

LEE
WILKINSON

Marriage on
the Agenda



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Серия «Mills & Boon Modern»

Аннотация

When Loris Bergman attended a party to celebrate the merger of her father's company with Cosby's, a huge American corporation, she couldn't shake off the feeling that one of the men attending was familiar to her. Jonathan Drummond insisted they were strangers! Despite his evasiveness about the role he played at Cosby's, a night spent with Jonathan convinced Loris that she loved him. But what, exactly, was on Jonathan's agenda? Marriage or revenge?

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“Will you dance with me?”

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Again she got that illusory feeling of having once known him, a haunting sense of recognition, without being able to place him.

Her breath came faster, and it took a moment or two to steady herself. “I’d love to dance with you,” she answered.

His hold light, but far from tentative, he steered her onto the dance floor. “I’m Jonathan Drummond.” He volunteered no further information.

The name was unfamiliar. Though she was almost convinced they hadn’t, she felt compelled to ask, “Have we ever met before?”

LEE WILKINSON lives with her husband in a three-hundred-year-old stone cottage in a Derbyshire village, which most winters gets cut off by snow. They both enjoy traveling and recently, joining forces with their daughter and son-in-law, spent a year going around the world “on a shoestring” while their son looked after Kelly, their much-loved German shepherd dog. Her hobbies are reading and gardening and holding impromptu barbecues for her long-suffering family and friends.

Marriage on the Agenda

Lee Wilkinson



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CHAPTER ONE

THE taxi skirted Hyde Park and dropped Loris Bergman outside the Landseer Hotel. Having paid the driver, she hurried inside and crossed the plush lobby to the Ladies' Cloakroom.

When she had shaken the raindrops from her hooded cloak she gave that, and the small weekend case she was carrying, to the attendant, before glancing quickly in the mirror to check her image.

It was a bad enough crime to be so late for Bergman Longton's St Valentine's party, without her appearance being found wanting.

A small oval face with a pure bone structure, a wide, passionate mouth and almond-shaped eyes the colour of pale sherry, looked back at her. To others, her beauty was startling, but to Loris, with her total lack of vanity, familiarity had made her looks commonplace.

Satisfied that her long black hair and wispy fringe were tidy, and she looked cool and collected, she headed for the chandelier-lit ballroom.

The party was in full swing, with music and laughter and conversation. Some of the guests were dancing to a good-sized band, others milling about or gathered, glass in hand, in little groups.

A fair-haired, slimly built man, just under six feet tall and

wearing impeccable evening dress, was standing alone in the background. His very stillness amongst the lively throng drew Loris's attention. She had a fleeting sense of familiarity, a feeling that a long time ago she might have known him.

A second look convinced her she was mistaken.

If she had ever met this man, with his look of maturity and quiet strength, his unmistakable air of self-assurance, she would have remembered.

His stance was easy, relaxed, back straight, feet a little apart. A slightly cynical expression on his good-looking face, he was watching the other guests.

She was wondering who he was, and what he was doing at the gathering, when his brilliant, heavy-lidded eyes met hers.

Suddenly meeting that cool, ironic regard had the same impact as walking into an invisible plate-glass window. A sense of shock made her stop in her tracks while her heart began to beat in slow, heavy thuds.

As she stood, momentarily held in thrall, her mother's voice said, 'So there you are, at last...'

Tearing her gaze away from the stranger's with an effort, Loris turned to the petite, dark-haired woman, whose still-beautiful face was marred by an irritable expression.

'We were beginning to wonder where on earth you'd got to. Your father's certainly not pleased.'

'I told you I had a six-thirty appointment and would no doubt be late,' Loris said patiently.

‘It’s utterly ridiculous on a Saturday night! And you didn’t say you’d be this late. The party’s more than half-over.’

Although her parents knew quite well that as an interior designer Loris frequently had to work unsociable hours, they always kicked up the same kind of fuss, treating her like a recalcitrant teenager rather than a confident, talented woman with a blossoming career.

‘Unfortunately Mrs Chedwyne who is a client I can’t afford to lose, wouldn’t be hurried, and when I did manage to get away I still had to go back to the flat to change.’

Refusing to let the subject drop, Isobel Bergman complained, ‘I don’t know why you don’t insist on people consulting you during normal business hours.’

Loris sighed. ‘It doesn’t work like that. I have to visit my clients’ homes at their convenience. Quite a number of them are out during the day. Some only have weekends or evenings free.’

‘Well, don’t be surprised if Mark’s furious. After all, it is a special party to celebrate the Cosby takeover, and it was your place to be by his side. He’s missed you.’

Spotting her fiancé on the dance floor entangled with a tall, vivacious blonde, Loris remarked tartly, ‘He doesn’t appear to be missing me at the moment.’

‘When you’re this late what can you expect? You should have been here to keep an eye on him. If you’re not careful some scheming little gold-digger will steal him from under your nose.’

Though Loris was well aware of Mark Longton’s tendency to

be attracted by a pretty face, the notion that she needed to ‘keep an eye’ on him wasn’t a particularly pleasant one.

‘Don’t forget Mark Longton’s quite a catch,’ Isobel persisted. ‘A handsome, sexy man, still in his thirties, who runs a company and has money, isn’t to be sneezed at.’

‘I’m not interested in his money,’ Loris said flatly.

‘Well, you ought to be. Your father’s turned sixty, and if I can’t get him to change his will when he dies your stepbrother will get the lot and you’ll be left out in the cold...’

Simon, extrovert and loaded with charm, had always held pride of place in Peter Bergman’s affections and, knowing what she did know, Loris hadn’t been at all surprised by her father’s decision. But well aware that it had been a bitter blow to Isobel to learn that her husband’s son from his first marriage was to inherit everything, Loris said soothingly, ‘I really don’t mind if Simon does get the lot. I have a career I enjoy and—’

‘It shouldn’t be necessary for you to work. Your father could easily afford to give you an allowance—’

‘I’m twenty-four, not fourteen.’

Ignoring her daughter’s protest, Isobel rushed on, ‘Seriously, I’d never have married him if I’d known he’d turn out to be such an old skinflint.’

It was a familiar complaint, and one that Loris had learned to studiously ignore.

‘He’s even talking about giving up the London flat and semi-retiring to Monkswood.’

‘A lot of people work from home these days, and it would make it a lot easier to run the estate.’

‘Well, I don’t want to be stuck in the country the whole week. I’d go mad. But your father only thinks of himself, never of me. Weekends are bad enough—’ Isobel continued to complain ‘—unless we’re having a house party... By the way, I hope you remembered to bring some things?’

Loris and Mark were joining the weekend house party at Monkswood, the Bergmans’ country estate which bordered on the village of Paddleham.

‘Yes, I remembered.’

As the dance ended and the floor cleared, both women looked for Mark’s tall, thickset figure, but he was nowhere to be seen.

‘There’s still plenty of food on the buffet if you want to eat?’ Isobel suggested.

Loris shook her head. ‘I had a sandwich before I went to keep my appointment.’

‘Well, I could do with something. This latest diet is much too severe...’

At forty-seven, Isobel waged a continuous, and mainly losing, battle against the extra pounds that middle-age had piled onto her once-slim figure.

‘And I’m convinced the pills they gave me with it are making my migraines worse,’ she grumbled, as she disappeared in the direction of the buffet.

A waiter approached with a tray of champagne and, accepting

a glass with a word of thanks, Loris sipped the well-chilled wine while her gaze travelled over the assembled company.

As she scanned the crowd, instead of Mark's heavy, slightly florid face, with its thick black brows and dark eyes, she found herself looking for a stranger's lean, tanned face, with clear-cut features and light, penetrating eyes.

A sudden fanfare called for the assembled company's attention, and Loris watched as her father, her fiancé, and a thin, balding man, went up onto the dais in front of the band. Sir Peter Bergman, stocky and tough-looking, with shrewd blue eyes and iron-grey hair, stepped forward and held up his hand for silence.

'Most of you already know that Bergman Longton and the American giant, Cosby, have been planning to amalgamate. I'm delighted to announce that that has now taken place, and William Grant—' he drew the thin, balding man forward '—one of Cosby's top executives, is here with us tonight to celebrate the event.'

There was a burst of applause.

'This merger will make us one of the largest and, we confidently expect, one of the most successful companies in our particular field. We have decided to rename the UK part of our combined companies BLC Electronics.' He raised his glass. 'May BLC go from strength to strength.'

There was more enthusiastic applause, and the toast was drunk.

As the three men left the dais they were momentarily

swallowed up by a surge of people wanting to shake their hands and offer congratulations.

When the excitement had died down and the crowd began to disperse, Peter Bergman and William Grant walked away together, talking earnestly.

Mark glanced towards where Loris was standing, striking in an aquamarine dress that clung to her slender figure. She smiled and moved in his direction, but his face was cold, and he turned away to join the woman he'd been dancing with earlier.

Stunned by the rebuff, Loris stopped in her tracks. Admittedly she was very late, but she had warned Mark in advance that she might be.

Still, she felt a certain amount of guilt, and if it hadn't been for the blonde, who was laughing up at him, she would have gone over and apologised.

But uncertain of his reaction—Mark could be very unforgiving when something displeased him—she hesitated, having no wish to be humiliated in front of the other woman.

As she stood wondering how to retrieve the situation, a special St Valentine's waltz was announced. '...at the conclusion of which, gentlemen, you may kiss your partner.'

Surely Mark would come to her now?

But without hesitation he offered his hand to the blonde.

Biting her lip, Loris was about to walk away, when a low, attractive voice, with just a trace of an American accent, asked, 'Will you dance with me?'

Turning, she found herself looking into a lean tanned face, with a straight nose, a cleft chin, and a mouth that was firm, yet sensitive. A very masculine mouth that sent tingles through her, a mouth she could only describe as beautiful.

Again she got that illusory feeling of having once known him, a haunting sense of recognition, without being able to place him.

His thickly lashed eyes, she saw at close quarters, were sea-green rather than the silvery-grey she had thought them to be. Their impact was just as devastating, making her pulses start to race and her breath come faster, so that it took a moment or two to steady herself.

Though part of her wanted to dance with this fascinating stranger, Loris was well aware that accepting his invitation would only serve to exacerbate things.

Despite the fact that Mark had a roving eye himself, since she'd agreed to marry him he'd proved to be both jealous and possessive, hating her to so much as look at any other male.

Bearing that in mind, she was seeking a polite way to refuse when, noting her hesitation, the man by her side asked sardonically, 'Scared that Longton won't approve?'

So he knew who they both were.

'Not at all,' Loris denied crisply. 'I...' She broke off as Mark and his partner circled past, close as Siamese twins.

Catching her companion's eyes, she saw the unspoken derision in their clear, green depths.

To hell with it! she thought with a spurt of anger. Why should

she refuse? Mark had chosen to dance with someone else, and what was sauce for the gander...

She knew by now that if anyone failed to stand up to him he simply walked all over them and, though she hated any kind of discord, she had no intention of being a door-mat when they were married.

'I'd love to dance with you,' she finished firmly.

He smiled at her, a smile that lit his eyes and made little creases at each corner of his mouth. His teeth were excellent, white and healthy and gleaming.

She judged him to be around thirty years old and, wondering why such a relatively young, attractive man appeared to be here alone, she moved into his arms.

His hold light, but far from tentative, he steered her smoothly onto the floor. He was a good dancer, and they danced well together, their bodies fitting.

Mark, heavily built and well over six feet tall, dwarfed her slight five feet four inch frame, but this man was about six inches taller than herself, and her high heels brought their eyes almost on a level.

Meeting those brilliant eyes made her strangely breathless and, needing to say something, she remarked, 'You're aware that I'm engaged to Mark, so you must know who I am?'

'I do indeed. You're Loris Bergman.'

Something about the way he spoke made her say coolly, 'As I don't know your name, you have the advantage of me.'

‘I’m Jonathan Drummond.’ He volunteered no further information.

The name was unfamiliar. Though she was almost convinced they hadn’t, she felt compelled to ask, ‘Have we ever met before?’

‘If we had, I would have remembered,’ he replied.

‘So how do you know me?’ she asked curiously.

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘Most of the people here, I imagine.’

He shook his head. ‘I’m sure they all know the lucky woman who has one of the big bosses for a father and the other for a future husband.’

‘You sound as if you disapprove?’

‘It seems like an eminently suitable arrangement to keep all the money and power in the same family.’

‘Money and power have nothing to do with it.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

‘Then why are you marrying Longton? Apart from the fact that he’s a divorcé and much too old for you, he’s not a particularly nice character.’

‘Being a divorcé isn’t a crime, and he’s only thirty-nine.’

‘I notice you haven’t defended his character.’

‘As that’s only your opinion, it didn’t seem necessary.’

‘Neither have you answered my question.’

‘We happen to love each other.’

At that moment Mark came into view. His partner’s arms were

round his neck, and he was saying something in her ear.

‘He has a strange way of showing it.’

‘I’m afraid he’s angry with me for being late.’

‘Has he any right to be?’

‘Some, I suppose,’ she answered honestly.

In response to Jonathan Drummond’s raised brow, she briefly explained the circumstances.

Coolly, he said, ‘As Longton was pre-warned, I don’t see any justification for him behaving like a spoilt child. Do you?’

Challenged, without thinking how it might sound, she spoke the truth. ‘Not really. That’s why I’m dancing with you.’

‘I see. Tit for tat. I guess it was too much to hope that you actually wanted to.’

As he finished speaking the dance ended, leaving Mark and his partner standing close by.

As couples began to kiss, Jonathan Drummond waited quietly, making no move.

Mark glanced in Loris’s direction and, seeing that she was watching him, bent to kiss the blonde, who responded with enthusiasm.

Vexed by such deliberate provocation, Loris slid her palms beneath the lapels of her companion’s dinner jacket and raised her face invitingly.

For a moment he stood perfectly still, then, taking her wrists, he lifted her hands away. ‘I don’t care to be used,’ he said coldly.

‘I-I’m sorry, she stammered, feeling cheap and foolish. ‘I didn’t

mean—’

‘Oh, I think you did. Goodnight, Miss Bergman.’

As she stood unhappily and watched him walk away, Isobel appeared by her side. ‘Your father and I are leaving now.’

Loris pulled herself together and, knowing how her mother loved social occasions, asked, ‘I thought the party went on until twelve?’

‘It does, but it’s almost eleven now, and with such heavy rain your father thought we should get started. Most of our guests came to Monkswood last night and are settled in, but one couple weren’t due to arrive until this evening.’

Fretfully, she added, ‘It’s all a bit of a mess. If I’d realised earlier that this company party coincided with our house party I’d have done something about it. But by the time I discovered the muddle over dates it was too late and I—’

‘Is Simon there?’ Loris tried to stop the flow.

‘No, he’s staying in Oxford with some friends. I presume you’ll be driving down with Mark as soon as the party’s over?’

‘I suppose so,’ Loris said uncertainly.

‘You mean he’s still with that blonde creature? Yes, I see he is. She’s probably after his money... Well, you’ve only got yourself to blame. All in all you’ve managed to make a real mess of the evening.’

‘It’s not entirely my fault,’ Loris protested. ‘If Mark had been a little more understanding...’

‘When have men ever been understanding?’

'I'm sure some are.'

'Well, not the macho ones like Mark and your father.' Obviously wondering if she'd said too much, Isobel added hastily, 'Though who wants to be married to a wimp?'

'Not me.' For the first time that night, Loris smiled.

Peter Bergman thrust his way through the crowd and addressed his wife. 'About ready?'

'I only have to get my coat.'

Giving his daughter a look of extreme displeasure, he asked brusquely, 'I suppose you realise you've spoilt the entire evening? Have you any idea just how angry and disappointed Mark is?'

'He's made it quite plain,' she answered wearily.

'Then it's up to you to apologise. And as soon as possible.'

'Do,' Isobel urged as she prepared to follow her husband. 'Otherwise they'll both sulk for the rest of the weekend and it'll be murder.'

Loris was surprised by her mother's caustic observation. Though Isobel frequently criticised her husband, she had never been known to admit to even the slightest imperfection in her future son-in-law.

'You may well be right,' Loris admitted as she kissed the proffered cheek.

'I expect we'll be in bed before you get to Monkswood, so I'll see you in the morning. By the way, you and Mark have your usual rooms.' Isobel hurried away.

Knowing that the only possible chance of saving what was left

of the weekend would be to get her apology over as quickly as possible, Loris began to look for her fiancé.

She finally spotted him standing, tall, dark, and powerful-looking, apparently bidding goodnight to some people who were leaving early.

Though he was still what most people would have called ‘a fine figure of a man’, she noted, with almost a feeling of betrayal, that his black, crinkly hair was showing signs of grey, his jawline had lost its firmness, and he had the beginnings of a paunch.

Relieved to find the blonde was nowhere in sight, she hurried over, and said quickly, ‘Mark, I’m terribly sorry I was so late. I know you have every right to be angry with me, but please don’t let it spoil the weekend.’

His brown eyes showing no signs of forgiveness, he snapped, ‘The party’s almost over. Isn’t it a bit late for apologies?’

‘I would have told you I was sorry straight away if you’d been alone.’

‘Pamela’s a beautiful woman, don’t you think?’

When Loris said nothing, knowing he was just rubbing it in, he added, ‘She comes from the States. Her father is Alan Gresham, the American newspaper magnate, which makes her heir to the Gresham millions.’

‘How nice.’

So her mother was wrong. It wasn’t Mark’s money the blonde was after.

‘She’s made it quite obvious she fancies me.’

Loris's lips tightened in distaste. 'Don't you find her just a bit blatant?'

'She certainly knows her way around,' he said admiringly. 'And she's not the sort to say no, which makes a nice change.'

So it wasn't just her late arrival he was punishing her for. Her refusal to go to bed with him was a good part of it.

In the three months they had been engaged Mark had been fairly pressing, and several times, deciding she was being stupid in holding back, she had almost given in.

He was a handsome, virile man, and she had little doubt that he would make a good lover. Yet each time when it came to the crunch, perhaps still inhibited by the past, she had changed her mind.

Understandably, this had enraged Mark, who had sulked for days. He would be perfectly normal with everyone else, but only address her when he absolutely had to, and then be brief and glacial.

Reading the signs, Isobel had once said seriously, 'I know sleeping together is almost the norm these days, but I think you're right to hold back until the wedding ring's on your finger.'

It was the first time her mother had ever broached the question of sex and, wondering if she had somehow guessed what had happened with Nigel, Loris had asked, 'Why do you say that?'

'Because Mark's the sort of man who, when he's got what he wants, might well lose interest and start to look elsewhere...'

Like Nigel.

‘Of course once you’re his wife it won’t matter so much. After one divorce, I imagine he’ll be fairly discreet.’

Profoundly disturbed by what her mother was suggesting, Loris had said, ‘You sound as if you think he’ll stray.’

‘Don’t most men? And I can’t imagine a man like Mark being satisfied with one woman.’

Seeing her daughter’s expression, Isobel had added, ‘After all, what does it matter? You’ll have money and position, a good lifestyle. Mark seems generous enough. Unlike your father.’

‘I don’t happen to want that kind of marriage,’ Loris had said quietly.

‘Well, of course I could be totally wrong.’ Isobel had hastily backed off. ‘Mark is getting to the age where he might be ready to settle for the faithful husband bit...’

Becoming aware that Mark was waiting for a response to something she hadn’t heard, Loris said, ‘Sorry?’

‘I merely remarked that if you’re jealous of Pamela, you know what to do about it.’

‘But I’m not jealous,’ Loris denied calmly.

Looking distinctly put out, Mark asked, ‘Then why did you rope in that wimp to dance with you?’

‘I didn’t “rope him in”. He asked me.’ Remembering Jonathan Drummond’s quiet self-assurance, his firm refusal to be used, she said, ‘And I certainly wouldn’t describe him as a wimp.’

Eyes narrowing, Mark queried, ‘Had you met him before?’

‘No.’

‘Did he know who you were?’

‘Yes.’ Remembering his comments about Mark, she added, ‘I gather you and he know each other.’

Mark looked down his nose. ‘I’d hardly say know. I’ve seen him knocking around the offices.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Just some Johnny-come-lately. He’s over from the States with the Cosby crowd.’

Of course. She recalled that his attractive voice had had a slight American accent.

‘What does he do exactly?’

‘No idea,’ Mark said dismissively. ‘He’s sat in on most of the meetings, but I gather he’s there in some minor capacity. Secretary or PA to one of the executives, or something of the sort. Why do you want to know?’

Unwisely, she admitted, ‘I found him interesting.’

Looking at her as if she’d lost her senses, Mark echoed, ‘Interesting?’

‘He seemed unusually cool and self-possessed. Very much his own man.’

Mark snorted. ‘Though he had the infernal cheek to ask you to dance, I noticed he didn’t have the nerve to kiss you.’

‘I don’t think it was lack of nerve.’

‘Then he probably remembered his place.’

‘Remembered his place?’

‘Well, he’s definitely not in our league.’

‘I wasn’t aware we had a league.’ Her voice was as brittle as ice.

Sounding human for the first time, Mark said wryly, ‘I thought you came over to apologise, not pick a quarrel.’

‘I did. I’m sorry, Mark. Let’s not talk about Jonathan Drummond.’

‘Drummond, that’s his name. I’ll keep an eye on him from now on.’

‘What do you mean by “keep an eye on him”?’

‘Just that. It strikes me he could get too big for his boots.’

Well aware that Mark could be quite petty if he took a dislike to anyone, Loris wished she’d said nothing about Jonathan Drummond.

Wanting to change the subject, she asked lightly, ‘So, now I’ve apologised for being late, are we friends again?’

Ignoring the question, he went off at a tangent. ‘You do realise that when we’re married you’re going to have to give up this ridiculous job. I refuse to have my wife working all hours.’

‘I won’t be working all hours.’

‘You are at the moment.’

‘Only because I have to pay an exorbitant rent for my flat.’

‘You could have gone on living at home.’

‘I didn’t want to.’ Her desire to be independent had made her move as soon as she was able to support herself.

She made an effort to placate him. ‘Once we’re married the financial pressure will ease and I’ll be able to choose just a few special clients.’

‘When we’re married you won’t need any clients.’

‘But I want to work.’

‘I flatly refuse to let any wife of mine go about telling other people how to decorate their homes. It reflects badly on me. You must see that.’

‘But what will I do all day?’

‘Whatever it is that other rich men’s wives do.’

Loris, who was about to argue, thought better of it. ‘Well, I’m sure we don’t need to discuss it just at the moment.’

‘No, there are more important things to sort out.’ He put an arm around her waist.

‘Such as what?’

Bending his head, he said in her ear, ‘I’ve had more than enough of your stalling. I want you to sleep with me tonight.’

‘But we’re at Monkswood.’

‘All the rooms have a double bed. Either you come to me, or let me come to you.’

‘No. I couldn’t. Not in my parents’ house.’

‘Don’t be an idiot, Loris. They need never know if you don’t want them to. And even if we shared a room openly I know your father wouldn’t mind. After all, we are going to be married. Oh, come on! You’re living in the twenty-first century, not Victorian times.’

‘Yes, I know, but I still don’t feel comfortable about it.’

‘Then come back to my flat with me now, and we’ll go on to Monkswood afterwards.’

About to make the excuse that she wasn't in the right mood, she hesitated. Perhaps it was time she cut herself free from the past.

With today's sexual freedom there was little real justification for holding back, and Mark was clearly getting to the end of his patience.

She had opened her mouth to agree when he muttered angrily, 'Look, Loris, I'm warning you. This time I don't intend to take no for an answer.'

Hating to be pressured in this way, she felt her temper flare, and she snapped, 'I'm afraid you'll have to.'

Perhaps if he'd used his not inconsiderable charm, he might have succeeded in talking her round, but, in a mood for confrontation rather than conciliation, he threw down the gauntlet. 'Damn it, if you won't come back to my flat with me, I know someone who will.'

'I suppose you mean Pamela?'

His smile was an unpleasant combination of smugness and threat. 'She'll come like a shot, and I might just ask her.'

'Why don't you?' Loris said coldly, and, chin held high, stalked away.

Going to the Ladies' Cloakroom, she sat on one of the pink velvet chairs, staring blindly into the gilt-edged mirror while a trickle of women began to collect their coats.

The St Valentine's party was almost over, and as far as she was concerned the whole thing had been a total disaster. Had she

known what trouble her being late would cause she would have cancelled her appointment, even if it had meant losing a client.

As it was, she'd displeased her father, made Jonathan Drummond think badly of her and, on this special night for lovers, thoroughly upset Mark.

Thinking of the promising moment that had suddenly metamorphosed into an unpleasant flare-up, she gave a deep sigh. Of course he wouldn't do as he'd threatened. The only reason he'd flaunted his conquest of the blonde had been to add weight to his demands, and his ultimatum had been caused by a build-up of anger that had needed to find an outlet.

But it was ironic to think that if it hadn't been for him jumping in too soon they would have been on their way to his flat by now. Perhaps, rather than reacting in the way she had, it would have been better if she'd controlled her temper and agreed to go, regardless.

Once they were lovers the tension between them would ease. They could go back to being happy and enjoying each other's company, rather than Mark, frustrated and resentful, quite often spoiling things by sulking.

She sighed deeply.

But it wasn't too late. She could always find him and apologise yet again. Tell him she'd changed her mind, she would go with him.

Joining a short queue, Loris collected her belongings. Then, slipping her evening bag into one of the deep pockets of her

cloak, she put the cloak over her arm and, case in hand, made her way into the crowded foyer.

She was scanning the throng for Mark when she noticed the blonde. Wearing an expensive-looking fur coat, Pamela was heading for the exit. As she reached it Mark, who had obviously been waiting for her, stepped into view. An arm around her waist, he escorted her through the heavy glass doors.

For a second or two Loris was shocked into stillness, then, a combination of anger and dismay making her heart beat faster, she pushed her way outside.

It was still raining hard, and she was just in time to see, through the downpour, Mark's silver Mercedes spray water from beneath its wheels as it pulled away from the entrance.

A gusty wind was driving icy rain beneath the hotel's brown and gold canopy but, oblivious to the cold and wet, she stood as if stunned, staring after the car.

'Suppose you put this on before you get saturated?'

Taking her cloak, Jonathan Drummond placed it around her shoulders and pulled the big, loose hood over her dark hair.

He himself was bare-headed, wearing only a short car-coat with the collar turned up.

'Let me have this.' He relieved her of the case.

'Thank you,' she mumbled. Then, unencumbered, began to walk towards a line of waiting taxis drawn up on the forecourt.

Reading her intention, he stopped her. 'I'm afraid you'll find they're all prebooked.'

‘Oh,’ she said blankly.

Putting his free hand beneath her elbow, he urged her towards a modest white Ford saloon. ‘Jump in and I’ll drive you home.’

CHAPTER TWO

STILL feeling stunned, Loris found herself being helped into the passenger seat. Her case was tossed in the back, and a moment later Jonathan Drummond slid in beside her.

She had made no move to fasten her seat belt, and he leaned over and fastened it for her. His fair hair was darkened by the wet and, feeling curiously detached, she watched a drop of water trickle down his lean cheek.

As they joined a queue of cars and taxis that were leaving the hotel forecourt and slowly filtering into the stream of late-night traffic, he said, 'You live in Chelsea, I believe?'

Loris pushed back her hood and, making an effort to come to grips with the situation, answered, 'That's right. But I wasn't intending to go to my flat.'

'Whose flat were you intending to go to?'

She bit her lip, and stayed silent.

Slanting her a glance, he murmured, 'I see. But you were unexpectedly...shall we say...replaced?'

So he'd seen Mark and the blonde driving away.

Gathering together the tatters of her pride, Loris informed him haughtily, 'I was intending to go down to my parents' house.'

'At Paddleham?'

Wondering how he knew so much, she answered, 'Yes.'

'So Longton was supposed to be going too?'

He was too quick by half. Sounding suitably amazed, she asked, ‘How on earth did you deduce that, Holmes?’

Grinning, he answered, ‘Elementary, my dear Watson. You didn’t go with your parents, you don’t have a car, and you hadn’t ordered a taxi. Which means you were expecting your fiancé to drive you down.’

Then, sounding as though he cared, ‘No wonder you looked shattered, being treated so shabbily.’

‘It was partly my own fault,’ she admitted.

‘All the same, it must hurt like hell.’

She said, ‘I’m more angry than hurt.’ And discovered it was the truth.

‘Stay that way. Anger is easier to cope with.’

As they neared the head of the queue, he asked, ‘So which is it to be? Chelsea, or Paddleham?’

‘I can’t ask you to drive me all the way to Paddleham,’ she demurred.

‘I’ll be happy to, if that’s where you want to go?’

‘It isn’t really,’ she confessed, dismayed by the thought of having to try and explain Mark’s absence. ‘But I can’t go back to my flat.’

‘Gee that’s tough, doll.’ Sounding like a gangster in a second-rate movie, he asked out of the corner of his mouth, ‘So what are the Mob after you for?’

She laughed in spite of herself.

‘It’s not quite that bad. I agreed to let an old college friend of

mine have my flat for tonight and tomorrow night.'

'And there's only one bedroom?'

'Worse. Judy and Paul are on their honeymoon... Monday, they're flying to Oz to go backpacking.'

'Hmm... Well, if you can't go back to your flat and you don't want to go to Paddleham—' he gave her a villainous leer '—what about my place?'

Loris was about to curtly refuse, when she realised he was pulling her leg.

Lightly, she said, 'I'm afraid I'm superstitious about going anywhere new on a wet Saturday.'

'Pity.'

'But thanks all the same.'

'Think nothing of it. We aim to please. So what's it to be?'

Briefly she considered asking him to take her to a hotel, then dismissed the idea. She could well do without the expense. In any case, by breakfast-time next day her parents would require some kind of explanation. Though she dreaded the prospect, her practical streak insisted that it would make sense to be there in person to make it.

Coming to a decision, she said, 'If you really don't mind, I think I'd better go to Paddleham.'

'Paddleham it is.'

A moment or two later they had joined the traffic stream and were heading out of town through gleaming, rain-lashed streets.

Worrying her bottom lip, she wondered how she was going to

explain away Mark's absence.

Of course she could simply tell her parents the truth. But if she did she knew it would be her they would be blaming, saying she'd brought it on herself.

Which in a way she had. If she hadn't been late for the party in the first place. Though her lateness, she recognised, had only been the catalyst. None of this would have happened if she'd agreed to sleep with Mark when he'd first pressed her to.

But, even after six years, the remembrance of the shame and humiliation she had suffered over Nigel was still a powerful deterrent.

She had been in her first year at art school when she had met him. The son of Sir Denzyl Roberts, one of her father's wealthy friends, Nigel had been five years older, and light years ahead of her in experience. Expecting her to be like most of the women he had known, he had been surprised and intrigued to find she was supremely innocent.

On her part it had never been a conscious decision to remain a virgin. It had just happened. Since her early teens her unusual beauty had made her a target for every male aged between fifteen and fifty. But, naturally fastidious, she had kept them at bay, disliking their one-track minds and fly-paper hands. Waiting for someone special. Someone she could love.

There had been one boy, different from the rest, a fleeting attraction that might have developed into something deeper if, before she could get to know him, he hadn't vanished from the

scene.

At the same time she had met Nigel. Impressed by his looks and maturity, and perhaps falling in love with love, she had fondly imagined he was that someone special.

Even so, almost out of force of habit, she had held him off until, rapidly losing patience, he had proposed to her.

Though she had still been very young, the match, from her parents' point of view, had been an advantageous one and, highly delighted, they had encouraged the engagement.

Once the ring was on her finger, Nigel had redoubled his efforts to get her into bed. Certain she loved him, and happy in the knowledge that they were going to be married, she had given in.

Loris had found their lovemaking disappointing, getting little or nothing from it. She had consoled herself with the thought that it was bound to get better when they were used to each other.

It hadn't.

Blaming herself, her inexperience, she had said nothing, merely kept on trying to please him.

They had been sleeping together for almost three months when, turning up unexpectedly at his flat one evening, intending to surprise him, she had found him with another woman.

Though hurt and bewildered, she had been ready to forgive him, until the girl in his bed had taunted her with the fact that this was no one-off, but was, and had been for some time, a regular arrangement for the nights Loris wasn't there.

‘He needs a woman who’s got some life in her, who knows how to please a man. Not some frigid statue who just lies there and—’

‘That’s enough!’ Nigel had silenced her at that point.

But it had been too late. As far as Loris was concerned, the damage had been done. Nigel had told this brazen slut of a girl intimate details about something she had considered essentially private and sacrosanct.

Badly humiliated, and furious at the way he had treated her, she had thrown his ring at him and walked out.

When her father and mother had learnt of the broken engagement, deploring the fact that she was ‘losing her chance to marry well’, they had tried to get her to change her mind. But, while refusing to tell them the reason for the break-up, she had made it clear that it was final.

Judy, her friend and room-mate at college, was the only one in whom she had confided her hurt, but down-to-earth as usual, Judy had pulled no punches. ‘Think about it. Would you really want to marry a two-timing rat like that?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Then forget him. He’s not worth a second thought.’

‘I just wish I hadn’t been such a fool.’

‘Well, we all make mistakes. It isn’t the end of the world.’

It had only felt like it.

‘I thought he loved me,’ Loris had said sadly. ‘But he was only using me.’

‘Surely you got something out of it?’

Loris had shaken her head wordlessly.

Judy had said a rude word. 'Still, it'll be different next time, you'll see.'

But, feeling degraded by the experience, Loris had vowed there would be no next time. Even so, it had taken her a long while to regain her self-respect...

Flashing lights suddenly reflected in a myriad raindrops, and the urgent sound of a siren bearing down on them brought Loris back to the present with a start.

The road they were on was narrow, and there was on-coming traffic. Pulling half-onto the wet, deserted pavement, Jonathan made room, and a second later the ambulance went racing past on its errand of mercy.

Impressed by his presence of mind, she glanced at him. His face was calm, unperturbed.

Intercepting her glance, he gave her a sidelong smile that quickened her pulse-rate and made her feel suddenly breathless.

A moment later they had regained the road and were continuing their journey. By now they were on the outskirts of town, and the downpour was continuing unabated. Rain beat against the windscreen and even at their fastest speed the wipers had a job to keep it clear.

As they reached a crossroads and turned right it occurred to Loris, belatedly, that she had given him no directions and he had asked for none.

Wondering how, being from the States, he knew the way, she

queried, 'Are you familiar with this part of the world?'

'I was born and brought up quite near Paddleham.'

'Really? Then your parents were English?'

'My father, a hard-working GP, was English while my mother, who was an airline stewardess until she married, came from Albany.'

'The capital of New York State?'

'That's right. Her parents owned a small business there.'

To Loris, the details of his modest background seemed at odds with his cultured voice.

'Have you lived in the US long?' she asked, wanting to know more about him.

'For several years now.'

She thought he was going to leave it at that, when he added, 'After my father died my mother got homesick for her birthplace and went back to Albany.'

'Do you have any brothers or sisters?'

'One sister. When she left university she married the son of a local landowner. But there was nothing to keep me here, so I spent some time travelling, trying my hand at various jobs, before I made up my mind to settle in the States.'

His answers had been easy enough, but when he volunteered no further information, afraid of sounding nosy, she relapsed into silence.

Once the suburbs had been left behind them, from being unpleasant, the journey became positively hazardous. The

country roads were dark and muddy, littered with snapped-off branches and storm debris.

In the bright tunnel made by their headlights Loris could see that a lot of the verges were partially flooded, and though Jonathan drove with care their nearside wheels almost constantly threw up a wave of water.

Just before they reached their destination a swollen stream that had overflowed its banks, and covered the low-lying road to what he estimated was an unnavigable depth, made a detour necessary. Feeling guilty at having dragged him so far on such a terrible night, Loris was seriously wishing she had plumped for a hotel.

‘I’m sorry about all this,’ she apologised.

Sounding quite unconcerned, he said, ‘You mean the conditions? Don’t worry—I’ve driven in a great deal worse.’

A few more minutes and they were passing through the dark and sleeping village of Paddleham. An occasional streetlamp lit up the driving rain, and strung high across the roadway a saturated banner announcing a St Valentine’s dance at the village hall flapped dementedly in the wind.

The Yew Tree came into sight, its inn sign swinging on the supporting chains. ‘We’re almost there,’ Loris said, making no attempt to hide her relief. ‘Just past the church there’s a turning off to the left, then about half a mile down the lane, also on the left, you’ll see the entrance to Monkswood. The gates should be open.’

The black and gold wrought-iron gates were open wide, and

the Tarmacked drive was well-lit. Several sleek cars were parked on the paved apron in front of the house.

Jonathan drew up beneath the ornate lantern that hung over the porticoed entrance and, leaving the engine running, came round to help Loris out.

She couldn't fail to notice that, parked between a Porsche and a Mercedes, the ordinary little car looked out of place.

Key in hand, she had opened the door by the time he had retrieved her case. A chandelier in the hall, and one at the top of the grand staircase, had been left on, but the rest of the house was dark and still.

'I can't thank you enough for bringing me,' she said, as he handed over her case.

'It was my pleasure.' Briskly, he added, 'Well, everyone seems to be in bed, so I'll say goodnight and let you join them.'

As though her subconscious had already decided, she found herself saying, 'Please, won't you stay? I'd hate to think of you having to drive all the way back to town on a night like this.'

'I wouldn't want to put you to so much trouble.'

'It's the very least I can do. And it really is no trouble. Do stay. You can have Mark's room.'

Though he never moved a muscle, Loris sensed his surprise. Obviously he'd presumed that she and Mark shared a room.

'In that case I'll be happy to.'

Crossing to the car, he switched off the engine and doused the lights before joining her in the hall and relieving her of her

case once more.

When she had closed the door behind him, and shot the heavy bolts, she turned and led the way up the richly carpeted stairs and through a decorative archway to the right.

‘This is my room.’ Taking her case from him, she put it inside before crossing the wide corridor to open a door opposite. ‘And this is Mark’s.’

Switching on the lights, she led the way into a comfortably furnished bedroom decorated in masculine colours of blue and grey.

‘He doesn’t leave clothes here, so I’m afraid I can’t offer you any pyjamas.’

‘That’s all right.’ Jonathan smiled. ‘I don’t use them.’

Feeling her colour rise, she said hastily, ‘But you should find a new toothbrush and everything else you need in the bathroom cabinet.’

‘Thank you.’

A thought struck her, and she added regretfully, ‘Except a shaver, that is. I’m sorry.’

He shrugged. ‘Don’t worry. Though I can’t see myself with a beard, in an emergency I have been known to wear designer stubble.’

‘Well, goodnight.’

‘Goodnight, Loris,’ he said gravely.

Feeling curiously restless and unsettled, she went back to her own room and was about to prepare for bed when she thought

of her stepbrother.

Though Monkswood was virtually Simon's second home, he wasn't going to be here this weekend. Consequently, in his bathroom, there would almost certainly be a razor that their last-minute guest could borrow.

Without further ado she hastened barefoot along the darkened corridor to Simon's room and went in quietly. Sure enough, on the bathroom shelf was an electric razor. If Jonathan Drummond hadn't already gone to bed, she could give it to him now, ready for the morning.

As she reached his room she saw through the multicoloured fanlight above the door that his light was still on. Bearing in mind that not too far away people were sleeping, she tapped softly. When there was no answer, she tried again. Still no answer.

Perhaps he was in the bathroom?

She opened the door a crack, and could just make out the sound of the shower running. Deciding to leave the razor where he couldn't fail to notice it, she slipped inside and tiptoed across the room to put it on the bedside cabinet.

Turning back to the door, she gave a half-stifled gasp. Just emerging from the bathroom, Jonathan was in the act of pulling on a short white towelling robe. His hair was wet and ruffled, and drops of water still clung to the fine golden fuzz on his legs.

Without undue haste or self-consciousness, he adjusted the robe and fastened the belt.

Thrown by how irresistibly sexy he looked, and feeling a

sudden potent attraction, she stammered, ‘I—I did knock, but you must have been in the shower. I’ve brought you Simon’s razor. He won’t be wanting it this weekend.’

A well-marked brow rose. ‘Simon?’

‘My stepbrother.’

‘Ah, yes...’

Embarrassed to realise she was still standing goggling at him like a fool, Loris prepared to make her escape. Only to find that, somehow, Jonathan was between her and the door.

‘I’ll say goodnight again.’ She was aware that she sounded breathless.

He took her hand, while green eyes smiled into gold.

Wits scattered, she stood gazing back at him like someone mesmerised, before making an effort to free her hand.

When he failed to release it, she said huskily, ‘I must go.’

‘Must you?’

Without realising how provocative it looked, she used the tip of her tongue to moisten lips gone suddenly dry.

Using the hand he was holding to draw her closer, he said softly, ‘This time I think I’ll take you up on the invitation.’

His free hand slid under the fall of dark silky hair to cup the back of her head, and a second later his mouth was covering hers.

Loris found his light kiss both pleasurable and exciting. But though it sent a tingle right down to her toes there was nothing alarming about it, nothing to warn her that she was in any danger.

While part of her mind pointed out that she shouldn’t be

letting this happen, another part answered that, as kisses went, it was relatively innocent.

She wasn't caught up, wasn't involved... She could walk away whenever she pleased.

But she hadn't reckoned on the seductive sweetness that, almost without her realising it, made her want the kiss to go on, made her want to kiss him back.

As her lips parted, his tongue-tip stroked along the velvety-smooth inner skin, making her quiver, before he deepened the kiss.

Mark's kisses were ardent, hot-blooded, sometimes bruising in their intensity. They totally lacked the finesse, the subtlety and imagination of this man's lovemaking.

He explored her mouth with a kind of delicate enjoyment that sent little shudders running through her, while, almost unnoticed, his free hand traced her slender curves.

When it found the soft swell of her breast and his thumb brushed coaxingly over the nipple, she knew it was time to call a halt.

But the sensations that the thistledown-touch was arousing were so exquisite that every bone in her body seemed to melt, and an awakening hunger that refused to be stilled cried out for more.

Responding to that hunger, his lovemaking gradually became more intense as he added a new and disturbing dimension.

Passion.

But it wasn't a tempestuous, uncontrolled passion that might

have swamped any response, or served to scare her. This was a leashed passion that lured her onwards, that enticed and invited an answering passion, until suddenly she was lost. Mindless. Carried away. Caught and held in a web of sensual delight...

Loris stirred and surfaced slowly from a deep and contented sleep, to find grey morning light was filtering into the room.

Though her mind was still enshrouded in a kind of golden haze, she was dimly aware that her body felt relaxed and satisfied.

She was stretching luxuriously when one of her feet brushed against a man's hair-roughened leg.

Shock hit her, and she stiffened as the sharp, cold wind of memory blew in, dispersing the haze.

Oh, dear heaven, what had she done?

After putting off her own fiancé for several months she had gone to bed with a virtual stranger.

She only just stopped herself groaning aloud.

Lying unnaturally still, afraid to move a finger, she listened to Jonathan Drummond's quiet, even breathing.

Satisfied that he wasn't yet awake, she turned her head slowly to look at him.

He was lying facing her, so close that they were almost touching. His tanned skin was clear and healthy, his breath sweet. There were grooves each side of his mouth, and little laughter-lines radiated from the corners of his eyes. Thick, gold-tipped lashes lay like a fan on his high cheekbones.

It was the face she remembered from the previous night, yet

not the same.

The mature self-assurance and the somewhat disturbing irony were gone from it. With his tousled hair and his confident mouth relaxed in sleep he looked endearingly boyish, in spite of the morning stubble adorning his chin.

But there had been nothing remotely boyish about him last night. His lovemaking had proved him to be a skilful and experienced man.

Heat ran through her as she remembered all the things he had made her feel, and her own unexpectedly passionate response. After the fiasco with Nigel, she had started to wonder uneasily if she might be frigid. That had been one of the reasons she had remained celibate for so long. She had been afraid to start another relationship in case the same thing happened.

But last night had proved that she could be warm and responsive and far from frigid. The fault hadn't been hers.

Nigel, she knew now, had been a selfish, uncaring, inept lover who, as well as mangling her self-respect, had almost destroyed her faith in herself as a woman.

Jonathan's skill and generosity, his imaginative lovemaking, had triggered a response that had shaken her to the core. For the first time in her life she had experienced all the joy and delight she had only ever dreamt about.

If it had been Mark she had spent the night with, she would be on top of the world.

Only it hadn't been Mark.

Rather than her own fiancé, it had been a man she had only just met. A man who would no doubt consider her easy and, in the cold light of day, feel nothing but contempt for her.

Gathering her wits, and desperate to get away before he awoke, Loris turned carefully onto her side. Her back to him, she was about to ease herself towards the edge of the bed when she felt him stir.

His arm came around her, and with a sleepy murmur of contentment he moved his warm palm to cup her breast.

Like some terrified animal, she froze into utter stillness, her heart pounding. She could feel the heat from his body, and his light breath stirring her hair.

After a moment or two his breathing returned to the evenness of sleep, the arm across her grew heavier, and she felt his hand relax its hold.

Taking a deep breath, she moved cautiously onto her back. Slowly, and with the greatest care, she eased herself from beneath the surprisingly muscular arm and slipped out of bed.

Though on one level she had known she was bare, the sight of her nakedness in the full-length mirror made her cringe. She averted her eyes.

The sooner she had put something on and was out of here the better.

Her last night's clothes were lying in an abandoned heap, one silk stocking trailing seductively.

She was reaching for her undies when a movement in the

corridor outside brought her heart into her mouth. People were up and stirring, making their way down for breakfast.

Suppose one of the guests saw her creeping from room to room, still wearing what was obviously a party dress?

The towelling robe Jonathan had worn the previous night was tossed over a chair. Snatching it up, she pulled it on and fastened the belt. A quick glance at the bed, meant to reassure herself that he was still fast asleep, gave her a fresh shock. His green eyes brilliant, he was lying quietly watching her.

Gathering up her belongings, she fled without a word. Her timing couldn't have been worse. Just outside the door she ran slap into her father.

'So you did make it.' He didn't sound particularly pleased. 'I thought you might have changed your mind about coming. Our journey here was bad enough, and conditions were deteriorating fast.'

If only she had known how things were going to turn out, Loris thought vainly, she could have used the weather as an excuse for not being there...

Eyeing the tell-tale clothes she was clutching, her father added drily, 'Mark having a lie-in?'

She was saved from having to answer by a female voice cooing, 'Oh, good morning, Sir Peter.'

A red-haired overdressed woman she had never seen before was heading towards them.

Always a ladies' man, her father assumed an expression of

charm. ‘Good morning, Mrs Delacost. So sorry we weren’t here to welcome you last night.’

‘That’s quite all right, Sir Peter. We didn’t get back from Monte Carlo until quite late, and your wife did explain about the company’s party...’

As she spoke, the redhead glanced curiously in Loris’s direction.

Noting that look, Peter said without warmth, ‘This is my daughter, Loris.’

Seeing her chance, Loris murmured a hasty, ‘Good morning,’ and bolted into her room.

As the pair moved away she could hear Mrs Delacost gushing, ‘It was so nice of you to invite us to your lovely home...’

All of a tremble, Loris sank down on the nearest chair and, twisting the magnificent half-hoop of diamonds she wore round and round her finger, gave a groan of despair.

Her father had been all for the engagement, encouraging it in every way possible, and she sensed that he had been far from displeased to find her leaving Mark’s room. But when he discovered that Mark wasn’t here it would be a very different story. He was likely to be livid, and that was putting it mildly.

She felt a leaden weight in the pit of her stomach.

Though he had never so much as raised his hand to her, preferring an icy silence or a cold reprimand when she displeased him, Loris had always shrunk from his anger.

But she was a twenty-four-year-old woman and independent,

she reminded herself, not some schoolgirl. He had no right to tell her what or what not to do. No right to complain about her actions...

Except that it was his house. The last place she would have chosen to go off the rails and humiliate herself.

And that was exactly what she had done. It had been a stupid mistake. A one-night stand with no feelings on either side. She had been mentally condemning Mark, but she was no better. The only difference was that Mark's decision to sleep with someone else had been premeditated. Whereas hers had been anything but.

So where did that leave her engagement?

In trouble.

With the beginnings of a headache, she longed for a cup of coffee but, resisting the temptation to ring for some and linger over it, she went through to the bathroom to shower.

She would have to show her face and give some kind of explanation sooner or later, so better to get it over with. Though what explanation could she give for spending the night with a virtual stranger? She couldn't even explain to herself what had made her behave so out of character.

But perhaps it was better not to try and explain anything. Merely give the bare facts and then relieve them of her company, even if it meant staying at a hotel.

Having made the decision, she was starting to feel a shade better when it occurred to her that she couldn't get back to

London unless she left with Jonathan Drummond.

No! That wasn't an option. She would sooner call a taxi. The thought of driving all that way with the man who had seduced her was insupportable. Not that she hadn't been a willing victim, honesty forced her to admit. The blame was hers as much as his.

Belatedly it occurred to her to wonder how he was feeling. His behaviour hadn't been exactly praiseworthy.

Possibly, depending on what kind of man he was, he would be embarrassed by what had happened? Maybe he'd be as anxious to leave as she was to have him go? He'd been wide awake when she had left his room, so with a bit of luck he would just dress and slip quietly away.

When she had dried herself, she made-up lightly to hide an unusual paleness before dressing in fine wool trousers the colour of tobacco, a cream blouse, and an embroidered waistcoat. Then, summoning up every ounce of composure she could muster, she lifted her chin and sallied forth.

Drawn like a magnet to the door of the room opposite, she stood listening. Not a sound. Did that mean he'd already gone? She fervently hoped so. Shamed and mortified by her own weakness, she dreaded the thought of having to meet him face to face again.

And there was another consideration. An important one. If he'd gone without anyone seeing him she wouldn't have to divulge exactly who had slept in Mark's room. That would save trouble all round. Though she had no reason to try and protect Jonathan

Drummond, if Mark and her father were to learn his identity it could cost him dear. They would, she felt sure, pressure Cosby's into getting rid of him on one pretext or another.

Needing to know for sure, she opened the door quietly and, holding her breath, peered inside. The room was blessedly empty, and the bathroom door, standing ajar, showed that was too.

Going over to the window, which overlooked the apron and the smooth green lawns at the front of the house, she peered out.

The rain had temporarily ceased, though the sky was heavy and overcast, threatening more. The garden looked battered and waterlogged, and shallow pools of water had gathered on the apron.

All the other sleek cars were still standing where they had been the previous night, but she could see no sign of the white saloon that Jonathan had been driving.

He must have gone back to London.

Sighing her relief, she made her way downstairs to the breakfast-room.

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