentions on you and as soon as it's possible you'll be free to go. But while you're with me you must stop treating me as if I'm a monster. Is that clear?"

She lowered her eyes. This stern-faced man was a Nicky she had never seen before—another facet to add to the many different ones she already knew. But his demand was not unreasonable. She had agreed to continue with their engagement, and the situation would only be tenable if they both behaved in a civilized manner.

"Very well," she said. "I can't forget what you've done but I—I'll try and be nice to you."

"Thanks." He turned his back and poured himself another drink. A large one, from the sound of it. "You'd better go
The next few days were strange ones for Valerie. Nicky insisted on showing her the sights and, knowing Bob had publicized her unexpected arrival, she knew it was all part of the act. Together they were photographed in Central Park, at the Bronx Zoo, the Empire State Building, outside the Guggenheim Museum and strolling down Fifth Avenue. Nicky was always charming, and even when reporters were not within earshot, maintained the same attitude, so that there were moments when Valerie almost forgot the real situation and believed they were what they seemed—lovers without thought for anyone but each other.

Neither Bob nor Nicky mentioned Dawn, and Valerie wondered if they had managed to dissuade her from causing trouble. From what she had seen of the girl, she thought it would take more than a persuasive tongue to stop her from an attempt at blackmail. Contemptuous though she was of Nicky, she loathed the idea of anyone being put under such a threat, and hoped that her own continuing engagement to him would frighten Dawn off.

A week after her arrival in New York, Nicky appeared as a guest in an off-Broadway revue. The theater was small, the production inexpensive—by American standards—but the kudos of being asked to participate in this particular show was exceptionally high.

"What number should I do?" Nicky had asked Bob, three days before he was due to appear. "One from my new album or an old favorite?"

"One of your new ones," Bob had said.

"What about the one you sang to Aunt Alice?" Valerie had suggested. She had come up to Nicky's suite to meet a feature writer from a magazine that was doing a cover story on him, and had not yet returned to her own room. She was now able to talk to Nicky with some degree of normality, and the truce that had trembled between them for the first few days had firmed into something solid.

"Do you think the kids will go for that kind of number?" he had asked.

"I don't see why not. It has a beautiful melody and it sounds sincere."

He had reddened, as if finding her comment snide. But then silently he had turned away from her.

"What song is Valerie talking about?" Bob had questioned.

"One I composed a few months back. Just for my own fun—not to play to anyone else."

"Why not?" Valerie had again demanded. "I'm sure your fans would like to hear them. Try one. If it doesn't go down well, you can always sing one of your old favorites."

It was not until she sat in a corner seat in the darkened theater three days later and heard Nicky go into the opening bars of his first song that she realized he had taken her advice. Doing away with his backup group, he appeared on stage alone, sitting in front of the microphone with a guitar on his lap, and dressed casually in slacks and a silk shirt, quite unlike his usual sexy attire.

There was a murmur of surprise from the audience but it died quickly as he strummed the opening bars. It was not the song he had sung in the little Bayswater house but a more lilting one about first love and last love and all the unimportant loves that came in between. The words were catchy, the tune even more so, and when he came to the end the frenzied applause forced him to sing again. This time he did sing the melody Valerie remembered, and tears trembled on her lashes as she thought back to the simple girl she had been then.

Unable to bear the desolation that swept over her, she stumbled from her seat and went outside. How could Nicky compose such heart-rending songs and yet be so unlike them? Or were these songs the real Nicky? The man he could be if he were able to lose his cynicism? There had been glimpses of someone warm-hearted and tender during the time she had spent with him in London. The young man who had so entranced her aunt had not been all pretense, nor had the solicitous man who—after that passionate episode on the cabin cruiser—had steadfastly refused to make such overwhelming love to her again. That had been a month ago, four weeks from this very day. She sighed. How
would he react if she could revert to the girl she had been then—who had believed in him and trusted him? Would it enable him to discover his real self or were the layers of pretense too many to be shed? Yet the very fact that he had sung his own songs tonight gave her hope that the Nicky she had once thought him to be still existed, and she dabbed her eyes and turned to go back into the theater.

As she did, a girl stepped out through one of the side doors, and though Valerie moved quickly to avoid her, she was not quick enough, for a hard voice bade her stop. Afraid of causing a scene, Valerie did so and waited for Dawn to approach.

"So Nicky and Bob persuaded you to carry on with the act," she said sarcastically. "You're a bigger fool than I took you for."

"I'm not a fool, Miss Meadows. Just someone who doesn't like to see a gold digger get away with it!"

"You've got a nerve! I love Nicky—rat though he is."

"You wouldn't threaten to destroy him if you loved you. You want him because he's famous and rich."

"And you don't?"

"I don't want to destroy him," Valerie said. "And as long as I stay engaged to him, you won't succeed."

"Not even if I can prove you've only been engaged for a few weeks and months?"

"You can't prove it. We'd both deny it."

Dawn glared at her. "I can't make you out. Is Nicky paying you to stick with him or are you doing it because you still think he'll marry you?" She saw the flicker in Valerie's eyes and immediately her own blazed with temper. "You don't have a chance of keeping a man like him."

"Don't be so sure!"

"I am! A whole day in your company and he's ready to climb up the wall. Remember when he took you to his boat?" Again Valerie's eyes gave her away and again Dawn saw it and gloated. "He was so bored to be stuck with you that he couldn't wait to get back to me. One hour before he went on stage, he was in my bedroom! Ask him, if you don't believe me."

Valerie's shock was so great that she could not speak. But Dawn mistook her silence for haughtiness and became even angrier.

"I'm not lying, you idiot. Ask him!"

"I don't need to," Valerie said huskily. "He—he told me about it the next day." She heard herself speak as if she were listening to someone else. And it must be someone else who could stand here lying like this. "Nicky and I don't have any secrets from one another," she went on, still hearing her own words as if they were coming from a stranger. "He was ashamed about it and had to tell me."

"Ashamed?"

"Because he had behaved like an animal. Being with you that night made him see that—that passion without love was—was meaningless. So I should thank you for what happened—not be upset by it—"

The look of astonishment on Dawn's face was almost laughable and it helped Valerie to maintain her composure. "You can't come between Nicky and myself, and the sooner you realize it, the better."

"I may not be able to break you up," Dawn hissed, "but it'll cost him plenty to keep me quiet. There are still lots of magazines in the States that would jump at the chance to print the story of my affair with Nicky Barratt."
High heels clicked on marble and Valerie was left alone. Without being aware of moving she found herself back in her seat. Nicky was still singing and she saw that the audience was still refusing to let him go. She heard him as if she were in a dream, and still in the same suspended state, went backstage afterward.

As usual he was surrounded by people, but he spotted her at once—as if he had been watching out for her—and beckoned her to join him at the dressing table where he was removing his makeup.

"You were right about my songs, Val. The audience loved them. It's opened up a whole new way for me to go."

She tried to answer but was unable to speak. The courage she had called upon to withstand Dawn's attack had sapped her of strength and she suddenly began to shake as if she had fever. The room revolved and she clutched at the edge of the table and wondered if she could get out of the room without collapsing.

"Val, what is it?"

Nicky's voice came from miles away and she tried to answer him. Her lips parted but no sound emerged, only a strangled cry as she sank down into a black abyss.

When light returned she and Nicky were alone in the dressing room. She was lying on an easy chair with her legs raised up on another one, and he was watching her anxiously.

"How do you feel now?"

"Better."

Gingerly she moved to sit up. Only then did she realize the bodice of her dress had been loosened and that her breasts were partially visible. Coloring, she gathered the soft material across them and tried to do up the back zipper.

In silence he stepped behind her and did it for her, his hands cool on her skin, though they lingered there for a moment before he moved back in front of her.

"Why were you so upset?" he asked. "You came in here looking like a ghost. Bob said he saw Dawn in the theater. Did she speak to you?"

The Valerie of a week ago would have lied, but the girl she was today was a different proposition. Learning more about Nicky's deceit could still hurt her, but she was no longer willing to suffer anything in silence.

"What did she say?"

"That I was a fool to let you talk me into continuing our engagement and that you went to bed with her l our weeks ago, which was the day you took me down to your boat."

Nicky spun round to face the mirror. But as if he could not bear the sight of himself he turned again ;ind faced her. Already pale, she would not have thought he could grow paler. But he did. His eyes were black as coal because of it, and burned with an intensity that made them luminous.

"I wanted to tell you about it," he said, almost in- audibly. "But I didn't think you'd understand."

"That you felt the need for a person like Dawn?" she said scathingly. "I understand that very well."

"You don't." It was a cry of anguish. "How can you understand something I'm only beginning to understand myself! That day on the boat—when I wanted to… when I lost control —It had never happened to me before and I was —well, bowled over by it. No girl had ever got under my skin the way you had and… and to be honest about it, I hated the idea of it. That's why I went to Dawn. To prove to myself that you weren't the only girl who could arouse me." He turned his back on her. "I suppose that makes you hate me even more than you do already?"

She considered the question. She was surprised by what Nicky had said, but the more she thought about it, the more she appreciated the fear that had motivated his behavior. Of course he would hate the girl who made him feel
vulnerable. That was something Nicky Barratt had vowed never to be. But he was. Vulnerable to herself. It was an exhilarating thought but she was careful to hide it. Nicky had to see this for himself. When he did, he would either run away from it—as he had subconsciously done when he had gone to see Dawn—or he would face up to the knowledge that one girl had come to mean something special to him.

"You still haven't answered me," he said.

"I don't hate you," she replied. "You aren't the person I thought you were, but—"

"I'm not the person I thought I was either!" he put in dryly. "But maybe by the time we return to England we'll both have a better idea of who Nicky Barratt is."

"I can't stay here until you're ready to come home."

"Why not? You'll like Hollywood."

"You'll be shooting for three months and I—I don't want our engagement to go on that long. Bob said we should end it when you were halfway through the film."

"You're eager to see the back of me, aren't you?"

"Won't you be pleased to see my back too? Having a fiancé must curtail your activities." She was delighted at the casualness of her voice and even more delighted to see him scowl. She stood up. "Which nightclub are we going to tonight?"

"None." He looked faintly on the defensive. "As you weren't feeling well, I thought we'd go somewhere quiet."

"Your friends won't like that."

"I don't have any friends. I told you that once before."

"I remember. But I thought you only said it as part of your act."

"I didn't put on an act with you, Val. Leastways not after the first few times we met. And I don't give a damn whether or not you believe me." He strode to the door. "Come on. We're going to a place I know on Park and the Sixties. And if it's still the same, there'll be no one there who's ever heard of me."

Valerie found this hard to believe, Nicky's publicity being what it was, yet amazingly it was true, for no one gave them a second glance when they entered Mama Luigi's. It was an Italian restaurant that looked homely and inexpensive and was homely and fantastically expensive.

They were shown to a corner table, half-hidden from the other diners by a large potted palm, and Mama Luigi herself came out to take their order, suggesting various dishes of the day and firmly refusing to serve them cocktails.

"We have Italian wine only. But the very best. You start with a bottle right away, and perhaps with your cheese, another half bottle of something special."

"I'm in your hands, Mama," Nicky smiled.

'Better you should be in the hands of your beautiful girl friend."

"My fiancée," he corrected.

Mama Luigi cast a look at Valerie's ringless fingers and Nicky looked startled. "We got engaged in a hurry."

"Always the young are in a hurry. But don't be in such a hurry that you forget to put a hands-off sign on this girl of yours."

"I'll do it first thing tomorrow," he promised, and gave Valerie a rueful smile as the woman walked away. "I forgot
to tell you what a character she is. Tonight she's in one of her quiet moods!"

"You could have fooled me!" Valerie studied the other people nearby. They were conservatively dressed and nearer middle age than young, which was not surprising when one considered the prices here. Yet they did not look like expense account diners either. "How did you find this place?"

"By chance. I was in New York a few months ago and slipped away from the gang. I asked a cabby to take me to the best Italian restaurant he knew, and he brought me here. Don't tell Bob about it," he warned, "or everyone will know."

"What other secrets do you have from him?" It was an idle question and she was unprepared for the grim look that came onto his face.

"Only this one, so far. But I'm learning."

"Learning what?"

"To keep my own counsel and make my own decisions."

He broke off as their wine arrived but even when the waiter had gone, he did not pick up the same subject. For the rest of the meal, he talked about his forthcoming film and she had the impression that his mind was elsewhere. But it was only when they were driving back to the hotel that he said something that proved her right.

"I look on tonight as our first proper date, Val. You know me for the skunk I am and there was no need for me to pretend. I forced myself not to talk about anything that's happened between us, and though it made the conversation hard going, I didn't do badly, did I?"

"You did very well. I know as much about making films as a film producer!"

He was still smiling at her remark when they entered the lobby and went to the reception desk for their keys. A sheaf of telephone messages was handed to Valerie and she looked at them uncomprehendingly, wondering who was trying to get in touch with her. Nicky took the bundle from her hands.

"If Bob's released some new story about us without letting us know, I'll kill him!" He glanced at the first message and the smile left his face. Swiftly he drew Valerie away from the busy desk area. "It's from Mrs. Jakes. She's been calling you all evening. Your father's had an accident and she thinks you should fly home immediately."

"My father!" Valerie swayed. "What sort of accident? I must phone him." She turned distractedly, looking for a telephone and not knowing where to find one.

Nicky caught her arm and led her across to an elevator. "It'll be better if you phone from my room."

Silently they went up to his suite and he pushed her into a chair and brought her a brandy. "Drink it," he commanded, then picked up the receiver and dialed the operator.

Within seconds he was speaking to Mrs. Jakes, shaking his head at Valerie when she went to take the telephone from him. He jotted down a number on the pad beside him, cut the housekeeper short and put back the receiver.

"I've the hospital number," he said, "and the name of the doctor in charge. If I speak to him myself he won't put me off with platitudes."

"How b-bad is it?" she stammered.

"It was a car accident," he hedged. "I'll know more when—hello? Is that the Wiltringham Hospital? This is Nicky Barratt speaking. I want to make an inquiry about my father-in-law, Richard Browne."

Dazedly Valerie listened. How clever of Nicky to pretend they were already married. A son-in-law had much more weight than a fiancé—even a famous one. She tried to hear what was being said but the voice at the other end was
too faint, and she had to wait until the call ended.

"Broken ribs, concussion and some internal injuries," Nicky said baldly. "They won't know how bad they are until they get him into the operating theater."

"I must go to him."

"I'll fix it. Now keep calm."

"How can I keep calm when my father may be dying?"

Ignoring the question Nicky turned to the phone again and Valerie paced the floor, wishing it were possible for thought to transport her instantly. If only she had never come to New York, if only her mother's cousin had not left her that legacy

"It's all arranged," Nicky announced, interrupting her thoughts. "And we're in luck."

"Luck?"

"I've got us two seats on Concorde's early morning flight."

"Two seats?" she echoed, knowing she should stop repeating herself but unable to do so.

"I'm coming with you."

"But your recording session... you can't leave in the middle. Mr. Villiers will—"

"Have a fit and I don't give a damn!" Nicky concluded. "I'm going with you and that's final."

He repeated these sentiments to Bob a half hour later when his manager returned to the suite, and Valerie left the two of them arguing and went to her room to try to rest for a few hours.

She dozed fitfully, and at four in the morning began to pack, dumping her things uncaringly into her cases and wishing she could trade the exotic Jackie Burns' clothes for her father's health. With a little moan, she knelt down by the side of the bed and prayed.

She was calmer when she followed the porter from her room. Nicky had phoned through to say he would meet her in the main lobby and he was waiting for her when she arrived. He looked unfamiliar in a dark suit and tie, more like a young executive than a pop star, and she wondered if she would ever cease to discover different facets to him.

"Poor darling," he said as they climbed into the back of the chauffeur-driven car. "I expect you're thinking that if you hadn't come out here to me, your father wouldn't have had his accident."

"How did you know?" She was amazed.

"It's the usual way one thinks at times like these. But you can't blame yourself. He could have had an accident like this at any time."

"But I should have been at home. Not thousands of miles away."

"I know." He patted her hand, held it momentarily and quickly let it go. "Poor kid. Bob and I have really messed up your life."

"Don't keep calling me a kid."

"Why not? I'm an old man compared with you. That's the penalty of being in show business. It makes you a star to your public but it rubs the stars from your own eyes."

He lapsed into silence, not breaking it until they were at the airport and given the VIP treatment that went hand in
hand with being Nicky Barratt.

Only when they were airborne and supersonic did Valerie relax, knowing she was going as fast as possible to see her father. How different this return journey was from the one she had made over here. The flight held no magic for her, even though Nicky was by her side. She glanced at him, surprising him watching her. She still could not fathom exactly why he had wanted to accompany her, and wondered if it stemmed from guilt. Yet she was as much to blame for her unhappy position as he was. She should never have been so naive as to believe she could appeal to a man of such worldly tastes. It was the Dawns of this world—with their blatant sexual charms and limited intelligence—who were likely to satisfy him.

"We'll be in London in four hours," he said "Greenwich time it will be two in the afternoon."

"Traveling supersonic makes distance seem unimportant."

"It also stops you feeling like a traveler. Without a sense of distance, you arrive in a foreign country expecting it to be like the one you've left behind."

He continued to talk, forcing her to respond, and she knew he was trying to stop her thinking of her father. His understanding and tenderness was a surprise to her, as was the authority with which he had taken charge of the entire situation. She had the conviction he rarely—if ever—felt responsible either to or for another person, and knew that in this lay the reason for his selfishness. But given encouragement he could be solicitous of others; his actions tonight proved it.

On arrival at Heathrow Nicky bundled her into a chauffeur-driven car that took them directly to Wiltringham Hospital.

She was glad of Nicky's silent support as he entered the rubber-floored reception hall where she was met by a young doctor who said her father had undergone surgery a few hours before and was as comfortable as could be expected.

"There was internal bleeding," he explained, "but we managed to stop it. Dr. Simons is an excellent surgeon. He's operating at the moment, or he would have spoken to you himself."

"May I see my father?" she asked.

"By all means. He's unconscious though."

Staring down at her father's silent figure she knew a deep sense of fear. He was ashen gray and there was extensive bruising down one side of his face.

"Do you know how the accident happened?" Nicky asked the doctor.

"According to the police—who found a witness to it—Mr. Browne was driving along the main road when a learner driver shot out from a side and turned without stopping."

"I bet he wasn't hurt."

"How did you guess?" the doctor said dryly. "That's the way of the world." He inclined his head in Valerie's direction. "You may stay here if you wish, but your father's unlikely to come 'round today. He's still heavily sedated."

"But if he gets worse I—"

"We'll call you the moment there's any change."

"I'll take you home, Val," Nicky said. "You look as if you're out on your feet." "I feel it," she admitted, and followed him back to the waiting car.

A crowd of youngsters surged toward Nicky and he pushed Valerie into the backseat and dived in after her.
"Fans!" he muttered. "That's all I need now."

"Are you going back to London?" she asked as they headed toward Kerring.

"No. I asked the chauffeur to book me at the Taverners."

"You can stay at the house."

"And give fodder to village gossip?"

Again she was surprised by his thoughtfulness. "I don't care what gossips say."

"But I do. For you, not me. But we'll have dinner together."

The prospect of an evening with Nicky was more than she could bear. "I want to go to the hospital again."

"There's no point to it while your father is still unconscious. Wait until he knows you're there, before you start trekking back and forth."

"He might never know."

"Don't talk like that." Nicky was unexpectedly sharp. "You've got to keep hoping."

"Hope and dreams," she said wearily. "That's all I seem to have done with my life."

"You've got years ahead of you, Val. Plenty of time for your hopes and dreams to come true."

Tears blurred her vision and she closed her eyes. Did Nicky honestly think she would find love with someone else? Having been emotionally untouched in his own life, he could not conceive of the way it affected one's outlook. In time, her love for him would fade, but it would never vanish completely.

It was six o'clock when they walked into the house, where Mrs. Jakes was anxiously waiting for news. Learning from Nicky that they would not be returning to the hospital that night, she offered to make dinner for them.

"It will be better for Valerie to get out," he said, refusing the suggestion with thanks. "If we stay home, there'll be tears in the soup!"

"How can you make jokes?" Valerie cried. "Are you so insensitive that you don't know how I feel?" Remembering the way he had walked out on his recording sessions, she regretted her outburst. "I'm sorry, Nicky. That was a stupid thing for me to say."

"I'll only forgive you when you're sitting opposite me in the Taverners dining room. So run and change."

Within fifteen minutes she was back, her pale cheeks masked by color, though nothing could disguise the shadows beneath her eyes.

"I like you in lilac," he said. "You should wear it more often."

"You said that when I wore red the other day, and when I put on a green suit last week."

"That just shows how many different colors suit you!" He held open the door. "I told the chauffeur to go," he went on. "I thought you'd like a little walk."

"I would."

Slowly they made their way to the small inn. The bar was crowded but the dining room was empty, and they chose a table in the corner. Mrs. Mathers took their order personally, pausing to offer her sympathy to Valerie and asking if there was anything she could do to help, before going into the kitchen.
"I suppose you know everybody in Kerring," Nicky said. "And everybody knows you. I'm not sure I'd like that kind of life."

"It's not much different from yours. Except that more people know you."

"They know my publicity—the image Bob has created."

"You are your image," she said flatly.

His eyebrows came together. It was not a frown, but more of a contemplation, as if he were pondering what she had said. "You make me sound as if I don't exist," he murmured.

"But you do. To millions of people you're the best singer since Sinatra."

"A voice," he said. "But not a man. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "You don't like people. You distrust them and it's made you defensive. That's why you don't want any meaningful relationships."

He half smiled. "Not so long ago you accused me of being incapable of anything meaningful. So at least we're progressing."

Progressing to where? She longed to ask the question but bit it back, glad when their first course was served and Nicky turned to a less personal subject.

They returned home at eleven, and only as they entered the house and he saw it was in complete darkness, did he realize she would be sleeping in it alone.

"I thought Mrs. Jakes lived here," he said.

"She has her own cottage on the other side of the village green."

"But you can't stay here by yourself."

"Why not? I'm not a child."

"You are to me," he said and then stopped, as if embarrassed. "I've never worried about anyone else before," he went on.

"You've no need to worry about me. I can look after myself."

"But you can't stay here by yourself."

"Not until you're safely in bed."

"But-"

"No arguing, Val. I'll wait till you're in your room and then I'll go."

Reluctantly she went upstairs, undressed and got into bed. Downstairs all was quiet. Not sure whether Nicky was still there, she called his name.

Almost at once he came up the stairs. Her heart beat fast and she lay back on the pillows and pulled the bedclothes above her shoulders as he came in, carrying a glass of hot milk.

"Just to make sure you have a good night's sleep," he said.

Obediently she sipped the drink and wondered how it was possible for a man to be so thoughtful when he was basically so callous—for that he was callous she had no doubt. A man who became engaged to a girl in order to protect himself could not be deemed otherwise.
While she finished the milk he stood by the window, one hand in his trouser pocket, the other holding the curtain apart as he looked into the dim street. His face was half turned away from her but she discerned its brooding expression and felt a pang of love so intense that she almost cried out.

How can I love someone I despise, she wondered, and shakily put down the glass.

"You can go now, Nicky."

"Shall I open the window for you?"

At her nod, he did so. Cool air wafted in, billowing the curtains, and he stood by the bed, watching her.

"Sure you won't be in a draft?"

"Positive."

He grunted. "Beats me why women can't wear sensible nightclothes. That bit of chiffon you're wearing wouldn't keep a cat warm!"

"I'm not a cat," she said lightly.

"I know. There's nothing catty about you, Valerie. You're the nicest girl I've met." He caught her hand. "Don't worry about your father. I'm convinced he'll be all right."

"I hope so." She stared up into his face. "Thank you for being so kind. I never expected that you could be..."

"You never expected me to be kind. Well, I didn't expect it myself."

Before she could answer he sat on the edge of the bed, so close to her that she could see the rise and fall of his chest.

"I've never wanted to be kind to anyone until now, Valerie. I've always been more concerned with protecting myself."

"You might feel differently if you forgot the past and concentrated on the future."

"The future?" His eyes grew darker. "When I'm close to you like this I can only think of the present. A warm, pulsating present."

She tried to smile. "You're talking like an old-fashioned romantic!"

For a reply he pulled her forward until she was resting against him, the buttons of his jacket pressing through the filmy material of her nightgown. She tried to resist but he was too strong, and when his mouth came fiercely down on hers, she did not want to resist anymore. He drew her back onto the pillow, pushing aside the blanket that separated them. His whole body was shaking and he kept murmuring half sentences that all seemed to incorporate her name.

Again and again they kissed until Valerie lost all sense of where she was or who she was. She existed only for Nicky: for his touch, his need of her, his possession.

"Nicky... darling!"

Suddenly he wrenched himself free and stood up. His skin was shiny and his eyes glazed. "I—I must go," he said jerkily. "I—I'll see you in the morning."

The door closed behind him and Valerie buried her head in the pillow and wept.

She had dressed and telephoned the hospital before Mrs. Jakes arrived the next morning.
"Dad's conscious," she said at once, seeing the woman's anxiety. "According to the Sister, they're very pleased with him."

"Then you've no excuse for not having a decent breakfast. You must have starved yourself in New York, Valerie. I've never known you so thin."

"I didn't have much appetite."

"Then the sooner you and Mr. Barratt get married, the better. When I was courting with Harry, we both ended up like a pair of skeletons!"

Valerie reddened and Mrs. Jakes went purposefully into the kitchen, from which soon wafted a delicious smell of frying bacon and percolating coffee.

It was still early when Valerie was ready to leave for the hospital. There had been no word from Nicky and, remembering last night, she was loath to call him. Slipping on her coat, she made for the front door. Simultaneously the bell rang and she opened the door and saw Nicky.

Color flooded her face and he grinned mockingly. "Trying to avoid me? Had an idea you would."

"Not at all," she said. "I wanted to get to the hospital early and I—I know you sleep late."

"Only after I do a show."

"I came back to England to be with you while your father's ill, and I can't have you run out on me now!"

"You're very—"

"Don't you dare say kind. I'm enjoying myself taking care of you. Let's leave it at that, for the time being."

Although not sure what he meant, she nodded silently, then watched him surreptitiously as he drove. There was no need to ask if he had slept well, for his face was grayish and there were lines beneath his eyes and on either side of his mouth which she had not noticed before. He was tense too, his hands gripping the wheel as if it were going to take off.

"I phoned the hospital," she said.

"So did I."

That was the end of their conversation, and still in silence they arrived at the hospital and went up to the third floor.

Mr. Browne was weak but able to smile as they entered his room, and Valerie ran forward and knelt beside him, too choked by emotion to speak.

"Sorry about spoiling your holiday," he whispered. "Mrs. Jakes shouldn't have called you."

"Don't talk nonsense. Anyway I'm glad to be back. I was fed up with America."

"I don't believe you. You wanted to be with Nicky."

"In person, sir. I flew back with Valerie."

Mr. Browne visibly relaxed, as if Nicky's presence had reassured him. "I'm glad you did. I... I've been worried, you know. Wasn't sure how you and Valerie were getting along."

"Dad!" Valerie pressed his fingers. "You really are delirious, darling. Why ever should you worry about Nicky and me? We're perfectly happy and we'll be happier still once you're fully recovered."

A rustle of starch heralded the entry of a nurse, and correctly interpreting her look, Valerie and Nicky left, promising
to return again later.

The knowledge that her father was going to recover robbed Valerie of all tension, leaving her as enervated as if she
had done a hard day's work.

"We'll have a nice lazy day," Nicky said.

"I still can't believe the nightmare's over."

"Well, it is. I told you not to worry, didn't I? Next time, listen to me."

"I promise," she said, and smiled weakly.

At home once more, Nicky decided to call Bob and tell him he would return to New York in a few days.

"I don't suppose you will want to join me until your father's out of the hospital?" he said to Valerie.

Before she could answer, Mrs. Jakes came in to ask if they would like some coffee. Nicky asked for some toast too, but as the woman turned to go, he gave an irritated mutter. "Would you hold back the toast for ten minutes, Mrs. Jakes? I've left a telephone number at the hotel and I want to fetch it. Villiers' private line," he explained Valerie. "I thought I'd call him personally and apologize."

"That's a good idea."

He was on the threshold when he paused. "Think over the question I asked you and give me the answer when I come back."

Hardly had Nicky gone when the telephone rang and, still on edge and nervous, she rushed to answer it.

"That you, Val?" It was Bob. "What's the news of your father?"

Happily she told him, then said, "Nicky was going to call you to say he's coming back to New York, but he went to his hotel to get Jackson Villiers' private phone number. He wants to call him and apologize personally for leaving the way he did."

"He's got nothing to worry about," Bob said easily.

This was so unlike the man's earlier, furious reaction to Nicky's intended return to London that Valerie was mystified. But truth came quickly, as did bitter, searing disillusion.

"Nicky got himself some fantastic publicity for coming home with you," Bob went on. "Villiers was mad as all hell to begin with, but when he saw the headlines he cooled down. He couldn't have made such an impact for Nicky if he'd paid half a million dollars. There were headlines in all the papers across the country."

Valerie clutched at the receiver. So that was why Nicky had been so eager to accompany her to England! Famous Singing Star Breaks Contract to be with the Girl He Loves. She could see the headlines as if they were in front of her.

"Tell him he needn't bother calling Villiers," Bob was still talking. "He's so tickled pink he wants to bring out a second album right away. Straight love songs, with a photo montage of shots of you and Nicky. Sounds great, doesn't it?"

"I won't be coming back to New York," she said. She tried to make her voice firm but it came out as a thin thread of sound. But not so thin that the man did not hear it.

"Why not? If your father's on the mend there's no reason for you to remain behind."

"There's no reason for me to come to New York either. You've got all the publicity you need out of my father's accident!"
Not waiting for him to reply, she slammed down the receiver. Angry tears coursed down her cheeks. But it was not anger against Nicky. He had acted true to form and she could not blame him. It was anger against herself for believing he had been motivated by affection for her; for believing that their few weeks in New York—when pretense had been abandoned—had helped them to establish a more genuine basis for a relationship.

A relationship. What a laugh that was. As if one could ever relate to a machine! And that's what Nicky was—a lovely voice inside a machine.

With a start she looked up and saw him. He must have returned without her hearing him and was watching her with a softened expression on his face. But seeing her eyes on him, he walked to the phone.

His hand was on it when she spoke. "Bob called while you were out. I told him you were going back to New York and he said for you not to bother ringing Mr. Villiers."

"You mean he wouldn't talk to me?"

Disgust shook her. "I mean you can stop playacting. It's over, Nicky. Finished. I know why you came back with me so you needn't pretend any more."

"Pretend about what?"

"About caring that I'm upset or that my father might have died! You came back for the publicity it would get you, and you've been so successful that Villiers even wants to do a special album based on your mercy flight!" The very thought of it refueled her anger, making her want to lacerate him with her tongue, to destroy him the way he had destroyed all she had believed in. "You're so motivated by ego that you're incapable of doing anything unless it's for your own self-advancement. You've never had a genuine emotion in your life. I'm not surprised your aunt and uncle didn't love you. It would have been easier for them to have loved a robot!"

"Be quiet!" Never had his voice been so loud. "Don't you dare throw my past back into my face. You know nothing at all about the life I had. Nothing."

"I know you are nothing!" she stormed. "You're an image your manager has created. A gimmick he built up with money and lies. You're a phony, Nicky Barratt, and I never want to see you again in my life!"

Black eyes blazed at her, searing her as if they were laser beams. But soaked in her bitterness she was immune to them, and returned his look with equal force.

"I'll leave for New York today." The quietness of his voice was astonishing. "I hope your father will be out of hospital by the time I come back. Give him my regards and wish him well."

Unable to bear the continued sight of him, she turned to face the wall. She heard footsteps cross the hall and the door slam. Only then, alone at last, did she burst into tears.
CHAPTER TEN

It was from the newspapers that Valerie learned what Nicky was doing in America. A few weeks after returning to New York he flew out to California where, ensconced in a magnificent house, rented from a film star now based in Europe, he held court to reporters and photographers—all eager to relate the doings and sayings of a man they rapturously acclaimed as the voice of the eighties!

"I'm quite well enough for you to leave me and go back to that fiancé of yours," her father said a month after she had come home. "And you don't need to worry about paying for your ticket. Considering you were forced to come back because of me, the least I can do is make sure you finish your holiday."

"It wouldn't be a holiday for me in Hollywood. Once Nicky starts filming he'll be busy all day and exhausted all evening. He has a punishing schedule, Dad, and he'll be better left alone."

"Would you leave him alone if you were married?"

"No, but—"

"Then why leave him alone now?" Mr. Browne moved his hand in a declamatory gesture. "Ignore the question, Valerie. I had no right to ask it. What goes on between you and Nicky is your own affair. But I'd like you to know that I think he behaved very well in flying home with you."

Valerie said nothing. She had not known whether to tell her father the true situation between herself and Nicky and had only decided not to do so because of its very sordidness. Despise Nicky though she did, she could not bring herself to let others see him for the sort of person he was. It was far better for everyone to believe their engagement had terminated because their love had died, rather than to know there had been no love in the first place.

"I'll see more than enough of Nicky when he's back in England," she said aloud. "Right now I'd prefer to concentrate on you!"

Slowly the days passed, each one as endless as the one before. The house was spick and span. Everything that could be polished was polished, everything that could be cleaned was cleaned, and eventually the day dawned when no matter how closely she looked, Valerie could not find anything to do. Restlessly she walked from room to room, and had just decided to make a cake to take to her father—she had told Mrs. Jakes not to come in until he was home from the hospital—when the bell rang.

Opening the door, her eyebrows rose as she saw Sheila Stewart.

The girl smiled shyly. "I hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"Not at all." Valerie led the way into the sitting room and they sat down.

"I was terribly sorry to hear about your father. When Mark told me I wanted to call around at once, but I didn't feel you'd want to be bothered with visitors."

"I didn't," Valerie agreed. "But in the past week I've welcomed the next-door cat! I don't mean to be rude but—"

"I know what you mean," Sheila laughed. "In fact, I said as much to Mark. But he thought that with your fiancé being here, you wouldn't want anyone else around. I mean he must be sick to death of people pestering him. But when I read that he'd gone back to America, I knew it would be all right to call."

"You could still have called." Valerie smiled and casually changed the subject. "How's your ankle?"

"As good as new. I feel a fraud still staying on at the farm. But I help Mrs. Chariot with some of the chores, so it relieves my guilt!" Sheila glanced around. "When will your father be home?"

"Not for a few weeks."
"It must be lonely for you here. Why don't you come back and have a meal with us?"

"I've got so much food in the house that I'll waste if I don't eat it up," Valerie replied, unable to face the thought of seeing Mark.

"In that case," Sheila grinned, "I'll stay and eat."

Valerie's mind flew to the larder hoping there was enough food there to make a meal. If there wasn't, it would give the lie to her statement. She stood up hurriedly.

"Why don't you read a book or look at the television while I prepare supper?"

"Can't I help you?"

"Definitely not."

"In that case I'll phone Mrs. Chariot and tell her I'm staying on here."

While Sheila talked on the telephone, Valerie closeted herself in the kitchen. A quick search disclosed a well-stocked larder—again thanks to Mrs. Jakes who still insisted on doing the shopping, to allow Valerie more time with her father—and she set about making a shepherd's pie from tinned mincemeat topped by instant mashed potatoes, well flavored with butter, an egg and a dash of nutmeg. While it was cooking she whipped up a soufflé, using a generous splash of Grand Marnier to give it zest.

An hour later, she and Sheila sat at the dining-room table.

"I'm afraid I can't offer you any wine," she apologized.

"I don't mind," Sheila said. "I'm not much of a wine drinker. I'm afraid you must think me awfully unsophisticated."

"Because you don't like wine?" Valerie shook her head. "It's an acquired taste, you know. I wouldn't worry because you haven't acquired it!"

"But I do. I feel so—so inadequate and childish. I wish I had your poise, Valerie. I'm not surprised Nicky Barratt fell in love with you."

"I'm sure a lot of people were."

"Then they were stupid." Sheila's piquant face was earnest. "If Nicky married someone in show business he wouldn't stand a chance of being happy. I think he showed remarkably good sense in choosing you. You're beautiful to look at and you're also sensible."

Valerie could not help laughing. "You speak with such authority, yet you hardly know me."

"I don't need to know a person a long time in order to judge them. I've got an instinct."

"You and a million other women!" Valerie retorted. "I used to pride myself on my judgment too, but I don't anymore.

"Why not?"

Afraid she had said too much, Valerie changed the conversation. "If you like living in the country, why don't you try to find a job around here? Mrs. Mathers at the Taverners Hotel might be able to help you."

"No. I don't want to stay here indefinitely. It's wonderful for an interlude but it can be no more than that."

"I don't see why not. You might even meet a farmer and marry him," Valerie teased. "We've a couple of nice young ones in the next village."

The color that flamed into Sheila's face made Valerie regret her joke. But thinking it kinder to pretend ignorance of the girl's embarrassment, she muttered about seeing to the soufflé and hurried out. By the time she returned with it, Sheila was once more composed, and for the rest of the evening they chatted desultorily, and it was nearly ten o'clock when Sheila stood up to go. "This has been one of the nicest evenings I've ever spent," the girl said as she rose to leave at ten o'clock. "I wish I'd been able to see more of you."

"So do I. Maybe when you come down again…"

"You're still here," Valerie replied, smiling.

"But not for long. I'm definitely going at the end of the week." Sheila nibbled on her lip. "How about riding with me tomorrow? Mark promised to come but some extra work has cropped up on the farm and he can't make it."

Valerie hesitated. It was a long while since she had ridden and the thought of doing so was pleasurable.

"What time shall we meet?"

"Nine-thirty. Which of Mark's horses do you prefer?"

"Trigger."

"Good. I'll see he's mounted for you."

As she watched Sheila's thin figure disappear down the village street, Valerie wished that Mark could see the girl as someone more than a kid with whom he had grown up. Yet having made such a mess of her own life, she did not feel qualified to interfere in his.

The next morning dawned clear. The roads were dry and though a red sun shed little warmth, it cast a cheerful glow over everything. It was a perfect day for riding and as Valerie swung her leg over the glossy flanks of the chestnut mare, her spirits rose. Sheila was astride an enormous black gelding which moved uneasily as she settled herself in the saddle.

"He looks a bit wild," Valerie commented. "Is he safe?"

"Perfectly." Sheila leaned forward to pat her mount's neck. "I've ridden him many times before. He's all right as long as you've got a firm hand."

Together they set off toward the Downs, the horses' hooves striking sparks on the hard road. Valerie sat comfortably in her saddle, the feel of the superb animal beneath her and the warm comforting smell of horse and leather giving her a sense of physical well-being. There were not many cars about as she guided the horse along High Street, and the Trigger, responsive to the slightest touch of the rein, stepped delicately along, ignoring the occasional hooting of a car horn. Sheila's horse, Wanderer, seemed less sure of himself, his ears pricking nervously every time a car drove close to him, his elegant forelegs skittering on the road. But Sheila was an excellent rider and controlled him beautifully, and once they were off the road and could canter, Wanderer lost his nervousness.

At length they pulled the horses to a stop and, dismounting, left them to crop the grass while they strolled through the trees.

"Each time I go riding," Valerie observed, "I vow to do it regularly."

"It is heavenly, isn't it?" Sheila agreed. "That's one of the things I'll miss when I leave here."

"The other's Mark, isn't it?" Valerie stated in a flat, composed tone.

"Have I made it so obvious?"

"Only to me."
"I suppose that's because you're in love," Sheila sighed. "You're luckier than me, Valerie. Mark does not even know I exist."

Valerie knew a sudden desire to confide in Sheila. But she hardly knew the girl. Besides, Sheila had her own troubles.

"Maybe Mark will realize what he's missing one day," she said. "They say absence makes the heart grow fonder, and perhaps when you've gone______________"

"I'd be kidding myself if I thought that," Sheila said. "Mark still thinks of me as a schoolgirl with freckles and pigtails." She gave a watery smile. "Anyway, he's madly in love with you."

"No, he isn't!" Valerie protested. "He only thinks he is. We're quite different types and we'd never be happy together." She thought of Nicky and her voice firmed. "Love can't last if there's no compatibility between the two people."

"Mark's love for you has lasted."

"Only because he's obstinate. The more you chide him about something the more fixed he'll become in his ideas. The thing to do is to tease him out of it."

Sheila shook her head. "If I haven't been able to make Mark aware of me in all the weeks I've been staying with him, I won't have much hope of doing so when I'm a couple of hundred miles away!"

"Then don't go."

"I must. I'm not a fighter, Valerie." She sighed. "It's like Mrs. Chariot says: what can't be cured must be endured."

"I hate cliches." As she spoke, Valerie remembered that Nicky had once used an almost identical phrase. If only her thoughts did not always return to him. "Let's get back to the horses," she said, and whistled for Trigger.

He lifted his head and looked in her direction, but Wanderer set his ears back with his usual obstinacy and went on cropping the grass. Sheila laughed and went toward him.

"What an obstinate creature you are," she said, swinging herself into the saddle. "I think I'd better change your name to Mark!"

At a brisk trot Wanderer went ahead of Trigger, breaking into a canter as they skirted a large lake. The red glow from the sun turned the water to liquid fire and Valerie called Sheila to look at it. As the girl turned in her saddle, a piece of paper blew against Wanderer's forelegs. With a nervous whinny he shied and, taken unawares, the reins jerked out of Sheila's hands. Unnerved at feeling his rider lose control, the horse took the bit between his teeth and careened off round the lake. Instantly Sheila recovered her poise and leaned forward to catch the reins. But it was too late, for they were dangling over the horse's head and trailing between his front legs.

With growing alarm Valerie urged her own horse forward after Sheila, vaguely aware of a man appearing at the brow of the hill and running toward them. As he came closer she recognized Mark. He was shouting and waving his arms in an effort to stop Wanderer, and was so successful in his intent that the horse tossed his head wildly and stopped dead in his tracks, jerking Sheila from her seat and flinging her into the lake. The water was deep and she disappeared from sight, coming up a moment later, gasping and struggling.

With horror Valerie realized the girl could not swim, and pulling Trigger to a stop she slid down her back and raced to the water's edge. Mark was there before her, and only stopping to remove his jacket, he plunged in and swam toward the struggling figure.

In a matter of seconds he reached her and began to guide her to the bank. The moment he felt solid ground beneath him, he rose and lifted Sheila into his arms. She was silent and inert, her face waxy.

"Darling," he cried. "Darling, speak to me."
There was no response and he laid her face down on the ground and began to give her artificial respiration.

"What about the kiss of life?” Valerie said, kneeling down beside him.

"I've got to get the water out of her first."

There was a gurgle and water bubbled from Sheila's mouth. She coughed, gurgled out more water and then retched violently.

Only when she had finished did Mark gently turn her around to face them. Color was slowly returning to her skin, though she was still deathly pale.

"Mark!” she gasped. "Where—what are you doing here?"

"Saving you,” he said huskily and raised her wet hand to his mouth to kiss it. "How do you feel now?"

"A bit of a fool.” Shakily she sat up. "It was stupid of me to let Wanderer bolt like that. Is he all right?"

She looked round to where the horse was standing, now quiet though still trembling a little.

Mark followed her gaze. "He'll be fine. Don't worry about him. But I'll never let you ride him again."

"It wasn't his fault.” Sheila rose and, going over to Wanderer, stroked his nose and murmured soothing words to him. "I was to blame,” she said over her shoulder. "I should have been more careful."

"Talking about being careful,” he replied, "the sooner you get out of those wet clothes the better. I'll take the horse back and you go along with Valerie."

"I'm perfectly capable of riding Wanderer,” Sheila said in a high voice. "Don't fuss over me, Mark. Go back with Valerie."

"I won't let you ride him anymore,” he said and caught the reins from her hands. "He's still nervous and likely to shy at something again. If you want to sit on him, fine, but I'm riding him too!"

Mark mounted himself behind Sheila and dug his heels into Wanderer's flanks. The horse set off at a canter and Valerie followed.

How upset Mark had been by Sheila's fall, Valerie thought. Unless she was very much mistaken, the accident could have made him realize exactly what the girl meant to him. Sheila's dream of living in the country might still come true. If only her own dreams would come true as easily! But that was impossible. Her relationship with Nicky had been a nightmare, and she must forget it. Only then would she stand a chance of finding happiness with someone else.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

It was not until a week before Christmas that Mr. Browne was allowed to leave hospital.

Seeing him sitting in his usual armchair by the living-room fire, Valerie could almost believe the accident had never happened. True, he was pale and thinner than before, but he looked rested and content, and made no secret of his eagerness to return to the bank and an active life.

"I had hoped that Nicky would manage to fly back for the holidays," he commented. "Perhaps he's planning to surprise you."

Thinking what a surprise it would indeed be, she murmured something inconsequential and pretended to search for a colored skein of silk in her embroidery bag.

"Petit point," her father expostulated. "Whoever heard of a beautiful young girl sitting at home night after night sewing chair seats!"

"They'll be lovely when they're finished," she defended.

"I daresay. And if you were doing them for your own home I could understand it more. But to make them for me ________"

"For us." She saw his look and said hastily, "I can't sew things for a house I don't have."

"Then see about getting one. Or is your engagement going on forever?"

Valerie paused before replying. She had not wanted to tell her father that her engagement to Nicky was over, fearing he would blame himself for it. "If you hadn't been forced to come back to England ———"

She could practically create the words he would use. Yet neither could she bring herself to tell him the truth about her engagement, partly because he had grown to like Nicky during the times Nicky had sat with him in the hospital, and partly because she still could not bear to openly disclose that her idol had feet of clay. Feet! she thought ironically. He was wholly clay!

Since their angry parting he had not tried to contact her, though she had heard from Bob a few days after Nicky had returned to New York.

"I'm sorry things have ended between you and Nicky," was his opening gambit. "I always felt the two of you hit it off."

"Really?" She had not disguised her sarcasm but the man had been impervious to it.

"Yes, really. You were good for him, Val. Something genuine in a phony world."

"What do you want from me?" she had demanded bluntly. "You didn't ring me up in order to compliment me. Come to the point, Bob, or I'll put down the receiver."

There was a short silence. "I suppose you feel bitter about the whole thing? I can understand that, Val, and I wish——"

"Be brief, Bob, and leave out the fairy tales. Why did you ring me?"

"To ask you to go on with the engagement, at least until we get Dawn out of Nicky's hair. She's making legal noises, which I don't like, and she's got herself a tough lawyer, which I like even less."

"She wants money?"

"And how. If she found out you and Nicky weren't together any more, she'd have a go at trying to prove he'd only
"got engaged to you in order to get rid of her."

"Which is true."

"Have a heart, Val," Bob pleaded. "You may not like Nicky, but you must like Dawn even less. The girl's nothing but an out-and-out cash register."

Unable to gainsay this, Valerie could also not deny Bob's request. But she would not rejoin Nicky in New York, nor would she go to California.

"So what will you do?" Bob had demanded in exasperation.

"I won't deny our engagement and I... if necessary I'll pose for pictures with him when he returns home. Unless he's free of Dawn by then."

"Wouldn't you consider coming here for a weekend? A day even?"

"No."

She had put down the telephone and relieved her feelings by indulging in an orgy of cleaning, leaving the house sparkling but her own spirits dimmed.

Since that day there had been no further word from Bob, and the little she knew of Nicky's life she gleaned from the newspapers.

"If you don't think Nicky's coming over for Christmas, why not join him in California?" her father cut into her thoughts. "Mrs. Jakes is perfectly capable of taking charge here."

"I've no intention of leaving you." Valerie was indignant. "I'm so delighted we can share Christmas together at home that I'd even refuse an invitation from the Queen!"

Mr. Browne smiled, but Valerie saw the speculation in his eyes and knew she had not fooled him much as she had hoped. One day soon she would have to tell him the truth. Christmas might be a propitious time for he was bound to notice there was no present or telephone call from Nicky.

But in this she was proved wrong, for on Christmas Eve a magnificent hamper arrived for her father from Fortnum and Mason: foie gras, caviar, smoked salmon and marrons glacées nestled among four bottles of champagne and a huge box of Havana cigars, while for herself there was a small package with the mauve paper of Asprey's of Bond Street. Inside, in a black leather box, was a ring.

Valerie stared at the enormous fire opal, overcome by its beauty. She had never seen a gem like it. Every different angle disclosed a different color, though through them all the fiery heart of the stone could be seen. There was a card with the package, inscribed in what she took to be Nicky's hand, which surprised her as much as the present itself, for it implied he had actually gone to the trouble of writing it and not let Bob do it for him—though of course Bob must have been the originator of the idea.

"Send the girl a present and keep her sweet."

She could almost hear him say the words. Sourly she looked at the ring again. It was far too expensive for her to keep and she would return it to Nicky the moment he came home.

"Well, dear," her father said, "what does Nicky say? Is it your engagement ring?"

Hastily she read the card, cheeks flaming as she did so. "This fire opal reminds me of you," he had penned. "Lovely to look at but with even lovelier depths."

"He doesn't say," she replied.
"It's beautiful enough for one. You should wear it on your engagement finger."

"What for?" She saw her father's expression and hurriedly added: "All this stuff about engagements is awfully dated. Nicky and I don't go along with it. I've already told you that."

"I find it hard to believe. For a young man who writes such romantic songs, he's surprisingly unromantic!"

She forced a chuckle and made a pretext of having to go to the kitchen. Once alone, she looked at the ring and knew that if Nicky were within striking distance, she would have thrown it at him. How dare he write her such a false message! Did he think she would show it to her friends and perpetuate the myth of their engagement? Well, he would soon learn otherwise. The minute—the very minute he had settled things with Dawn—she would telephone the newspapers and tell them she had broken with him. Had it not been for her father's accident and her reluctance to distress him, she would never have allowed Bob to persuade her to go on with it, no matter if Nicky had had a hundred Dawns screaming out for his blood!

Much later that night, as she was putting the finishing touches to their small Christmas tree, Nicky telephoned her from Hollywood. Unfortunately her father was in the room and she was forced to make a pretense of being delighted to speak to him. But he was quick to recognize she was not alone.

"I wondered why you sounded so affectionate," he drawled. "I take it your old man's with you?"

"Yes."

"If he weren't, you wouldn't talk to me at all, right?"

"Yes, darling."

"Then I'll put you out of your misery and hang up!"

"Wait!" she said hurriedly. "When are you coming home?"

"Eager to see me or to get rid of me?"

"The latter, of course." She made her tone passionate, as if she were saying something deeply affectionate. "I can't wait, Nicky darling."

"That's what I thought." His voice was no longer drawling but hard. "You're a tough girl, Valerie. You make up your mind about a person and nothing can change it."

"People don't change. They only pretend they do."

"Have a happy Christmas, Val, and give my best to your father."

"Are you recording this farewell for your publicity handout?" she said as she saw her father hurry from the room and diplomatically close the door.

There was a small explosion of fury from the other end of the line. "It's a good thing I'm not near you, Val. If I were…"

"Happy holiday, darling," she purred, and ended the call.

It was in the week between Christmas and the New Year that she learned Nicky had finished his film and would soon be leaving for England, though the columnist who interviewed him inferred that the singer was contemplating making the States his future home.

"I've always fancied being able to retire to California," her father joked. "I understand they cater marvelously to elderly people."

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him the truth but, as always, she found she could not do it. Perhaps it would be
easier to wait until her engagement was officially ended.

January snowed and blew its way through to its end and February was halfway along when she again heard Nicky's voice. The instant she did, she knew he was in England.

"I got back this morning," he announced. "How are things with you and your father? Is he still convalescing?"

"He returned to the bank a couple of weeks ago."

"So you're free? Good." He sounded crisp and businesslike. "Bob wants us to have a new set of pictures taken. You know the sort of thing I mean."

"I can imagine." Her voice was equally crisp.

"Shall I send a car down for you or shall I have someone meet you at the station?"

"Neither." She was still crisp. "I'm not going anywhere. If you want any pictures with me you'll have to come down here. The business of being a loving fiancé applies equally well to you!" Not giving him a chance to reply she banged down the receiver.

Anger buoyed her through the rest of the morning, coloring her cheeks with scarlet and adding luster to her eyes, so that her father remarked on her prettiness when he returned home for lunch.

"It's because Nicky's back, I suppose," he said. "I must say I expected him to rush down here—or at least for you to go tearing off to London."

"I'd hardly get a chance to see him alone," she replied. "He's up to his eyes with press conferences."

"In my day a man wouldn't allow a thing like a press conference to stop him seeing the girl he loved."

"You don't know modern publicity," she said wryly.

"Maybe not. And it seems I don't know modern love, either. I'm surprised that—"

His words were drowned by a squeal of brakes, and glancing through the window she saw a silver-gray Lotus. Nicky's car! Heart racing, she went into the hall, hearing the sound of another car as she did so. Quickly she opened the door and Nicky, his finger raised to the bell, drew back a step to look at her.

"Darling girl!" he said loudly, and pulling her into his arms, pressed his mouth upon hers.

Unable to stop herself she responded to him, arms encircling his neck, her limbs trembling as she felt his warm breath on her face. Then a blinding light startled her and she became aware of a battery of cameras and a crowd of newspapermen.

Face flaming with color, she tried to push Nicky away. But he held her more tightly and spoke in a low voice that only she could hear.

"Be still, Valerie. This is part of the act you agreed to play."

"I'll only play it if you let me go. If you don't, I'll hit you across the face!"

Instantly his hands dropped to his side. But his mouth remained stretched in a smile, though it did not reach his eyes, which remained cold and hard.

"You look fantastic," he drawled. "I'll never let my career part us again."

"What about another kiss?" Bob called. "A couple of the boys at the back didn't get a decent picture."

"I don't like kissing in public," Valerie said.
"Nor do I." Nicky caught her arm. "Let's go inside. I'd like to see your father."

"That's a great idea," Bob interrupted, busy as ever. "I'm sure the boys would like a picture of the three of you together. It's a miracle your father came through his accident, Valerie. That's why Nicky flew home with you, wasn't it?" Bob turned to the newsmen. "You remember that, don't you, boys?"

Sickened by Bob's remark, Valerie said, "No more pictures," her tone so icy that it even penetrated his thick skin. The smile left his face but his voice was as smooth as ever as he turned back to the reporters.

"You heard what the little lady said. She doesn't want her father bothered with pictures and I can't say I blame her."

"We didn't drive down for only one shot," a thin man said from the back of the crowd. "Have a heart, Bob. We also need more of a story."

"Where would you like our lovebirds to pose?" Bob asked. "There's a swing in the garden where Nicky used to push Valerie when he was courting her."

"This I'd like to see," a red-faced man said. There was general laughter and they all moved round the back of the house to the garden.

The next hour was an unpleasant charade for Valerie. Bob was indefatigable and much as she disliked the man, she could not help but admire the way he parried awkward questions and steered the men onto subjects which would afford Nicky the greatest value.

At length even the florid-faced manager seemed satisfied and, still talking, he shepherded everyone back to his car, leaving Valerie alone with Nicky.

As the large American car drove away, she turned to look at him. He was more handsome than ever. The California sun had given a faint bronze sheen to his skin, and he had cut his hair slightly shorter, which gave it an unexpected wave in the front. She swallowed hard, wondering if the time would ever come when she would see him without wanting to throw herself into his arms.

"Now that Bob's gone," she said coolly, "there's no need for you to stay."

"Considering I drove all the way down to see you," Nicky said sarcastically, "the least you can do is ask me in for a drink."

"You drove down for the publicity," she snapped. "You wouldn't want to see anyone but yourself!" She flung back her head. "If I still remember you by next Christmas, I'll send you a mirror—then you can look into it and see a portrait of the only person you love."

Anger darkened his eyes. "I wish we were alone," he grated. "I'd make you take back those words."

"What's stopping you?" she asked. "No one can see us."

"Your father's watching us through the window. You'd better ask me in, Valerie, or does he know the truth?"

"No, he doesn't. I didn't tell him because he___ because for some unknown reason he likes you. When we end our engagement I'm going to let him think it was because we were incompatible."

"Thanks for warning me," Nicky drawled. "I'm glad to hear one member of the Browne family appreciates me."

Turning on her heel she marched into the house.

For the rest of the day Nicky exerted all his considerable charm on Mr. Browne, persuading him to take off the rest of the day and then regaling him with stories about his experiences in Hollywood. Watching her father's amused expression, Valerie could cheerfully have strangled Nicky and, as she served dinner late in the evening, knew an almost insane longing to tip the bowl of soup over his head. She could not help smiling at the thought, and seeing
the smile, Nicky leaned forward and caught her hand.

"You look so beautiful, darling," he murmured. "You've a wonderful daughter, sir."

"Character's more important than beauty," Mr. Browne said gruffly. "And Valerie's got plenty of that."

"I agree with you. Character and beauty. No wonder I love her." Pushing back his chair, he leaned across the table and kissed her full on the mouth. Valerie went scarlet and her father chuckled.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said gruffly. "I like to see Nicky showing his affection. You're too bottled up, my dear."

This was the first intimation her father had given that he considered her repressed and Valerie could not hide her astonishment. But she refused to comment on it, knowing it would prolong a conversation she wanted to end. Apart from that, Nicky was enjoying her discomfiture and would do all he could to increase it.

Not until ten o'clock did he make a move to go, and when her father asked him to stay the night she held her breath. If he accepts, she thought furiously, I'll walk out. But to her relief he shook his head, explaining he had to be in London for an early morning press conference.

"I expect you'll want Valerie to be with you," Mr. Browne said.

"With all my heart. But I'm not sure she will. She hates the razzmatazz of show business."

"Then she shouldn't have fallen in love with one of its brightest stars."

Echoing the words—but silently—Valerie accompanied Nicky to his car and, alone with him at last, could not restrain her fury.

"I don't mind you putting on an act when there are other people around but it was unnecessary to do it tonight."

"I don't see why. You told me yourself you didn't want your father to know the truth about it."

"There was still no reason for you to put on such a heavy act. The trouble with you is that you want all the world to love you."

"That's better than having them hate me." In the moonlight he peered down at her.

"I don't like the way I originally hooked you, nor the way I've had to beg you to stay in my life. But sometimes you set a ball in motion and you can't stop it—even if you want to."

"Is that a plea for forgiveness?" she asked icily.

With a shrug he took his place behind the wheel, then with a laconic salute, he drove slowly away, careful not to rev the engine—a gesture of thoughtfulness she had not expected from him.

"You should go to London, my dear," her father said when she returned to the sitting room. "I don't think it's good for Nicky to be alone."

"Alone?" She almost laughed. "Alone with Bob and the group and all the hangers-on? The trouble is, Nicky's never alone! He likes being surrounded by people."

"That wasn't the impression he gave me. He was quite forthcoming about himself today. Surprisingly so."

She longed to ask what Nicky has said, but forced herself to keep quiet. It would all be lies anyway—part of the act he had put on to disarm her father. Yet why should he have bothered? What was he trying to prove? That he could get everyone to love him, if he tried?

Wearily she pushed her hair away from her face. She had not had it decently cut since her first visit to the Mayfair hairdresser, and it had grown so much that the original style was lost. Yet the longer length suited her, giving her a
sensual air of disarray.

"I think we should ask Mrs. Jakes to return," her father said. "I've made up my mind, Valerie. I don't want you keeping house for me. You'll soon be getting married and—"

"No," she interrupted. "I won't. I—we—we want to wait till we know where we're going to settle."

Mr. Browne opened his mouth to reply, thought better of it, and announced he was going to bed.

Four days later Nicky telephoned to let her know that his solicitors had come to a financial settlement with Dawn. Valerie's first thought was that she and Nicky were now free to end their engagement. Although it was what she had longed for, she felt bereft. Nicky would disappear from her life; he would forget her as he forgot all his girlfriends.

"I'm delighted," she managed to say. "That means we can end our engagement. I'll send you back your ring."

"Wait till everything's signed and sealed," he said quickly. "Bob thinks it would be safer."

"Very well. But don't announce it to the press until I've told my father."

On Friday afternoon Sheila called unexpectedly, and as soon as Valerie saw her, she guessed what had happened.

"I've something to tell you, Valerie," she began.

"I know. And congratulations! You'll make Mark a wonderful wife."

Sheila giggled and held out her hand. "He gave me this last night."

Valerie looked at the beautiful sapphire surrounded by diamonds. "It's perfectly lovely."

Sheila held it against her cheek. "Mark says it matches my eyes—that's why he chose it."

"He's a man with excellent taste," Valerie hugged Sheila. "When are you getting married?"

"I'm not sure. We haven't set the date yet, but there's no reason for us to wait. The blue eyes became curious. "What about you? You've been engaged much longer than I have. And you can't be saving up to buy a semi-detached!"

Valerie stretched her mouth into a smile, wishing Bob had not stipulated that she and Nicky continue with this farce for a few days longer. The weight of her pretense was becoming a heavier burden each day and she desperately longed to discard it.

"I still haven't met Nicky," Sheila continued. "But Mark says he's very nice."

Knowing what such a comment must have cost Mark, Valerie was grateful to him.

"I think Mark was very jealous of him to begin with." Sheila was still speaking. "But once he met me again, he stopped feeling so badly about him. Yet he still didn't realize he was in love with me. I've got Wanderer to thank for that!"

"Mark should have him as the best man!"

"I'll tell him so." Sheila followed Valerie into the kitchen, making a surprised face as she saw the dozen baking tins on the table. "Are you expecting company?"

"I'm helping out Mrs. Mathers. Her pastry cook's sprained her wrist and I offered to help out."

"Why?" Sheila still looked surprised. "Oh, I don't mean why are you helping out, but why are you still in Kerring to do it? Why aren't you with Nicky? If he were my fiance I wouldn't leave him for a minute."
"I trust him," Valerie said shortly, and felt regret as she saw her friend redden. She did not blame Sheila for being surprised at the way she was behaving; in Sheila's place, she would feel exactly the same. Damn Nicky and Bob and all their lies! If things weren't settled by the end of next week, she would go to London and settle them for herself.

"I hope you won't be cooking for Mrs. Mathers tomorrow?" Sheila said. "Mark and I would like you to come to the races with us."

Valerie thought quickly. She was not a lover of racing, finding the long wait between each event incredibly boring, yet she was reluctant to refuse the invitation, knowing that if she did, Mark might feel she resented his falling in love with someone else.

"I'll be delighted to come with you," she said, "but whatever you do, don't follow my bets. I'm the world's worst when it comes to picking winners!"

Sheila reminded her of this twenty-four hours later when one of Valerie's chosen horses romped home at twenty to one.

"If you're the worst picker of winners, old dear, I'd sure like to meet the best!"

"It's an accident," Valerie laughed. "My first win ever—I promise you."

But when her next horse also came in first, both Sheila and Mark asserted she must have secret information.

"Either that, or your luck's changed," Mark added. "You'll soon have the bookmakers paying you to stay away!"

"How about helping me spend some of my ill-gotten gains?" she quipped, pointing to the refreshment tent.

"A good idea. I can do with a brandy to warm me up."

They moved to the refreshment tent, though once there and their orders given, Mark refused to let Valerie pay. Accepting his decision with a smile, she sipped her drink and relaxed. As always when mentally off-guard, she thought immediately of Nicky and wondered where he was and what he was doing. Had he meant it when he had told the press he was thinking of settling in California? She tried to visualize his life in the future but could only see his present one, with people like Bob and Dawn as part of it. She turned to set down her empty glass and saw Dawn standing at the entrance of the tent. What an unhappy coincidence! Idly she watched the girl move forward, accompanied by a stout, middle-aged man.

"Anything wrong, Val?" Mark asked. "You look as though you've seen a ghost."

"Not a ghost. Just somebody I met in New York."

Mark followed her gaze. "You mean the silver blonde?"

She nodded and he stared thoughtfully at Dawn. "Funny... I'm sure I've seen her before." Suddenly he straightened. "I've got it! She used to weekend at the Taverners with the man she's just come in with. But she had blond hair then—almost white it was. Surely you saw them there yourself?"

Valerie cast her mind back, remembering Mrs. Mathers' comment about the couple who gave their name as Jones and professed to be hunting cottages. Suddenly she began to tremble. How could she have forgotten that heavily made-up face with its silver-gilt hair? True, she had only brushed past Dawn as she had left the hotel, but the girl's looks were so distinctive she must have been blind not to have recognized her.

With recognition came another realization. If Dawn and "Mrs. Jones" were one and the same, then Nicky had nothing to fear from her. She would never dare to say he had promised her marriage and then let her down—not when she had spent so many weekends, during that time, with another man.
She caught at Mark's arm. "I've got to phone Nicky."

"Nicky?" Mark looked surprised. "There is something wrong, isn't there?"

"No, there isn't. Quite to the contrary. But I've just thought of something very important to tell him."

"There are phone booths near the entrance. I'll take you there."

"There's no need. Stay with Sheila. I'll be back as soon as I can."

With growing excitement Valerie dialed Nicky's number. There was no reply and she spoke to the message clerk, who promised to leave word that she had called and urgently wished to talk to Nicky.

It was late afternoon before she returned home and she looked hopefully at her father, hoping he would tell her Nicky had called. But there had been no word from him and she telephoned again. Still there was no reply.

On an impulse she decided to go to London and talk to him face to face. If only his lawyers hadn't already passed over the money he had agreed to give Dawn. He could always fight to get it back, of course, and Dawn would lose the battle. But ugly publicity would ensue, and since this was the one thing he wished to avoid, he would no doubt prefer to lose the money.

Valerie refused to ask herself why she should care if he did. All she knew was that she wanted to stop it.

"I've got to go to London to see Nicky," she burst out. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, Dad, but I—"

"Don't fret about it," he said reassuringly. "I'm quite capable of looking after myself for the rest of the weekend."

"I won't be away for the whole weekend. I'll come back on the last train tonight." Her father's astonishment was too patent to be ignored. "What I have to say to Nicky won't take long. I—I can't tell you about it yet, but___ Please Dad, don't look at me like that. I haven't gone out of my mind."

"I didn't say you had. But you're certainly acting strangely. In fact you've been doing so since you got engaged to Nicky."

"It will all come right in the end," she said. "Most things do."

Forestalling any reply he might have made by dashing upstairs to change, she was on her way to London within the half hour.

She felt uneasy about entering the Savoy after an absence of several months, but a couple of the desk clerks recognized her, and at her inquiry, affirmed that Nicky was in his suite.

Nervously she went up to it and, outside the door, braced herself, and momentarily wondered why she had been idiotic enough to come here, and then knocked.

It was opened instantly by Nicky, and his lack of surprise at seeing her told her he had known she was on her way up. His greeting confirmed it.

"I couldn't believe it when Reception said my fiancée was here." He moved aside to let her enter the room. "There's nothing wrong with your father, is there?" he asked her.

"No. But I had to talk to you. I telephoned this afternoon but you were out."

"You should have left your name. Then I'd have called you back."

"I did leave my name. That's why I—that's why I'm here. When you didn't return my call? I thought you didn't want to speak to me."
"You're right," he said. "I don't."

She resisted the urge to walk out. She was here for a purpose and she would carry it out.

"Anyway, I didn't get your message," he added reluctantly. "If I had, I would have called you back." He moved over to a side table. "A drink?" At her refusal, he poured himself a large whiskey and then turned around. "What do you want to talk to me about? I told you I'd let you know the minute we'd be free."

"I know you did, but—"

"You can't wait, eh?" He gulped down his drink and poured himself another. "My country bumpkin can't wait to get rid of me! The man most girls vote that they'd like to marry is poison to little Miss Browne!"

Listening to him, Valerie wondered if he were drunk. She had never known him drink to excess before, yet neither had she seen him in such a belligerent mood.

"Don't look so scared of me, Miss Browne. I'm not drunk, only merry."

"Maudlin, more like it!"

"And who can blame me? What man wouldn't be maudlin at losing a pretty little fiancée like you?"

"Nicky, stop it! I haven't come here to have a row with you."

"Then what have you come for?"

"To tell you Dawn Meadows has another boyfriend."

Glass raised, Nicky paused. Then he gave a sarcastic smile. "I don't think that warranted a trip up here. I didn't think she'd pine for me forever!"

"But you did think she had hoped you would marry her. I mean that's why you've agreed to buy her off. Because she's kept on saying she was in love with you and was convinced you'd marry her as soon as she was divorced."

"So what?" he said irritably.

"So it isn't true. Dawn was playing around at the same time that she was telling you she loved you."

"How do you know?" His sarcasm had gone and he was watching her intently.

"I saw her at the races this afternoon and suddenly realized I'd seen her months before at the Taverners. Quickly she recounted all the facts. "I'm sure Mrs. Mathers will recognize her too."

"Is this what you came to say?" He looked amazed.

"Yes. I wouldn't have come if I could have spoken to you on the telephone. But when you didn't return my call I thought you didn't want to speak to me and— well, I couldn't let Dawn get away with blackmailing you. Even if she'd genuinely loved you, she was wrong to do it, but when I remembered her weekends with that other man…" She paused, hoping he would say something. But all he did was to go on looking at her, his expression still intent but impossible to read. "I… I hope you haven't paid her yet?" she continued. "I'm sure she wouldn't fight you, if you refused."

"I'm sure she wouldn't. As it so happens, we were due to hand her lawyers a check on Monday. So you've saved me a very hefty sum."

"Good." She rose and went to the door.

"Is that all you have to say?"
"What else is there? We can now end our engagement, Nicky, and get on with our own lives."

"You and that farmer friend, I suppose?"

"Does it matter to you?"

"Not in the least." His look was not as careless as his words. "But you were in love with me—or so you said—and I wouldn't want to think you were still—"

"Don't think," she interrupted tersely. "I'm not. I loved a dream. Not the true Nicy Barratt I found you to be."

"Romantic love is for fools," he grated. "One day you'll grow up enough to know you can't make a person into an angel."

Unable to bear anymore, she put her hand on the door knob. Before she could turn it he was in front of her, barring her way.

"You can't wait to go, can you?" he grated. "Well, let me give you a little memento as a final goodbye."

Before she could prevent him he pulled her close and pressed his mouth on hers. He had kissed her many times but never with such longing.

"Valerie," he muttered, "I can't let you go. There's something I must say."

"No!" she cried, and wrenched free. "It won't do any good."

"How do you know? Hear me out first. You said you loved me once."

She stared into his face, longing to tell him she would love him for the rest of her life. But pride held her back. Whatever emotion prompted Nicky now, tomorrow or the day after he would change, and she would merely be a good story for him to tell his friends—simply another episode for the newspapers.

"I was a child," she said flatly. "And a child's emotions don't last. You mean nothing to me, Nicky. To be honest, I'd find it easier to love a snake!" Pulling open the door, she ran down the corridor.

The next few days were an unending misery. She reached home at midnight to find her father just switching off the television. Knowing she could not hide her depression, she told him her engagement was over.

"I guessed it would happen," he said. "You've been unhappy since you came back from America. At first I thought it was because of my accident, but when I got better and you were still moping around like a wet blanket, I knew something was wrong." He paused. "There's only one thing I'd like to say. Things won't go on being as bad as they are now. One day you'll forget Nicky."

"I hope so." She half turned away. "I never stood a chance of marrying him. He was—he was using me."

"In what way?"

"As a smoke screen. He never loved me, Dad. You might as well know that."

Mr. Browne rubbed the side of his nose, a gesture he always made when puzzled. "I'm not so sure I agree. When he was here last I could have sworn he loved you. I don't believe it was an act."

"You don't know Nicky," she said wearily. "He's the best actor in the world."

"If you say so. Heaven knows I'm not defending him. You know him better than I do."

After that, neither of them referred to Nicky again. The days went by, each one more monotonous than the last, and Valerie was determined to take a job away from Kerring. Her broken engagement had been a seven-day wonder and she had been besieged by pressmen. Bob had displayed unexpected tact in intercepting most of the reporters and
interviewing them himself. He put the blame for the broken romance onto Nicky's sojourn in Hollywood and his
decision to live in California.

"Valerie doesn't want to leave England," he had said. "Nor does she want a show-business life. Nicky lives in a
goldfish bowl and he loves it. He loves his fans—every million of them—and from now on he's going to concentrate
entirely on his career."

Reading the reports, Valerie had to admit they made a good story for the popular press. Indeed as one tabloid put it:
Pop Singer Gives Up Love of One Woman for Love of a Million Fans.

To begin with, Valerie could not walk down the street without being the object of sympathetic stares, but public
memory was short and soon it was as if her engagement had never been.

Sheila and Mark were sympathetic and, taking their cue from her father and her own attitude, made no comment and
asked no questions. Only on one occasion did Mark, bumping into her alone on High Street, refer to Nicky.

"If there's anything I can ever do," he said, "you only have to ask me."

"I'm fine, Mark. You got over loving me and I'll get over Nicky."

He colored, at a loss to know what to say, and regretting her sarcasm, she made amends.

"Time cures everything, Mark. You should know that."

"Not time alone. In my case it was Sheila. If you could meet someone else——— "

"I'm sure I will." She smiled. "I'm not quite decrepit yet!"

"Far from it. You're prettier than ever."

Mark must have given some thought to their conversation, for a week later he and Sheila insisted on taking her with
them to a dance at the local golf club.

Valerie had no shortage of partners and she made such a skilful pretense of enjoying herself that Mark and Sheila
repeated the invitation the following week to another dance. This made it quite clear to her that they saw themselves
as matchmakers, but knowing she was still too much in love with Nicky to consider anyone else, she refused to go
with them.

For a short while they left her alone, then another invitation came, this time to a dinner party, and including her
father. Realizing he would not go without her, she was forced to accept. How irritating well-meaning friends could
be! If only they would leave her alone to recover in her own way.

Listlessly she dressed herself on the night of the party, bravely deciding to wear the red chiffon, which had been one
of her first purchases from Jackie Burns. How astonished Nicky had been at her changed appearance. She crushed
the folds of material between her hands and stared across the room.

She was still no nearer forgetting him than she had been a month ago. Maybe if he had been an ordinary man, never
appearing in the news, she would have stood more chance, but she had merely to open a paper to see his face, or turn
on the radio to hear his name or voice. To cap it all, two of his songs were on the current hit parade and were
whistled down the street and played on every record program.

"Valerie!" her father called. "Are you ready?"

Valerie knew she could not face the evening ahead and, going into the hall, she peered over the banisters.

"Do you mind if I don't come?" she called. "I've got an awful headache."

Mr. Browne came halfway up the stairs and looked at her. "Would you like me to stay with you? I can easily give
Mark a ring."

"I'd rather be alone. I'll take a couple of aspirins and go to bed."

"Very well," he said. "But I think you're wrong."

"Wrong?"

"You know what I mean. You're not making an effort to forget Nicky and unless you do, you'll mope away the rest of your life."

"Give me time," she said raggedly.

"It isn't only time you need. It's a new attitude, a new life."

"I've been thinking about that. I thought of going abroad for a while."

"The farther the better?"

Her smile was bitter. "Somewhere where there are no newspapers and radios!"

"You can't block out memories, my dear. The best thing to do is to cover them over with new and better ones."

"I'll write that down and say it to myself daily!"

He nodded. "Won't you change your mind and come with me tonight?"

"I'd rather not."

"Mark will know you were making an excuse."

"Then perhaps he'll leave me alone!"

With a sigh her father departed, and Valerie took a couple of aspirins—her pretended headache having become a genuine throbbing at her temples—and sat in front of the living-room fire. The evening paper lay on a side table and she opened it. A picture of Nicky stared at her and she dropped the paper to the floor. She let it lie there for a moment and then the desire to see his picture was so strong that she picked it up and looked at it again.

How handsome he was! No wonder she could not forget him. And yet it was not just his looks that chained her to him. It was the personality she had glimpsed on occasion: the lonely child that still lay within the man; the brilliantly creative composer; the person who could write love ballads that expressed one's innermost feelings. She stared at the picture closely. Poor Nicky! A man who was afraid to love. Suddenly she remembered something her father had said a short while ago. "If you're afraid to love you might just as well be afraid of living." How true that was. Nicky had been so hurt as a child that he had shut himself away from all feeling. Success had increased his cynicism and his isolation, for he had known himself to be the focal point of millions of screaming girls who wanted an idol to worship. No wonder he had treated every woman as if she were Dawn Meadows! Most of them had behaved the same way.

Tears welled into her eyes and she put Nicky's photograph face down on the table. Then, determined to fight her depression, she switched on the television. A variety program was in progress and Valerie found her eyes closing. The aspirin had made her drowsy and it was not until the opening chords of Nicky's signature tune filtered into the room that she was startled into wakefulness and saw a close-up of Nicky himself. He looked more handsome than she remembered, thinner too, so that his eyebrows seemed thicker and his eyes larger. How intensely they glittered as he smiled at the audience.

"I am happy to be here with you again," he said softly, "and for my first number I'd like to sing a new song I have just composed. It's about love and it's dedicated to all lovers."
Nicky moved back and seated himself on a chromium stool. He had a guitar on his lap and she recognized it as the one he played at her aunt's. Melody filled the room and his voice rose pure and effortless.

The words of his song were simple: love suddenly found and suddenly lost; the search to find it again and the admission that when one did, one should never let one's other half go.

With a murmur of pain she reached out and turned down the sound. But even with no music throbbing in the background she could still hear Nicky singing, softer and nearer than before; and she swung around and saw him in the doorway.

"No!" she gasped. "You can't be here."

"I am," he said softly. "You're watching a prerecording."

She stood up and backed away. "How did you get in?"

"Your father gave me the key. I was coming up the path when he left the house. I've been wandering around outside trying to pluck up the courage to come in and see you."

"You've seen me now," she said. "So tell me what you want, and then go."

He ran his tongue over his lips: a nervous gesture that made him look younger and more unsure of himself.

"I'm leaving for Hollywood next week and I—I had to see you." He stepped closer to her and she moved behind the chair. His mouth tightened. "Don't worry. I won't touch you if you don't want me to."

He moved back into the center of the room and looked around as if he were lost. Valerie watched him, her heart troubled. Why did he have to speak to her personally? Why hadn't he telephoned her instead? Or was he after her cooperation again? It seemed logical to assume, and her anger wiped away her sympathy.

"If you and Bob have any more bright ideas about publicity," she said coldly, "I'm not interested."

"He doesn't know I'm here. At the moment we're barely on speaking terms."

"Why?"

"We had a row." Nicky ran his hands through his hair, disheveling it and not caring. "We were discussing you, as a matter of fact, and I found out he'd used my trip over here—when you came back because of your father's accident—to get me a load of publicity in the States."

"I told you that ages ago," she flared. "You can't pretend you've just discovered it."

"I just discovered that he thought it was the only reason I flew back to England with you."

"Wasn't it?" she taunted.

"No. That's what I've come here to tell you. If Bob believed it, he must have made you believe it too."

"I didn't need Bob to tell me the obvious."

"It may have been obvious to you," Nicky said heavily, "but it wasn't to me. I came with you because I wanted to comfort you. For the first time in my life I wanted to protect somebody, and I didn't give a damn about my recording contract or anything else."

She was puzzled—at a loss to know why it was so important to him to have her believe him.

"You're not short of admirers, Nicky. Why bother trying to have one more?"

"I don't give a damn for your admiration. But I don't want your disgust."
This was not the Nicky she knew, not the pop star who didn't care what others thought of him so long as his fans still applauded.

"My only motive in coming back to England that time," he repeated, "was to look after you and love you. I wanted to be with you: to share your grief; to be part of your life—the bad as well as the good."

Looking into his strained face it was impossible for Valerie to doubt him. She still could not understand his motive for coming here, but she had to believe what he was saying.

"I don't blame you for hating me," he went on. "I behaved like a first-class swine. I used you as I've always used people, and for the first time in my life it rebounded on me." He ran his hand through his hair. "You can't despise me more than I despise myself."

Realizing what it had cost him to come and humble himself before her, she moved away from the security of the chair and came to stand beside him.

"I'm sorry I misjudged you, Nicky."

"Only about my reason for flying back with you," he reminded her. "In all other respects, you were right."

She was not sure what else to say and she went on looking at him. He met her eyes briefly and turned away.

"When we were together in New York," he continued, "I wasn't pretending either. You meant something to me then, but I was scared to tell you. I knew I'd hurt you and I was going slowly."

"Don't say anymore." Frightened, she stepped away from him.

"Why not? I love you, Val. I never meant to fall in love with you, but I couldn't help myself."

"Nicky, don't. I believe your reason for coming back from New York with me, but I can't believe this."

"I'm not surprised." His voice was gruff. "What have I ever done for you to start trusting me? All through my career I've lived like a phony. Until you came into my life I didn't know the meaning of the words truth or love." He laughed mirthlessly. "I was an idol for the fans to worship, and like an idol, you brought me crashing down. You've broken me, Val. You've destroyed Nicky Barratt."

"Oh no!" she cried. "Don't say that.""You have," he persisted. "And I'm so happy I could shout it from the housetops. At last I'm feeling things with my heart. I'm no longer a zombie who only comes to life when he's on the stage or in front of a camera. I'm not afraid anymore that I'll be hurt by people, because even if I am, I'll have other compensations." He turned and saw her bewilderment. "I've learned that one can't go through life avoiding the knocks and blows. Pain is part of my joy; happiness is only valued when you've known sadness. All this may sound trite to you, but to me... well, it's a new discovery, and it's made me reevaluate my whole lifestyle."

Still hiding her emotion, she said: "Does that mean you're going to do things differently in your career?"

"In my career and in my personal life too. These last two weeks Bob and I have fought like two tigers, but he's finally seen that I mean what I say and he's agreed to stay with me on different terms. I'm not going to do any more big tours, and I'm cutting down my live performances to a week every six months. I've signed with a major Hollywood studio to make one film a year for the next ten years, and it'll bring me in so much money that I can afford to do nothing for the rest of the time. Which suits me—for it'll leave me plenty of time to compose the musical I've always hankered to do."

"I'm so pleased for you," she whispered, and could not go on. His nearness confused her and she fought against the desire to fling herself into his arms. "Would you like a drink?" she asked huskily.

"I only want you. You've heard everything I've said, Valerie. You can't pretend not to know what I'm hoping for."
"It still wouldn't work."

"I see." He sank on to the settee and rested his head in his hands. Never had she seen him look so defeated, and when he spoke his voice was slurred.

"I can't blame you for still saying no. Even when I was driving here I knew I was wasting my time. But I didn't care. I just wanted to tell you how I felt. I never meant to love you. I was afraid of you to begin with. That's why I fought against you so hard. It's why I went to Dawn after we'd spent that day on the boat."

"Please don't explain. It isn't necessary."

"Yes, it is. That afternoon when I made love to you—when we nearly…I didn't know what had hit me. I was so scared of falling in love that I had to reassure myself that I hadn't. So I went to Dawn. But that was the last time. Since then, there's been no one." His head was still bent and he was unaware of Valerie moving close to him. "From your point of view I'm not much of a catch. Even though I'm reorganizing my life, it still won't be a quiet one. Whatever I do there'll always be some nosy-parker news hawk or fan snooping around. You were right to turn me down. In my heart I knew you would."

"Yet you still came here?"

Nicky looked up, his eyes glittering with tears he made no attempt to hide. "I wanted you to know how I felt; how much I hate the man that I was."

"Don't hate him too much," she said. "He was the man I first fell in love with."

He stared into her face, trying to read what was in her mind. "What are you telling me, Val? Don't play with me. This isn't a game anymore. Don't lead me on in order to hurt me. I couldn't take it—not from you."

"I'd never do that. We've both hurt each other enough to last a lifetime." She knelt beside him so that her face was on a level with his. "When you came here tonight and said you loved me, I was frightened to believe you."

"And now?"

"I'm not frightened anymore. You thought I'd turn you down but it didn't stop you from coming here, and that showed me, far more than words could have done, how much you've changed. The old Nicky would have been too proud to have done such a thing."

"There's no such thing as pride between two people who love one another." He caught her shoulders. "Does that mean you'll marry me?"

"Try and stop me!"

For an answer he caught her closely. He did not attempt to kiss her and she was content to rest within the circle of his arms, deriving comfort from his nearness.

"It's funny," he said shakily, "but some emotions go too deep even for kisses."

It was so exactly what she was thinking that she could not help smiling. "Darling Nicky! You learn fast."

"Because you're a good teacher!" He put his hand under her chin and tilted her face so that he could look into her eyes. "I'll get a special licence tomorrow. I'm not going to the States without you."

She grinned. "Bob will need time to organize the publicity!"

Nicky said a rude word and kissed the tip of her nose. "We'll give him plenty of things to get publicity on in the future. But I'd like to keep our marriage a private affair between the two of us—and your father."

"Between the two of us," she echoed, and lifted her hands to pull his head down until their lips could meet. For a
second they were two people, then passion made them one as they clung together unashamedly, their breath mingling, their bodies touching.

"You're mine," Nicky murmured brokenly. "And I will never let you go."