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THE GOLDEN LADY

BY JACK RAMSAY
SOON TO BECOME A MAJOR FILM



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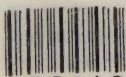
RAMSAY, J
The golden lady

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| AUTHOR | RAMSAY, J. | CLASS | F |
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Meet the Golden Lady, a woman whose mind whirls faster than the barrel of James Bond's gun, whose beauty outshines 007's charm and whose sophistication would leave Ian Fleming's secret agent scrabbling for words.

In the glossy, ruthless world of the international jetset, Julia Hemmingway relies on her own special weapons to outwit her opponents – her irresistible sensuality to break down their resistance, her brilliant mind to destroy them. Julia is a woman who will stop at nothing to get what she wants.

Julia Hemmingway is going to be the
ultimate cinema fantasy, rich
sophisticated and aloof.

EVENING MAIL

The film of THE GOLDEN LADY is based on an original idea by Keith Cavele and Chris Hutchins and is distributed in the United Kingdom by Target International Pictures. It stars the fabulous new screen star Christina World in the role of Julia Hemmingway.

THE GOLDEN LADY

JACK RAMSAY

Based on an original idea by
KEITH CAVELE
and
CHRIS HUTCHINS

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FIRST NEL PAPERBACK EDITION SEPTEMBER 1977

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NEL Books are published by

*New English Library Limited from Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London EC1N 2JR.
Made and printed in Great Britain by Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd., Aylesbury, Bucks.*

Preface

December 1945

For an hour the girl had sat almost motionless, her eyes closed, drifting through layers of semi-consciousness in the half world between sleep and wakefulness, lazily sifting through the memories of her childhood, drawing them to the surface of her mind and losing them again; blurred, bleary images of home, her parents and her brothers before the war when life was simple. Occasionally she would twitch slightly and blink as the train went over the points or the shock of a passing express sent a shudder through the compartment.

They had been travelling slowly through the evening. The snow had been heavy and in places the line was blocked so that they were forced to slow down. Three times on the way north they stopped at small stations where officials argued with passengers about the timetable. The war had been over for months but the railway company still had not come to terms

with the peace and the fact that the Germans were no longer in Denmark; they had had enough of efficiency for a while.

She was going home for Christmas and it would be exactly as it had always been: no more fear or deprivation; the curfew was lifted and she was going home to enjoy herself. In his letter her father had said they would have a goose and that they would eat without stopping for three days.

She opened her eyes and glanced up at her case on the rack, just to make sure it was still there. She looked round the compartment thinking of it as a warm wooden shell protecting her from the snow and ice of the world outside, a shell of old leather and dark brown panelling, lit only by two dim lamps. It was hot inside, the warm air blasting out from the grill under the seat, sending a soft breeze around her ankles so that she imagined the blonde hairs on her legs wafting back and forward. What must it be like to pull on a pair of silk stockings? To draw them up over the feet and up along the calves to the knee and along the length of the thigh? She shivered at the thought. Perhaps the soldier opposite had a case of silk stockings. He was American and they were said to have almost anything to barter. He was sitting opposite her, reading, frowning in concentration. She guessed that he was a year older than she, or maybe two: twenty-one perhaps. He was tall and dark with large brown eyes and the beginnings of a moustache; pleasant looking and so different from the fair-haired boys she had known.

Next to him sat a middle-aged woman and her son – they had not spoken to one another and sat in similar postures, straight-backed, hands on knees. The girl decided they were farming people, like her father, but stern and disapproving with hard Presbyterian faces. They would not approve of her father and his desire to eat and drink himself into oblivion for three whole days.

She was beginning to feel stiff and she shifted slightly in her seat. The soldier glanced up and looked at her, thinking she was still asleep but she watched him through half-closed eyes. She pointed her toes to stretch her legs and he shifted his gaze to her knees, then back to her face. She opened her eyes and he smiled a small timid smile before hiding again behind his book.

So, he was a shy soldier, she said to herself, and she noticed that his ears had gone pink with embarrassment.

The woman had seen the contact between them and she frowned in disapproval. The girl rested her head on the window-pane and wondered if the war had painted a scowl of disapproval on her mother's face. She hoped not; indeed, she was sure that her mother would remain cheerful throughout; she would be all right; her father would not allow any wife of his to turn into a hard-faced hag, she was sure of that. Again she closed her eyes thinking of the goose on the table and her father waving his carving knife at it. There would be black bread and hams and soups and fresh fruit and beer and afterwards her father and her brothers would take up their small drinking glasses and pour themselves some aquavit and get quite drunk, singing their drinking song.

She opened her eyes and saw that the soldier had been staring at her again and when she realised that she had been mouthing the words of the song she blushed a deep red; it was her turn to feel foolish and embarrassed.

She turned away, gazing at her reflection in the window, a ghost peering back at her through the condensation; a ghost with big green eyes, long fair hair, smooth white skin. Many people had told her she was beautiful and so she accepted it. The ravages of the war had not affected her beauty; time had not yet begun to take its toll upon her skin – she was still fresh and radiant with health.

She could see nothing through the window but a pale glow of the snow banks and only the occasional passing light of a farmhouse. She chided herself. How ridiculous; a passing farmhouse indeed, but it did seem as though they were motionless in their hot little shell while the rest of the world passed them by outside, moving slowly from left to right and away into oblivion. She slept again dreamlessly this time until the change in the rhythm told her that they were slowing down and approaching the city of Aarhus. She looked out at the cluster of lights and hid a long yawn behind her hand.

The soldier stood up and was reaching towards the rack and despite herself she felt sorry he was leaving. It would have been nice to talk and find out where he lived in America. But, then,

her English was bad and she was sure that he did not speak Danish. Only the Danes spoke Danish. But he had reached past his kitbag and was pulling down the woman's case, touching his cap as he handed it to her, the woman smiled graciously, all signs of disapproval gone. She pushed her son forward and the soldier opened the door to let them out. A blast of freezing air ripped into the compartment and the girl gasped and snuggled into her fur coat, drawing it around her and bringing her feet up on to the seat. Quickly he slammed it shut once more, smiling and said something to her which she assumed to be about the weather.

She nodded but said nothing, watching the station clock and counting as the second-hand made its way round the face. They stayed in the station for exactly three minutes before moving off once more, leaving the hustle behind them, listening to the last cries of the porters before they were back in their cocoon, just the two of them now, moving north through the night. Again she closed her eyes and the soldier returned to his book.

The images returned: her father with his knife, rising from the table, taking her hand and leading her out into the yard and through the garden to the barn, leaving her alone to play in the dust; it was so hot; she walked through the fields picking flowers, the breeze in her hair, her feet and legs aching in the heat; she looked around for a stream to bathe them but there was none and she was back in the barn listening to the hens making their strange clucking noise: click-clack, click-clack, a strange rhythmic sound; now she was on her back in the straw peering up at the roof and through the cracks to the sky and Einer was talking to her, stupid Einer from the village with his grubby knees and the elbows of his shirt always torn; Einer who wanted to leave the village and go to sea; what was he saying? she could not make out the words; his mouth was opening and closing but she could not hear him for the noise of the chickens; silly Einer blocking out the light as he leant towards her; she knew what he was doing; he always wanted to fumble with her and she had to fight him off; but it was too hot; she closed her eyes and lay back letting Einer touch her; he could do what he wished; it did not matter.

The girl opened her eyes slowly and the face of the soldier was only inches away, his voice murmuring words she did not understand, gentle soothing words in a strange language. Einer did not talk like that or kiss like that, gently, lips pressing against her mouth, a chaste brotherly kiss and she whimpered and drew him closer, looking into the brown eyes; there was no cause to fight; it was too hot and she was too sleepy and so she helped him pull open the fur coat and she held him across her body and drew the coat around him as far as it would go, a cocoon of fur in a shell of wood and leather, with the world moving slowly past them; cold, distant and irrelevant. She clutched him to her, her hands digging into the fur, keeping him close so that she could not see what he was doing to her; it would be all right just so long as she could not see; it did not matter as long as she could only feel . . . and when finally she groaned, a long deep sigh, there was no one to hear or see and her cries were lost in the sound of the wheels taking her home . . .

Again she awoke as the train began to slow down, the brakes squealing as they made the long turn towards the village. She shivered slightly and moved out from under him, making no sound. She smoothed down her skirt and shook the hair from her eyes, reached up for her case and moved to the door. She did not look back but glanced at the corner where he had been sitting. The book lay on its side and she could not understand the title but she knew the name of the author: a famous name; Ernest Hemingway.

And then she was out into the snow, slipping on the ice and falling into the welcoming arms of her father.

Chapter One

May 1977

The young man had positioned himself at the far end of the bar opposite the door in such a position that he could survey the lounge without having to swing round on his stool or turn his head too far. By glancing just a fraction to his right he could catch his reflection in the mirror; occasionally he tilted his jaw and pouted, studying himself in profile, the Robert Redford profile as one of his girlfriends had called it. He sipped his gin and casually leafed through a copy of *The Tatler*. He felt marvellous, confident that he looked stunning, the new cashmere sweater suiting his complexion perfectly.

A flicker of movement caused him to glance towards the door but it was only another of the chaps in pin-stripes. He wondered why there were so many of them, outnumbering the locals and the other residents, not one of them having made any concession in his dress to the fact that it was a week-end,

each one wearing a dark three-piece suit and a sombre tie around a white collar. Their conversation was a polite murmur of share prices and profit margins. It seemed odd. The hotel was sixty miles from town but the young man felt as though he were in some club in the City. There was not a woman to be seen. It was too bad. Did they not have wives? There was no one in the place to admire him.

With a snap of his fingers he beckoned the barman and asked the question.

'Financiers, sir. From the Stock Exchange, I believe. Down here for a week-end seminar.'

'Ah,' he said, thinking: how tedious.

'And you, sir? Are you staying with us for long?' He had seen the room key on the counter.

'Just overnight,' said the young man. 'I'm in advertising.'

'Ah,' said the barman.

He ordered a second drink and, as he watched it being poured, he became aware of a hush, the faint hiss of men drawing their breath. He turned to see a woman standing in the doorway and it was all he could do not to gape, bug-eyed, like the rest of them.

He guessed that she was perhaps four years older than he, in her late twenties; around five-seven and slim, ash-blonde hair swept back from her face and splashing on to her shoulders. Normally he would have given her the Redford stare, the quick up-and-down once-over, flashing the eyes up from beneath knitted brows but he decided against it; why, he did not know, but he contented himself with simply feeding the sight of her into his mind so that he would not forget: a white silk shirt over exquisitely cut black trousers, gold bracelets, a long tanned neck and just the suggestion of the surge of her breasts, a strong face, high cheekbones, an elegant nose, large green eyes lightly made up, and a mouth to dream about, the upper lip delicate, the lower lip full and touched with gloss.

She smiled at the City men and glided through their silence to the bar, glanced briefly in his direction and ordered a whisky sour. It was not until she had spoken that the talk resumed, slightly lower pitched now and disconnected.

The young man glanced to his left and saw a large florid

man rise from his seat. He wore a sweater and cavalry twills and he was being urged forward by his two friends. He moved to the bar, puffing his chest, smiled at some private joke and stopped by the woman's shoulder.

'I say,' he said, a deep grunt of a voice. 'I say, what on earth is a pretty gal like you doing . . .'

She turned and gazed at him, '*What* did you say?' emphasising the first word as if she could not believe what he had said.

'I was wondering,' he was stammering slightly, 'I mean, this isn't quite your sort of scene . . . is it? . . . I wouldn't have thought.'

For a moment she studied him, then turned back to the bar. 'How quaint,' she said and the big man coughed and backed away, choking on his embarrassment.

She picked up her drink and moved through the room, stopping to talk to a group of City men. Gradually, others detached themselves in ones and twos to pay their respects to her. The young man leant against the counter, clenching his jaw, occasionally turning to give her the benefit of his profile. She had moved imperceptibly closer until she was only a yard from him and he could hear her speak of high-risk investment and five-to-one ratios. Again he snapped his fingers for the barman and shook his glass, tinkling the ice cubes, a wordless demand for a refill. For a moment he considered offering her a what-was-it? a whisky sour but perhaps not, not yet.

He put his cigar to his lips but it had gone out. He reached into his pocket for a match, fumbling slightly and he blinked, startled, as a lighter was snapped in his face. He bent towards the flame, looking up at her, fighting to clear the surprise from his face. 'Don't mention it,' she said and moved away before he could speak.

So now he knew. He allowed himself the indulgence of gazing at her, trying to imagine how she would look when naked, thinking it over and fantasising until he was forced to shift his position on the stool. He stared at her body hoping to make out the smudge of her nipples beneath the silk, but he could not. She did not look at him again over the next twenty minutes as the City men began to leave in groups for dinner.

He was considering the best way to approach her when, quite without warning, she was gone. She had simply walked past him, suddenly, as he was taking a sip of his drink, trailing her hand along the counter, taking him by surprise and slipping out, alone, into the hallway. Puzzled and disconcerted he stood up, wondering if he should follow her and it was not until he had sat down again that he noticed that his room key had gone. He looked at the barman but he was deep in conversation ten feet away. Quickly he moved to the door and was just in time to see her climb the stairs and hear the clink of a key as it dangled against her bracelets.

He waited ten minutes before he signed the tab and made for his room. Silently he tip-toed up the two flights of stairs, his throat dry with anticipation. He wondered why he was pussy-footing along the corridor and why his heart was thumping through the cashmere. It was not as if it were his first time. Gently he tried the door. It was on the latch. He closed his eyes, took a long deep breath and pushed it open. The radio was playing a soft nondescript melody and by the dim glow of the lamp he could see her on the bed covered by a sheet. He shut the door behind him and she beckoned him to come over, looking up at him, unsmiling, as he stood by the bed. It was her neck, he was thinking, slim but strong, the sweep of the neck and the shoulder that was so exciting; he wanted to say something but could not. He reached forward to touch her face but she shook her head and stroked him so that he was forced to close his eyes as he heard the soft buzz of his zipper. He looked down at her and she picked up her glass, took a long drink and moved towards him; when the ice cube under her tongue was forced hard against the length of him, he shuddered and had to bite his lip in order that it would not be all over before it had even begun.

It lasted an hour or maybe two and the only word she spoke was 'no' when he tried to move her or take the initiative. Even when he was on top she was guiding him. Once, when he tried to use a touch of force he found himself tumbled over backwards almost off the bed with her hand at his throat and her mouth at his ear, hissing strangely at him.

It ended at last when she straddled him, arching her back

and pressing her hands down hard on his shoulders, then moving over him to stare into his eyes smiling; such a smile as he had never seen, of delight and triumph and maybe even affection.

He was asleep when she left him. As she stood by the door she looked back at him, his young face vulnerable now. And he did not move when she took his hand and gently placed his thumb in his mouth.

Back in her room the woman stood in the shower and closed her eyes as the jets of water stabbed at her body. She dried herself briskly, dressed slowly and went downstairs for dinner. At the reception desk she ordered a seven o'clock call with coffee and a full set of the morning papers.

'And one thing more,' she said. 'Would it be possible to send some flowers to the young man in room eight?'

'Of course,' said the receptionist.

'Orchids I think,' she said.

'Any message, Miss Hemmingway?'

'No. There's no need. Thank you.' She smiled and moved towards the dining-room, her mind set on a steak and a bottle of claret.

Three thousand miles to the east, in a night-club on the Persian Gulf, a tall, elegantly dressed Englishman had been sitting rather uncomfortably for two hours on cushions, eating cous-cous and spices and blinking as a succession of dancers swayed and gyrated in front of him. He had been treated all week with the utmost hospitality and he knew that he had only to snap his fingers, and he would be given anything his heart or his body desired.

But he was unable to relax. Nothing could distract him from the business in hand. His sole interest lay in the three Arabs who sat at his side.

He decided that he would make one final effort.

'As you know gentlemen,' he said politely. 'I am returning to London in the morning.'

'And some of our colleagues are accompanying you, I

believe,' said one of the Arabs.

'Yes.'

'And you will introduce them to London society before they leave for Washington, I am sure?'

'Of course.' The Englishman was becoming slightly impatient. These people could change the subject at will and shoot off at tangents; trying to talk business with a reluctant Arab was like punching feathers; it was hopeless.

'But what I would be grateful for . . . ' he paused, 'is some sort of decision, either way, before I leave.'

The biggest of the group shrugged his shoulders. 'We would like to oblige, of course. Nothing would give us greater pleasure. But we are not in a position to do so. For the moment the situation is out of our hands.'

The Englishman sighed. He was up a blind alley and there was nothing he could do but back out. The Arab who had spoken took him by the hand and smiled a comforting grimace of gold teeth: 'There is no question that we are interested in your product. It is far and away the best offer we have had, believe me. And as soon as the political side of it is cleared up . . . '

'And the king?' said the Englishman.

'Yassaf will do nothing until he has met your government.'

'So we wait.'

'We wait, Mr Rowlands. And while we wait we take advantage of the comforts of this establishment. There is an old Arab saying . . . '

Max Rowlands closed his eyes. In the past week he had heard enough old Arab sayings to last him a lifetime. He would be glad to be home.

Chapter Two

Luke, as always, drove impassively, both hands firmly on the steering wheel at the ten-to-two position, staring directly ahead, apparently oblivious to the attention the car was causing as it glided almost soundlessly through the country towns *en route* to London. He had long ago become accustomed to receiving special attention from others on the road and he no longer seemed to see or hear the pedestrians and the drivers who clamoured for his attention and pointed as he swept past them. Even in Knightsbridge and Mayfair where the residents are reluctant to appear impressed by anything, the progress of the Panther de Ville would turn the heads of most and cause them to stare.

It was a unique motor-car; handbuilt from a 1930s design. Luke would inform anyone who asked that it had an aluminium coach-built body on a rectangular steel ladder chassis, that the massive radiator was made of chrome and the running boards of polished stainless steel. Slowly and deliberately he would

explain, in the manner of a rather superior salesman, that it bridged the gap between the glories of the past and the necessities of modern-day driving. His favourite phrase, culled from the brochure, was that it had been 'built up to an idea rather than down to a price'.

To the practically minded he would extol the glories of the engine as if going over a shopping list, and to others, more concerned with exterior luxuries, he would point out the air-conditioning unit, the four-speaker stereo system, the telephone with extension and the television set and cocktail cabinet. 'And of course, handmade coachwork, deep-pile woollen carpeting and leather seats.'

'Why of course,' they would say, blinking and gasping in admiration.

Julia had once asked him, in a jocular mood, how he would feel if the car was caught up in a collision. But he had not answered. He had merely closed his eyes and shuddered, his legs buckling slightly at the knees.

But now he drove calmly towards the motorway past the gaping pedestrians and heading a small line of cars and motor-bikes, their owners leaning out of their windows and peering at him.

In the back Julia scanned the Monday morning papers, reading them selectively in a well ordered pattern: first the *Financial Times*, followed by the business sections of *The Times* and the *Telegraph*; then the gossip columns, starting with the *Mail*; and finally flipping through the general news stories. Now and again she marked something that interested her, circling the headline in ink for Lucy to clip out and file.

She felt relaxed glancing outside, feeling the heat of the early summer sun through the windows. She was glad to be getting back to London. It had been a marvellous week-end; productive and financially rewarding. She had made new contacts, done a little business, bought a beautiful young gelding at the throw-away price of three thousand. She had eaten well, taken a long country walk, slept well; she had done all the things that city dwellers are supposed to do in order to recharge the batteries. But two days and three nights were enough and she was looking forward to the correspondence

waiting on her desk, wondering if there would be any interesting surprises.

Idly she glanced at a feature in one of the tabloids, written by an ageing female romantic novelist: the days of crazy feminism were over, she read; the pendulum had swung back; what young girls wanted nowadays was the firm hand of a dominant male.

Julia laughed aloud and Luke glanced up at her in his mirror, to make sure that she was all right.

'It's nothing, Luke,' she said. 'A private joke.'

He relaxed, the face under the peaked chauffeur's cap resuming its imperturbable stare.

When they reached the motorway Julia leant forward and stabbed at a button to catch the morning radio report from Westminster. She settled back, absent-mindedly stroking the grey mink of her jacket listening to snatches of debate and the murmur of the commentators. By her hand lay a small tape recorder so that she could make a note of anything important. It had been a quiet week-end for news and the prospects for the next few days were unexciting. She hoped that there would be something at the office to start the adrenalin flowing. There was little point, she thought, in recharging one's batteries if there was nothing to use them on through the week.

For an hour she sat back, listening, reading and occasionally making notes. There was a tailback at the end of the Westway from the Marylebone Road and she saw Luke squint back at her, a gesture of apology as if it were his fault. They were jammed, unable to move and at times like these she wondered if perhaps Lucy might be right and that she should get a set of smoked-glass windows fitted. But she did not care for the idea of being blocked off from view like some little pop star with an over-inflated idea of his own importance. A family in a small saloon was staring at her, the parents middle-aged and dowdy, the two little girls inquisitive, noses flattened against the glass. Julia gave them a wave, royal style, a soft circular motion from the elbow. The children waved back, laughing but their mother scowled and told her husband not to stare.

Finally they were moving again and the London rush hour

traffic flowed all around them. As they approached Baker Street Julia could hear Luke sigh, that familiar hiss of resigned disapproval and she knew that someone was trying to cut him up, some young hot-shot masking his envy in aggression, but Luke paid little attention, driving as though he were still in the country lanes, looking neither to left nor right.

Julia was listening intently to the Stock Market forecast when the phone rang. Slowly Luke dropped his left hand from the wheel and brought the receiver to his ear. He looked into the mirror.

'Miss Hemmingway. Mr Rowlands on the line for you.'

Max, dear old Max, Julia thought, reaching for the extension. She tried to recall how long it had been, a year perhaps, after that time he had made a pass at her; poor Max, a bit of a fraud but with a certain charm and a voice like Bovril, she remembered. Like the young man last night, he made all kinds of assumptions just because he looked good. What was he? Forty? Forty-five? Tall, greying slightly; he would like to think he looked distinguished; always had a sun-tan. And perhaps she would have gone along with him that time if he had not had just that little bit too much to drink, those two extra brandies at lunch. It had been a business lunch and he had wanted to turn it into something more, but when the proposition finally came there was a slight slur to his voice and if there was one thing that dried Julia up inside, it was a sexual invitation couched in hiccups. And besides, she suspected that Max was one of those men who was excited more by the chase than the kill; a fox hunter; one of those who follow the scent, blowing and puffing so that by the time the quarry was cornered and ready to submit, he was spent and tired out by the effort. Mr Rowlands, she thought, would be an anticlimax.

'Max, where are you?'

'Heathrow.' He sounded out of breath.

'Where are you going?'

'Nowhere. I've just arrived.'

'From where?' Julia hoped the boredom in her voice didn't come across.

'Keep it under your hat,' said Rowlands. 'The Middle East.'

Same old Max, thought Julia, making a mystery out of everything. But despite herself, she was intrigued. Why should he leap off the plane and call her before he had got his luggage? In the background she could hear the handlers calling the flight numbers. Maybe it was important.

'Business?' she asked.

'What do you think?'

'Oh for goodness sake Max . . . ' He was like a little boy saying, 'Betya-don't-know-what-I've-got.'

'Julia, when can I see you?'

'You can make an appointment.'

'You're joking.' His voice broke in the middle of the word as if she had hurt him deeply. 'See me tonight?'

'To talk shop?' But as she said it she knew that Max was trying again. His voice had taken on the Bovril tone, all warm and comforting; his notion of seduction.

'I was thinking more of a nice restaurant,' he said.

'Just the two of us?' said Julia glancing through the window to her left where a young man in an open sports car had drawn level and was grinning at her, a scarf round his neck, thinking he was some kind of racing driver, waving and winking. 'Max, it didn't work. Don't you remember?'

'We could give it another try?' But there was no conviction in his voice.

Julia said nothing. She bent forward and tapped Luke on the shoulder. He nodded and spun the wheel sharply so that the world champion in his little car had to brake and swerve.

'Pam's not expecting me back tonight,' Max was saying. 'Julia, where's your heart?'

'Same place as yours. In a Swiss bank.'

Max conceded defeat. There was little more he could do, but still he tried. It would be dangerous, he said, for him to be left alone in the big city.

'Sorry, Max.' Julia was bored with the game. 'Look, I must go. I'm almost at the office.'

'Just one request then?'

He explained, and Julia nodded. 'How many?' she asked.

'All right, Max.' She made a note on the edge of a newspaper. 'Sure,' she said. 'I'll call you later. Good-bye Max.'

For half an hour Lucy had been in a mild state of unease, glancing every few minutes at her watch. It was strange, she thought, Miss Hemmingway was never late. Perhaps something had happened. As she bustled round the office making herself busy she listened to the radio, frowning at the banalities of the disc jockey, snapping her fingers and saying, 'Come on, come on' under her breath. At last the road report flashed through, a high-speed list of accidents and hold-ups on the roads into London read out by an intense young man from the Automobile Association:

'... and heavy congestion in the Baker Street, Marylebone Road area is causing a tail-back on the eastbound section of the Westway. Motorists are advised ...'

Lucy closed her eyes, offering up a silent prayer of thanks, and turned the radio off. She continued working in silence, making notes and lists, puffing specks of non-existent dust from her desk. She had worked for Julia for a year. She had never been happier. A small, slightly built girl of twenty-two with fluffy blonde hair and a gentle face which rarely smiled, she had been considered something of a misfit in her previous jobs. Her qualifications as a shorthand typist and personal assistant were excellent but somehow she was always the one who reluctantly attracted the attention of office wolves and lecherous bosses who thought they had bought a right to her body. And eventually she always had to leave because she would not give in to the grubby handling; she could not and would not take it. In the two years before she had met one of Julia's assistants she had had eight jobs and she had some difficulty persuading Julia to give her a trial. And at first she had been forced to work long hours, strange hours at times with no allowance given for mistakes.

She had never before worked under such pressure but when she was offered the job she almost wept with relief. Julia had been hard but she had been fair and Lucy repaid her with unquestioned loyalty and devotion.

Having completed the lists she looked round the office and into the lounge: it was a large room with cream-coloured decorations, it had a settee and three armchairs, a baby grand piano, fluffy rugs over the parquet flooring, one complete wall of glass, a single pane overlooking Regent's Park. Even in the depths of winter the room seemed bright with sun.

She walked across to the window and stared out across the park turning the view across to the Zoo and south to the smoke of the city. Immediately below, a tramp was packing his belongings into an old cardboard box before shambling across the street, apparently oblivious to the traffic. She watched him shout something at the crowds as they passed him, shaking his fist crazily at people who ignored him. Lucy shivered. She was glad that she was six storeys above. Life beneath her carried on silently; not even the squeal of a police siren was able to pass through the soundproofing and double glazing. She was happy and comfortable with her own room next door. She need hardly ever step outside and this was fine by her. It was a wicked world outside but in Julia Hemmingway's flat she was safe.

She spun round as the door was pushed open and Julia stood in the doorway smiling at her. Lucy's hands fluttered at her blouse and she blushed as if she had been caught in the act of stealing.

'Some day your prince will come, Lucy,' said Julia.

Her blush deepened but she squared her shoulders and walked smartly towards the door. 'Let me take your coat, Miss Hemmingway.' Her voice was businesslike and correct. 'How was your week-end?'

'Pleasant, thank you.'

'There are a number of calls for you already,' she said, following Julia like a sprightly puppy into the office. It was small but compact, ten feet square, the large glass-topped desk dominated the room, the walls were covered in walnut and lined with books; there were two lamps on pods, a video recorder and a playback machine, a tape deck, a small television set and a telex, three telephones and an intercom. Julia sat at the desk, spreading her hands across the glass table-top. She could reach everything simply by swivelling her chair; she did

not have to stretch, just reach out, and the world and its information came to her. She had told Lucy one afternoon that when she sat at her desk and closed her eyes she sometimes felt that she could fly her office all the way up to the stars, twice round the galaxy and back to the park. And Lucy had almost believed it possible. There was nothing that Julia Hemmingway could not do if she put her mind to it.

She picked up her clipboard, tapped it with her pen. 'Hagen called at seven this morning from Munich.'

Julia, reading a list of messages printed out from the answering machine, did not look up. 'What did he want?'

'He wouldn't say. He wants to talk to you personally.'

'All right. Ring him now, would you.'

'Right away.' Lucy turned and left the room, seating herself at her desk in the lounge. Almost immediately she heard a sharp rap on the door, a confident rat-tat-tat, and a girl looked in, a red-head, with a bright vivacious face. 'Hi Luce, is the boss in?'

Lucy nodded and pointed through to the office. The red-head marched across the room, an envelope tucked under her arm. As she passed the desk she winked. 'Hank loose, Luce,' she said. And again Lucy blushed.

Julia looked up as she walked in. 'Carol,' she said, smiling. 'Any problems?'

'Nah. Smooth as silk.' She handed over the envelope. Julia slit it with a gold letter knife and spun the contents on to the desk.

'They're good,' she said looking at a set of photographs. 'And the negs?'

Carol reached into her handbag and placed a roll of film in Julia's hand. 'Do you think I'd make a good photographer?'

'Stick to burglary,' said Julia, studying the prints which showed a list of figures and balance sheets.

'I could end up in Holloway,' Carol grinned.

Julia looked up and smiled. 'Not if you stick with me.' She looked down again. 'All these figures are perfectly legible. Did you have any trouble?'

Carol shook her head. 'What's a three-storey climb to me.'

I mean, once you've done the Eiger there's nothing left, is there?'

'North face?'

'What else?' said Carol.

They were interrupted by Lucy saying that the call to Munich had come through. As Julia picked up the phone, Carol blew a kiss and waved good-bye. Julia leant back, the receiver tucked under her chin. 'Wally. Good morning. You're awake early. What can I do for you?' As she listened she flipped through a card index on the desk. 'Yep,' she said, 'that's a great deal of money . . . at the highest interest? Of course I could guarantee you . . .' She paused, tapping a calculator . . . 'I could guarantee fifteen per cent.' Again she paused, listening, before continuing. 'My commission is one and a half . . . Fine. We shall confirm by telephone within three hours.'

She replaced the receiver and called to Lucy: 'Get me John Ritchie and then Erika.' She sat back, nibbling at a pencil until the first call came through.

'John. Hello again. I have the prints . . . yes, perfect.' She smiled, soaking up the flattery of her client. 'Of course I'll join you for lunch. It's already in my book . . .' She scribbled down the time and place and hung up. She placed the prints in an envelope, sealed it, stapled it and dropped the roll of film into a drawer.

Again a light blinked on the telephone panel. 'Good morning, Erika. Did I wake you? . . . I have something for you tonight . . . Swift's.' She listened for a moment and laughed. She was enjoying herself. So far, the morning had gone well.

It was the speed of the operation which impressed John Ritchie the most. After all, he had met the woman only a couple of days earlier, out in the country, and now here she was, cool as you like, supplying the goods. Of course, he had heard of her, vaguely. He knew someone whose brother had once had dealings with her. He knew that she had her own company with head offices somewhere near the park, but what she actually did was something of a mystery. He could not quite remember how they got on to the subject of the business at hand. It was over drinks on the Saturday, certainly, but how did it come up?

He could not clearly recall. And now here she was, looking charming and elegant, handing him an envelope as if it were a birthday card.

'I shan't open it here,' he said. 'Not at the table.'

'Very wise,' she agreed with a small sardonic smile. 'I would wait until you are back in your office. And if the results are to your satisfaction . . .'

' . . . then I shall send your fee round to you this very afternoon, by messenger.'

'And in cash.'

'Of course.'

They talked business, swapping stories, gossip and anecdotes, discovering acquaintances in common. Over coffee Ritchie found himself asking about the young man. It was bad manners of course, but he had taken enough wine for his inhibitions to become sufficiently blurred . . .

' . . . after you had left this morning. A very handsome young man. Greek profile, curly blond hair . . .'

'Mmm,' said Julia.

' . . . in a very agitated state. Wanted to know where he could find you. Scampering around the dining-room like a young pony. I mean I know it's none of my . . .'

'Perhaps I just wanted his body,' she smiled at him.

'Oh I don't think . . . ' he murmured, embarrassed.

'To round off a perfect week-end, maybe?'

It was time for him to change the subject, but Julia took the initiative. 'By the way, I was talking to Max Rowlands this morning. Do you know him?'

Ritchie frowned. 'Yes.' He looked over Julia's shoulder. For some reason he felt he still owed her something. He could not think why. 'I tell you what,' he said. 'Just a tip. If you see Rowlands again, ask him about Jetec.'

'Thank you,' said Julia. 'I will.' She signalled to the waiter and paid the bill, quietly and without fuss, flipping a book of credit cards on to the plate. Ritchie tried to protest but she smiled at him and told him it would be his turn next time. Luke was waiting for her at the door and she gave her client a lift back to his office before making her way back to the

flat and to the work which had accumulated over the lunch hour.

Something was bothering Bernard Hawkins; it was a hunch, a feeling of news in the air and it was enough to make him decide on a special journey to Fleet Street. As City editor he had little need to actually visit the paper. Normally he worked out of his office behind the Stock Exchange, phoning over his column to the copy-takers at the end of each day's trading. Only when there was something big in the air like the Lonrho business, or Slater-Walker and, each year, the Budget, did he actually work from Fleet Street.

Most of his colleagues hated the place and would not go near it but Hawkins made a point of visiting the office pub once a week, usually on a Wednesday to talk to the reporters and the sub-editors. He would turn up in his best suit and buy his round with the best of them. He was reluctantly fascinated by the seamier side of the business and quite enjoyed a chat with the chaps who did the crime stories and the inquests; especially he enjoyed talking to the foreign men just back from some skirmish in Africa or New York or somewhere. They always had the best stories and he guffawed along with them, showing them that he was no old stuffed shirt just because he worked on the financial page.

And they all came to him for advice. He was amazed how little these people knew about finance although they were so worldly in other ways. They would ask him about their mortgages and their insurance policies and their alimony payments and each week he dispensed opinions like some sort of fiscal agony columnist. He enjoyed it. It was fun. And sometimes he became quite drunk.

But rarely did he turn up unsolicited in the afternoons. It had to be something special. He had heard gossip, just the hint that something was up and he thought he had better look into it. He would show the other reporters that his nose for news was every bit as sharp as theirs.

He picked up some cuttings from the office library and a copy of *Who's Who* and made his way across the floor, nodding

greetings, towards the news desk.

The news editor watched him with ill-concealed annoyance. He did not like City people. They talked in jargon and did not know a story from a kick in the arse. But he had to be civil to Hawkins because he gave the editor share tips. And so he smiled sweetly when the man stopped by his desk.

'Have you a minute?' asked Hawkins breezily.

'Yes,' a charming smile. 'But make it quick if you would.'

Dramatically Hawkins flipped the cuttings on to the desk and laid the *Who's Who* in front of him. The news editor glanced briefly at one of the clippings.

'Rowlands. Yes, what about him?'

'My information is that he is putting to sea again.'

The news editor closed his eyes. Jesus, he thought. 'Putting to sea.' Christ.

'What are you talking about?' he asked, fighting to keep the irritation out of his voice.

'He's borrowing heavily.'

'So is England.'

'On short-term high interest?' There was an edge of triumph in Hawkins's voice.

The news editor grunted. 'How much?'

'In excess of a million.'

He picked up one of the cuttings and read aloud: 'Rowlands, Maxwell Cedric. Born thirty-six. Educated Bromley Grammar School. Studied chartered accountancy. Joined Scott's merchant bank in the early Sixties . . . Regarded as one of the new young men of the City with a reputation for ruthlessness. Through a confidant he gained privy information on Tory policy and was able to sell high before the stage one fall. Established the Universal Investment Trust which fell into liquidation three years later. In the enquiry which followed Rowlands was exonerated, leaving several associates to take the blame. Now chairman of Jetec . . . etcetera, etcetera.' He looked up at Hawkins. 'And you think there's something happening?'

Hawkins nodded.

'All right. See what you can scrape up.'

'Good.' Hawkins smiled like a schoolboy. But as he turned

to leave, the news editor spoke sharply. 'Hawkins, is this a personal vendetta?'

He turned back with an air of injured innocence. 'Of course not. I'm not the vindictive type. It's just that I don't like the way he does business. He leaves too many bodies around.'

Hawkins went to work immediately, asking discreet questions of his colleagues. That afternoon he made a trip to Companies House and looked up Jetec, making notes of the directors, underlining the name of Rowlands. At six he bought a few beers for some of his contacts and casually dropped Jetec into the conversation, listening for the sound of ripples. One of the group was a tall financier, a charming if rather vague fellow, Hawkins believed. An hour later the man made a phone call; he was not really sure why he did it. He just felt somehow that he still owed her something. Maybe it was because she paid for lunch.

'Miss Hemmingway? John Ritchie here . . .'

Ten minutes later Julia was on the line to one of her employees.

'Good evening, Carol,' she said. 'I have another job for you.'

Chapter Three

Swift's Club was situated in a quiet side street close to Berkeley Square and catered for a very special clientele. Its exclusivity was well defined but difficult for the newcomer to comprehend immediately. A three-figure membership fee and a carefully manipulated waiting list kept out the bulk of the undesirables and the discriminating charm of Henry the manager and his staff did the rest. Henry wanted rich members in his club, but money was by no means the sole criterion. He was delighted to play host to the world of show business, but only to those who would behave. The rock stars were not welcome; those who arrived in high-heeled boots and lurex and spoke too loudly were not Swift people. Model girls were welcome but not the brassy kind. Politicians, yes; the aristocracy, yes, so long as they did not make fools of themselves. Certain soccer players could enter the club, but not teams. Swift's was meant to fill a gap in the market, to attract those who found the gentleman's clubs too stuffy and the disco-night-clubs too noisy and vulgar.

At Swift's there were waiters instead of waitresses, live entertainment as opposed to canned music; passions were supposed to be kept under control and a certain degree of decorum was expected. The rules of the house were unwritten but Henry was quick to have words with anyone who stepped over the invisible mark.

That night he found himself facing a not uncommon problem with a large party at the corner table left of stage. At first they had behaved impeccably. The women were gorgeous and exquisitely dressed, the tall Englishman named Rowlands was the very soul of charm, and the four Arab gentlemen . . . well, they seemed delightful.

But now the girls were becoming slightly rowdy, to say the least, and he could see that Lena, the new singer, was less than pleased by their giggles and the fact that they were ignoring her talents. If it were not for the Arab gentlemen, Henry would have made his position known some time ago but he did not want to offend Arabs; Arabs were Swift people; they had money to burn and this particular group probably had many friends and partners at home. Henry would hope that they would recommend the club to them.

He sighed and snapped his fingers, called for their bill and glanced at it: seven bottles of champagne plus four on the table. Quickly he made his decision. He turned to their waiter and instructed him to prepare a tray of brandies, large ones, compliments of the house. It was a gamble, he was aware of that, but such gambles had been known to pay off before. Brandy, allied to champagne, tended to have a home-going effect. Gentlemen took the hint that it was time to call for cabs; and ladies, with such a mixture inside them, either became amorous and thought of bed, or simply became dizzy and took no further interest in the proceedings.

For much of the evening Max Rowlands had been speculating on which of the two blondes would be more satisfying in bed: Samantha on his left, tall, heavy breasted with a low sultry voice, or the little bubbly Erika on his right who giggled all the time and kept poking out a little pink tongue between her teeth. Samantha, being the quieter one who rarely smiled, would become wild and uninhibited, indulging in all kinds of

fantasies, while the little cheeky one would bounce all over the room and tie him up in knots and go home smiling.

Samantha's knee was pressed against his under the table and he was becoming excited. Okay, he thought, so it's a cliché, knees pressing under tables. You've been around enough, he told himself, not to get all worked up about knees under the table . . . but it was becoming all too much for him, especially with Erika smiling at him like that, taking that red rose from the slim glass on the table and running it between her lips. He tried to concentrate on the conversation and he noticed that the girls were doing all the talking, the Arabs merely sitting, smiling impassively, saying little.

' . . . I mean,' the tall ginger-haired girl in the green dress was saying, ' . . . what I can't understand is how they all feel, all your wives? How do they like it only getting it, as it were, every couple of weeks . . . ?'

' . . . personally speaking,' said the small brunette, 'I think you were quite right to use your oil as an economic bargaining tool; like in a free market place, you get what you can, isn't that right . . . ?'

' . . . don't you feel the cold?' from the third, the dark, buxom, heavy-hipped, scarlet-lipped one. ' . . . I'd have thought you'd freeze stiff after the desert and all that . . . '

Max was vaguely relieved when the waiter appeared at his shoulder, politely interrupting them and placing the brandies on the table. Compliments of the management; squeals from the girls and smiles from the men. Max glanced over the waiter's shoulder and smiled his thanks to Henry who was standing by the door watching them. Henry smiled back, put his finger to his lips, and Max took the point.

One of the girls was calling for a toast and Max raised his glass. 'To an absent friend,' he said. 'To Julia.'

'Julia,' they chorused.

For a moment there was silence and Max turned to Samantha. He should be leading the conversation, he thought, instead of sitting back thinking dirty. He switched to his seductive voice. 'You a model, did you say?' He stumbled slightly over the 'd's.

'Mmmm,' she said,

'She does the chocolate bar,' said Erika, leaning across him so that her breasts lay cross his arm. 'On the television. I tried out for that, didn't I Sam? It was a big audition and there were all these fellas watching us, sitting at the back, so I unpeeled this stick of chocolate.' She demonstrated in mime and Max closed his eyes. 'Then I opened my mouth like this, and I curled my tongue round it like this . . . you're not watching Max. And then I bit it. Hard. And you could have heard them wincing all over London.'

When Erika had stopped giggling, Samantha moved closer to Max and whispered something in his ear. His eyes bulged and he sat back, shaking his head as if to clear it, not quite sure if he had heard properly. Samantha looked straight into his eyes, unsmiling.

'Surely you can guess,' she said.

She looked round the table. The others sat silently, watching her. There was a hint of perspiration on Max's brow.

'You told me you were a gambler,' she said, reproachfully.

Max swallowed nervously and Samantha, without warning, clapped her hands. 'Pink black or red? *Faite vos jeux, monsieur.*'

'I think . . . red,' said Max softly and reluctantly.

Slowly Samantha raised her glass and sipped from it, looking over the rim at the men, then placed it on the table, smiled for the first time and laid her hands in her lap. The others could see her shoulders move as if she were limbering up for some kind of exercise. Gradually she bent low until her chin rested on the edge of the table and she glanced at each of the men in turn before sitting sharply upright in her chair, throwing her hand in the air as if in salute. Dangling from her index finger and wafting gently in the smoke was a pair of silk panties, baby-blue and trimmed with white lace.

'You lose,' she said smiling at Max.

He grinned a tight little grin and to his right he could see Henry hold his hand to his brow and appear to sigh. He closed his eyes briefly and when he opened them Erika had started to unbutton the front of her dress. It was a high-necked red dress, quite prim, in contrast to the lecherous look on the girl's face. Max groaned inwardly but Erika had turned away from him towards one of the Arabs. Slowly she undid the top three

buttons, exposing the swell of her breasts, then held the material together as she worked her way down, one at a time, all the way to her waist: occasionally she shook her head, tossing the hair from her eyes. Max stared at his guest's face watching the man's eyes begin to widen as Erika moved closer and he saw him blink as she slowly opened her dress right under his nose and held it open for fully five seconds before briskly turning away from him and buttoning herself up once more.

The Arab shrugged his shoulders. 'No brassiere,' he said. 'I lose also.'

One of the men began to clap and Max made to rise, thinking it was over but Erika had turned to him again and had dropped into a crouch, following Samantha's example, her chin on the table, large blue eyes gazing innocently up at him, like a child at a tea party asking for a balloon. Silently she mouthed the words: 'Black, blue or green?'

Max wanted it all to finish but there seemed to be nothing he could do. The brandy had numbed his brain. 'Blue,' he said, belching out the word.

Again the same wriggling motion, shoulders shaking until she sprang backwards, both hands raised in the air. Max looked up; Samantha whispered: 'Nothing. Seems you're always losing.' And Max continued to stare at Erika's fingers. He realised that he should simply have let the whole thing rest, but he heard himself protest feebly: 'How do I know you're not cheating?' Erika frowned and studied him for a moment before leaning forward and taking him by the hand. Slowly she pulled him towards her, drawing his fist on to her knee under the table, staring into his eyes. She was no longer giggling as he was pulled an inch at a time further forward, as far as he could go, until Erika gasped and closed her eyes. They held the position, frozen in a strange tableau, Max bent low over the table, Erika's back straight, her legs moving as she bit her bottom lip and quietly whimpered. The club had gone silent and the singer had finally admitted defeat. Samantha tapped Max on the shoulder.

'I think we should go now,' she said.

Chapter Four

Julia gasped as her body struck the water, the shock travelling to her fingers and down to her toes. As she surfaced she thrashed her legs and eased into a fast crawl stroke, eyes shut, slicing her arms through the waves, reaching forward and gliding as her body swivelled, cupping her hands and pulling back the water thrusting herself towards the shallow end of the pool. She reached the wall in twelve seconds and flipped over in a racing turn, cursing herself for mistiming it just a fraction so that she had to stretch for the tiles with her feet before pushing off again. For six laps she drove her body to the limit before slowing into a more gentle rhythm, moving lazily up and down the pool, breathing deeply when her face cleared the water, relishing the dull ache in her abdomen as she stretched and twisted.

She swam for fifteen minutes until she became aware that someone was standing at the deep end watching her. She could not see who it was, her eyes smarting with the sting of chlorine,

but it was a man; a large heavy shape. She forced herself into a final fast spurt up and down the pool, showing off just a little. Give him a show, she thought.

As she raised her head, blinking and tossing back her hair, she could see that the man was clapping and, as the water cleared from her ears, she heard him shout, 'Bravo!' She was mildly disappointed to discover that it was only poor old Max, looking slightly the worse for wear.

Under the careful grooming there were signs of a temporary disintegration. His cheeks were flushed, he wore dark glasses, overnight his voice had acquired a husky guttural tone and he seemed just a little unsteady on his feet.

'Would you care to join me?' she asked innocently but Max shook his head and shuddered as if the movement had caused him pain.

'I'm surprised to see you so early,' she said.

'Early?' he croaked. 'I practically had to fight my way out of their flat this morning.'

'You didn't enjoy your evening?'

Max sighed. 'Haven't had a night like that in years.' He paused. 'You're rather wicked, Julia. Where did you find a pair like those?'

Julia merely smiled and pushed away from the wall gently windmilling her arms in a relaxed backstroke. 'If you want to see them again, I can arrange it.'

'I know.' He followed her round the pool. 'You can arrange anything. But just give me a month to recover.'

She pulled herself out of the water, shook herself like a puppy and wrapped herself in a towelling robe. 'Come on, Max. I'll buy you a stiffener.'

'A nice place.' Max was yawning, trying to focus in the dim blur of the lounge. Julia sat on a stool beside him, dressed in a leotard, her head turbaned in a towel. 'Three hundred a year,' she said, 'buys you the pool, gymnasium, sauna, massage and privacy. Looks like you could do with all that.'

'Check,' he said. 'But right now I'll settle for a Fernet Branca.'

She ordered him the drink and he raised it to his nose,

sniffed, scowled and swallowed the dark brown liquid fast, grimacing and belching gently. She gave him a moment to get his breath back.

'Are you going to tell me what you were doing in Kuwait?'

Max shook his head.

'Oil or arms?' she asked. She was intrigued by his silence but she knew that if she pressed him, asked him long enough and often enough, he was bound to tell her. Again he shook his head. 'It's too big,' he said.

She was tempted to ask him about Jetec, while he was still weak from the debauch of the previous night, but it was too soon. One thing she had learnt years ago was the art of timing; to get someone to talk about things they wanted to keep quiet, you had to pick exactly the right moment . . . She switched tactics.

'But you've been worried?'

He nodded.

'Then if it's not business,' she said brightly, 'it's sex.'

'Mmm.' He removed his glasses, groaned, 'Shouldn't have done that,' and replaced them. 'I think I can handle a beer now.' He ordered a glass, took a sip and sighed. 'It's Pamela.'

Julia frowned. She had vague memories of Max's wife, a tall, rather absent-minded woman, nicely built, if she remembered correctly, but something of a frump. Julia had never been quite sure of the attraction. She had assumed that they had married young, before Max had discovered the extent of his ambition. Pamela was probably one of those who had been left behind in the race; or perhaps she had never bothered to compete. It would be interesting to find out. Pamela Rowlands could be useful.

'Is she playing around?'

'She hasn't got it in her,' Max said sadly. 'She's a mouse.'

'You don't prefer her that way?' she asked. 'Safe?'

'When I married her I thought she had everything.' He stared gloomily into his beer and Julia had to fight to keep her scorn from showing on her face. The old, old story. You would think they'd have learnt by now. If I was not here, she thought, he'd be telling it to the barman.

She half expected his bottom lip to tremble and his chin to

pucker as he continued: 'She's turned into a housewife. As for me, I run a poor second to a vacuum cleaner.'

'That's not exactly your style, Max. I take it you don't have servants.'

'She won't have them.'

'In that huge house?' Julia thought back to the time she had been there; a vast mock Georgian detached residence in Bucks. Six bedrooms and God knows how many bathrooms; and all that silver, and those horse brasses in his study; they alone would need full-time attention.

'She has to do everything herself.' He looked up now and Julia could sense it coming; the favour he was about to ask. If she could have seen his eyes they would have that pleading golden labrador look, what she had called the just-this-once expression; just help me out this one time and I'll be forever in your debt. She had seen it often. To Julia such an expression was a form of currency, with a high exchange rate; on such moments of weakness she built her empire. But it was never advisable to appear over-anxious.

'I'm no marriage counsellor,' she said brusquely.

'I know. But I'm sure you could do something. It's just that . . . ' He was searching for the correct way to put it, reluctant to grovel in front of her, to admit that he needed help. She realised that his marriage must have soured quite dramatically for him to come to this. Max Rowlands was not the type of man to admit to failure.

He tried to continue: 'You see . . . Pamela needs someone to guide her and tell her what it's all about. She's such an embarrassment to me. She doesn't even know how to dress.'

The last line was the key and Julia decided that the time had come to make it easy for him. 'And you want me to take her over?' she said.

Max looked relieved. He smiled at her enthusiastically, a small boy again. 'Yes, I do. Change everything, Julia. And charge everything.'

It's remarkable, she thought. They just walk into it. There's no need even to spin a web. They simply lie on their backs, kick their legs in the air and ask to be taken.

Pamela Rowlands was concentrating on her chandelier when the telephone rang. For twenty minutes she had perched, a little dangerously, on the step ladders, clutching a can of Windex and a duster, working on each tiny piece of glass. She was sure that somewhere she'd read that a chemical had been invented that simply sprayed on and cleaned the damn thing in one blast, without all this time-consuming polishing, but she could not find it anywhere. She had even asked the other girls at the coffee party that afternoon but none of them had heard of it. And now the phone was ringing.

As she climbed down the ladder she wondered who it could be; none of her friends surely. She had just left them all an hour ago; unless she had forgotten something at Delia's, her gloves maybe, but she didn't think so. And it could not be Max because he had phoned that morning saying he'd just got in and would be back in time for dinner. Her mind was still on the chandelier when she picked up the phone.

'I'm sorry? Julia who? Oh yes of course . . .'

Her first natural reaction was to ask why on earth she was being asked out to lunch, but that would be bad mannered. One simply did not ask baldly why one was being invited out. She stammered slightly as she spoke; a tiny worm of suspicion crept into her mind but she instantly dismissed it. If Julia was sleeping with Max she would not phone her up; that's the last thing she would do, unless she was a malicious bitch and she had not seemed malicious when they had met - hard and calculating perhaps, but not malicious. Like many of those who know little about the ways of the world, Pamela Rowlands believed implicitly that she was an excellent judge of character.

'Are you free tomorrow?' Julia was asking and she had to admit that she was, that she was free any time. And so she agreed. She was going out, by default she realised, because she could not be rude and could not think of an excuse; and anyway it would make a change.

She wrote down the name of the restaurant on her pad. 'That would be the Leicester Square tube, I suppose,' she said.

'Tottenham Court Road would be easier.' And Pamela had to interrupt as Julia began to give directions. My God, she

thought, surely I can find my way around Soho on my own and she wondered why she was sounding so pathetic, in her own house, telling a stranger that she did not get out much. What was wrong with her? She could feel her cheeks burn and she realised that she was blushing. And then Julia had gone and Pamela held the receiver at arm's length, looking dumbly at it. She put it down and began to walk through the house talking to herself and frowning. Finally she stopped. 'You're talking to yourself,' she said. 'This morning you talked to the kettle. Now stop it, Pamela. Don't be silly.' She climbed back up the ladder and began to work again on the chandelier and as she polished she was surprised to find that she was singing to herself.

Max had brought her a present from the Middle East. He was kind to her and gentle but he looked tired. He said he had been working very hard and was in bed by ten. She told him about the phone call and he said, 'That's nice.' He had no idea, he said, why Julia wanted to take her out but she was a lady of impeccable taste. Don't ask questions, he said, just enjoy yourself.

Later, in the middle of the night, she tried to waken him, caressing his shoulder but he turned his back and grunted something unintelligible in his sleep. She looked down at him, shook her head and returned to her own bed, telling herself that she would take his advice. She would enjoy herself.

She had allowed too much time and so she walked around Soho for half an hour. She did not want to get there first, after all. She could not remember the last time she had been in the area; a year ago, maybe two; it all looked so scruffy in the lunchtime sun. Someone bumped into her and growled at her in Greek and Pamela said sorry.

Julia was waiting for her, standing up at the table, her hand held out to greet her as if they were old friends. At first Pamela was flustered, feeling middle-aged and a little dowdy. Julia was even more striking than she had remembered and so sure of herself; even the waiters seemed awed by her. There was no outrageous flattery or attempts at flirtation, no 'cara

signorita's or 'bella ragazza's. They simply took the order and backed off.

Pamela was happy to let Julia order for her and she allowed her to lead the conversation. She found herself answering all sorts of questions about her home and the people next door. She chattered through the hors d'oeuvre and into the veal, through a bottle of wine and by the time they had reached the coffee she realised that she had been doing all the talking.

'It's just that I know nothing about suburban life,' Julia had said by way of explanation and somehow it seemed to make sense. With her flat and office in Regent's Park and her trips all round the world, what could she know about the coffee-morning set? But why should she care? Pamela did not know. All she realised was that Julia never said 'Is that so?' or 'My goodness' or any of those other giveaway lines which hint at boredom. She seemed genuinely interested and by the second brandy Pamela had accepted it. The woman simply wanted to be friends, no more than that. She could not understand why, but if that was what Julia wanted, then it was all right by her. And when it was suggested that they go to a private showing of Georges Mendel's summer collection, she simply accepted as if she went to fashion shows regularly. When the bill came she made a token attempt to share but Julia merely smiled, said she was very sweet but it was her invitation. The manager kissed Julia's hand on the way out and planted a neat peck on Pamela's cheek. It all seemed perfectly natural. As she stepped into the sunlight she realised that she had had quite a lot to drink but Julia was there at her side with a hand on her elbow to steady her.

She was attempting to be cool, elegant and sophisticated but when she saw the car and Luke holding the door open for her, she uttered an automatic squeal of excitement. She sank into the back seat, the backs of her legs tingling against the leather. As they glided away from the pavement she turned to Julia: 'What on earth is this?'

'Luke,' said Julia, 'would you tell my guest, Mrs Rowlands, about the car.'

'Certainly, Miss Hemmingway.' Luke spoke directly at the windscreen, a sombre heavy voice, reciting his favourite litany.

'Based on a design of the 1930s, twelve-inch, sixty-degree V cylinders, single overhead cam, independent front suspension, unequal length wishbones and telescopic dampers; an anti-roll bar, servo-assisted disc brakes . . .'

'Luke, stop,' said Julia as Pamela burst into a fit of laughter. 'I think you've made your point.'

'Very good, madam.'

In Curzon Street as the car drew up, Julia took Pamela's arm and guided her out and under a red canopy into the salon. They stood in the foyer and Pamela allowed a valet to take her coat. They walked together down the hallway, silently gliding across the thick carpet towards the hum of voices and the sound of music. For a moment Pamela felt in a daze and expected to wake up at home. She thought of pinching herself as one was traditionally supposed to do in these situations. Surreptitiously she tweaked her forearm and yelped. Julia turned round, eyebrows raised and Pamela smiled. 'This is all very regal,' she said, hiding her embarrassment.

'It's a big event in the social calendar,' said Julia as they entered the salon. Pamela took it all in; the audience, mostly women sitting on red velvet chairs clutching glossy brochures and watching models prance around on the stage to one of those tunes that she listened to on Capital Radio while cleaning the house.

A tall, slim young man with hennaed hair and dressed in denim clapped his hands when he saw them, excused himself from a group of admirers and came towards them, arms wide to greet them.

'Julia, angel, it's good to see you.' Pamela wondered if the whole world was pleased to see Julia Hemmingway and thought perhaps it was. She was introduced and shook hands with Georges; a firm handshake. She had expected a limp wrist but that was what came of thinking in clichés, she told herself. As Georges led them to their seats he chattered animatedly to Julia.

'You're in an expensive mood, I hope.'

'I could be if inspired,' said Julia.

'I guarantee it.' Georges beamed. 'I have dedicated a creation to you and only for you. I know you will adore it.'

As they settled in their seats Georges called for champagne and Pamela ineffectually tried to protest but he smiled and shook his head. 'To make you more relaxed,' he said.

'And put one in a buying mood, perhaps,' said Julia.

'You have brought your cheque book, my darling?'

'I'd be naked without it, wouldn't you say?' and she smiled at him.

For ten minutes they sat in silence watching the show while Pamela built up the courage to ask the questions that nagged at the back of her mind. It was the music and the champagne that gave her the nerve to do it, and the fact they were sitting side by side so that she could whisper and did not have to stare into those huge green eyes; she could simply lean over and ask, yet still she had to swallow hard before she could get the words out. 'Are you in contact with Max a great deal?'

'I see him quite regularly.' Julia's voice was level and unemotional.

'Should I feel jealous?' she asked the question quickly and Julia turned to gaze at her.

'Not at all. It's strictly a business relationship.'

Pamela felt herself begin to blush again. She apologised and Julia dismissed it.

'It's just that . . . ' she spoke slowly, trying to repair any damage that might have been done. ' . . . that I know so little about my husband's life.'

'Doesn't Max take you out?'

She shrugged. 'Too busy making money. I preferred it when he didn't have so much, when he was just a humble accountant.'

'You can't stop a man,' said Julia. 'You have to ride with him.' She spoke as though it were obvious, a simple truth.

'He's too far ahead and I don't want to race.'

'Then take a lover.'

Pamela was sipping champagne as Julia spoke and she giggled, the bubbles getting up her nose. She sneezed, chuckling at the same time, holding the back of her hand to her mouth. When she looked up she saw that Julia was gazing at her quizzically and again she snorted and giggled, realising how silly she must seem in front of all these women, laughing and

sneezing like a five-year-old at a party. But she simply could not imagine it.

Take a lover!

It was the way Julia had said it, as though it seemed the most natural thing in the world, like buying a hamster or something. But who could it be? Could it be John the accountant from next door who said sorry all the time? Sorry, he would say, when he knocked on the door, sorry to disturb you; sorry, when he asked for a Scotch and you only had gin, sorry if he thought he had stayed too long; the poor man was apologising for his very existence. Or Eric the golfer who talked about his swing all the time and did Tommy Cooper impersonations. Or the one they called Romeo who tried to pinch your bottom at parties and who told jokes about contraceptives . . . ?

Julia was still gazing at her, waiting for her to control herself.

'You must excuse me,' she wheezed at last. 'The very idea . . .'

'Does sex repel you?' Julia refused to be sidetracked.

'Far from it.'

'And Max? Is he generous?' Somehow she could ask the most intimate questions without seeming impertinent, as if it were quite natural to want to find out such things.

'He was at one time,' Pamela answered, serious now, 'but no longer. I realise that he has other women.'

'How do you know?'

'The usual signs. Men are so predictable, don't you think? And terribly stupid at times . . .'

But Julia was tapping her hand, interrupting her, pointing to the catwalk where a tall model was parading an elegant evening dress, long sleeved in blue and full length, the neckline slashed almost to the navel. 'It's beautiful,' Pamela whispered. 'What's the material?'

'Silk jersey.'

'I wish I could wear something like that.' She was hardly aware that she was talking, putting her dreams into words.

'You can,' Julia said.

Pamela shook her head. 'It's very revealing.' She turned and again Julia was gazing at her, but this time at her body. 'Some

people say that small breasts are an advantage, Pamela.'

Georges arrived, interrupting them. He winked at her and handed a pen to Julia, but Pamela did not notice. She was lost in a fantasy world, wondering how she would look in that dress, how it would feel next to her skin, but in her daydream she was alone. No one watched or admired her. She remained a solitary figure, even in her dreams.

She was still in something of a daze on the drive back to Julia's flat and made no objection when she was told that there was plenty of time to get the train. Her day had scarcely begun, Julia was saying, and she allowed herself to be led, not much caring where she was being taken.

She thought the flat was charming, walked round it, touching the furniture, gazing out over the park, turning to look at the pictures on the walls and caress the drapes and the tapestries. She felt she could ask questions now, even quite personal questions of her new friend.

'Is this all part of the family fortune? Did you inherit money?'

Julia, pouring coffee, shook her head. 'Believe it or not I'm illegitimate. All that I have I made myself.'

She sat next to Pamela and began to talk, slowly, telling her a story, her voice soft; a gentle story about a girl of twenty, a gorgeous young blonde Danish woman travelling on a train through the night, her only companion in the compartment being an American soldier. She was going home for Christmas. There was snow on the ground but in the carriage it was warm. The soldier was reading a book but every so often he would look up. When their eyes met they turned their heads away quickly. They were both young, both shy. After an hour or so the girl became drowsy and fell asleep. She was wearing a silver-fox fur coat and she snuggled down into it. She did not know how long she slept but in her dreams she was being touched and caressed. She awoke suddenly to find that the soldier had moved beside her and was gently stroking her hair. She was not afraid; he was so young and gentle. Silently she kissed him, at first almost sisterly, a chaste kiss, until she felt his hands inside her coat stripping her of her blouse.

She pulled herself away from him and stood in front of him

looking down, for a moment unsure of herself. She said later that if he had made a move to touch her, she might have been afraid but he sat silently as if hypnotised and she knew then that it was going to be all right. Slowly she unzipped her skirt and stood there, dressed only in her slip, then sank down again into her coat, raising one knee so that her leg touched his arm, then reaching for him, she pulled him on to her . . .

Julia took a sip of coffee and smiled. 'She said that never in her whole life, before or since, had she wanted a man with such intensity. When it was over, she slept until she reached her destination.'

Pamela stared at her, blinking, captivated by the story. Had anyone else told it, in any other company, she would have laughed. It was all too improbable and far too romantic. But perhaps, she thought, the champagne and the wine had worked a spell on her.

'And she never saw him again?' she asked, knowing the answer even as she spoke.

Julia shook her head. 'All she remembered was the book he was reading: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway.' And she began to laugh, breaking the spell. 'I told the story once to a man after we had made love. He said: "I'm glad he wasn't reading Dostoevsky."'

They laughed together and Pamela found she could hardly stop and she giggled until her cheekbones ached. And then Julia was talking again, something about marriage. She was saying that she did not believe in it, she preferred the excitement of an affair. The Prince Charming concept, she said, was a little archaic.

They sat for fifteen minutes, the conversation drifting around the edge of Pamela's mind. She could not really take it all in. Outside she saw a Jumbo jet circle on its way to Heathrow and she climbed aboard and it was bound for the Caribbean to some lagoon where she would wear a bikini all day and drink rum; in the evenings she would slip into the silk jersey dress and make herself up in vivid colours, smear her lips with scarlet and glide among the reefs, counting the stars until she became dizzy.

There was a knock at the door and Luke appeared. Julia

excused herself, left the room and returned a moment later. She took Pamela by the hand. 'I want you to meet two friends of mine.'

Pamela weakly mumbled something about having to leave but Julia had her by the elbow and was leading her towards the bathroom. She blinked as she followed Julia inside. In contrast to the summery cream of the drawing-room, the bathroom was small and cave-like, painted dark brown with heavy blinds over the window. She glanced down at her feet as they sank into the heavy black carpet tickling her almost to her ankles. There was a sunken bath and a bidet; a swivel chair stood in front of a washbasin and mirror which was lit from above by two small lamps. By the side of the chair Pamela could see two men, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. They were studying her seriously, looking into her face. Again she blinked and tried to move away but Julia was guiding her towards the chair.

'Pamela, meet Gunnar and Rex.'

They came towards her, one on either side of her and she nodded a greeting to them; they were young, in their early twenties, she guessed, slim-hipped and heavily muscled around the arms and shoulders. Gunnar was slightly taller, high cheek-boned, dark-haired and swarthy; Rex was fair and softer.

Without a word they gently eased her into the leather seat and spun her round so that she was facing the mirror. She turned quickly, looking for Julia, opening her mouth to say something although she was not sure quite what. Julia, at the door, glanced back over her shoulder at her. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'You're in good hands.' And she left, shutting the door behind her.

As Pamela turned back to face the mirror Gunnar bent over and deftly undid the top three buttons of her blouse while Rex bared her neck and shoulders exposing her body almost to the nipples. Automatically her hands went to her chest and crossed over her breasts but Gunnar firmly pulled them away and folded them in her lap. She stared in the mirror, ready to shout a complaint, a protest lurking in her throat. Had they smiled at each other or made any noise she would have yelled out and attempted to leave but their faces showed no sign of emotion

and they moved around her with the detachment of a pair of mechanics working on a car. Again she was spun around, a towel wrapped round her shoulders and the chair was tipped back so that her head rested on the edge of the basin. As she stared at the ceiling she felt the hiss of warm water on her scalp and strong fingers in her hair. The water turned from hot to cold and back once more, almost scalding her so that she trembled and closed her eyes. Her upper arms were level with the thighs of the men and they moved slowly against her as they worked on her hair, one of them rubbing in the shampoo, the other guiding the spray. She sighed deeply, listening to the water and breathing in the odours of the lotions.

When Rex moved away to pick up a brush she found herself gently pressing her shoulder into the hip of the other man but when she moved away, guiltily, he made no attempt to make further contact and she hoped that he had not noticed.

The shampooing over they turned her round again, rubbing her head with a towel, hard, almost brutal until she felt her scalp tingle. And now Rex was wafting a drier around, the warm air caressing her shoulders while Gunnar tugged at her hair, twisting and pulling. He moved round to stand in front of her, his hands in her hair still, pulling the length of it down past her shoulders, his knuckles resting for a moment on the swell of her upper breast. She stared at him in fright but again there was no emotion in his eyes as he studied her hair, staring at the image he was creating. Again she opened her mouth to say something but Gunnar held up one hand, his finger gently touching her lips. She understood that she was being asked not to move and for the first time he smiled at her, a small smile telling her to relax; and so she did, lying back again as they applied a face pack to her, drifting into daydream of Caribbean beaches and hot sun but this time there were people around her, tall athletic boys cavorting beside her, dancing and spinning, handstands and cartwheels, all of them naked.

The pack was removed sharply and she felt the sting of the damp air on her cheeks and a thrust in her back as the chair was raised so that she again faced the mirror. She stared at herself in amazement; her hair light and fluffy around a perfect

complexion. She thought of clichés, of peaches and cream and sunlight sparkling in her curls.

They had moved her blouse back up on to her shoulders but it remained unbuttoned and she saw that her breasts were rising and falling as though she had run for three miles and her nipples had sprung erect, showing sharply through the cotton. A zip of light to her left made her turn; Julia was standing in the doorway with a dress over her arm. Gunnar and Rex had gone and she realised that she was disappointed. It was all over.

'Stand up.' There was an edge to Julia's voice, a tone of command. Pamela did as she was bid and she saw that Julia was carrying the silk jersey dress. She wanted to say something but Julia had laid it on the chair and was helping her out of her blouse. 'And the bra,' she said. Pamela unhooked it at the front, a small clasp between the breasts letting Julia ease it from her shoulders. She stood naked from the waist up, surprised that she felt no embarrassment, amazed that she felt confident in front of this strange woman, hoping that she was being admired. Unasked she unzipped her skirt, stepped out of it and held up her arms for Julia to slip the dress over her head. She shivered as the material enveloped her, feeling the goose pimples rise along her arms and down her thighs. When she was ready, her hair fluffed back into place, she allowed herself to be led once more back to the drawing-room but this time she was made to walk straight across the room and through yet another door into a darkened room, decorated in grey; grey velvet curtains blocking out the sun, an enormous bed, the covers pulled back to expose blue satin sheets, fluffy rugs on the floor and bright cushions. By the dressing table Gunnar and Rex were standing deep in conversation and Pamela felt a tightness in her stomach at the sight of them.

They turned as she came in and motioned her to sit by the table. She stared at them unsmiling as she sat down. Gunnar put his hand to her face and tilted her chin back while Rex picked up a mascara brush. Again she closed her eyes as they worked on her, biting her lip so that she would not whimper, hoping that they would not notice that she was shivering at every touch. It lasted six minutes. She had counted the

seconds to stop herself trembling. When she opened her eyes she saw a whore: the eyes heavy in mascara and shadowed in green, her lips bright and glistening. Julia had gone. They made her stand, one touching each elbow, turned her round so that she moved closer to the bed, then they began to circle her and for the first time she heard their voices, strong, deep voices murmuring gently that she was exquisite, georgeous gorgeous, edible, fuckable. She closed her eyes as she felt Rex's hand trace a line down her spine, his knuckles pressing against each vertebra; she gasped as Gunnar stroked the zipper down the side of the dress and shuddered as it was eased from her shoulders and slid to the floor.

'Open your eyes now.' Rex stood in front of her, his face close to her, his eyes on a level with hers as he slowly leant forward to kiss her gently on the lips and she was not sure whether it was his hand on her breast or Gunnar's but now she had lost all control, grasping his hair with both hands and driving her tongue into his mouth, shaking her head furiously, squirming against his body until she was pushed violently from behind on to the bed and there were limbs all around her, tongues and teeth and the sweet smell of the two men grasping, probing, biting and sucking and as she dragged her mouth free of them she yelled, a great howl of delight and relief and total ecstatic abandonment.

Chapter Five

Julia awoke early next morning and as she showered and dressed she automatically went over in her mind the business of the day. Max was due to arrive at nine and she hoped that finally she would begin to see the benefits of all her work on the Rowlands family; she had spent enough time and energy on those two. But there was something about Max's attitude that intrigued her, his silence over the Middle East trip, and Jetec. What about Jetec? There was an aroma clinging to Max, the sweet smell of potential gain and Julia prided herself at being able to sniff out profit as a douser tracks water. She was rarely mistaken in her instincts and this one put up a stench of banknotes. But she would have to be wary. With Max Rowlands one always had to be wary.

She had a working breakfast with Lucy and complimented her on her appearance; her blouse sharply creased, the skirt neatly laundered, her smile firmly in place; the perfect secretary.

Max arrived promptly, smiled at Lucy and settled himself on the settee. Lucy left them alone and he smiled in turn at Julia, crossed his legs, fished a silver cigarette case from his inside pocket, snapped a lighter at it and drew a long breath. Julia studied him. He was certainly looking better than the morning after Samantha and Erika. He was cool, just a little bit too casual, feigning unconcern but she could sense the tension in him.

'Thank you for coming, Max.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'A pleasure. What's the problem?'

'No problem. I just wanted to see you. How's Pamela?'

'It's a beautiful dress,' he said.

'Stunning,' said Julia.

'Silk jersey material, I understand?'

'That's right. Suits her, don't you think?'

Lucy appeared with a pot of coffee and Max seemed glad of the interruption. Julia waited until he was sipping from his cup before springing the question: 'What are you up to with Jetec?'

He almost got away with it, almost remained nonchalant; she had to give him credit for trying. He did not splutter or spill his coffee, nothing like that. But the answer when it came was a giveaway. 'Jetec?' he repeated. 'What do you mean?' A forced innocence on his face, like a small boy caught with stolen apples.

'You're playing cat and mouse, Max,' she chided him.

For a moment they looked straight at one another. Max stood up and began to pace the floor, his coffee cup in his hand. 'I've kept this well hidden,' he said quietly. 'How did you know about Jetec?'

'That well-known little bird,' she said, smiling. Max frowned, allowing his guard to drop, looking a little puzzled. Julia stood up and held out a hand. 'Come, let me show you something.'

They walked hand in hand to the office and Julia swung the door open. Three young women were working inside, one tapping a calculator, another ripping copy from the telex and a third, Lucy, busy among the filing cabinets.

'Max, meet the team. Ladies, may I introduce Mr Row-

lands . . . Carol and Selena, my researchers and of course you already know Lucy.'

'Enchanté,' said Max, smiling at each of the girls in turn.

Julia permitted him a moment of gentle flirtation before turning to Lucy and asking for the Jetec file.

Lucy slid open a cabinet, thumbed through it and picked out a large blue folder. She handed it to Julia and eased her way past Max, signalling Carol and Selena to follow her. Julia glanced at the file and handed it over inviting him to examine it. There were share certificates, a prospectus, company reports and several clippings from the financial papers. He settled himself in a chair and began to read.

Max whistled through his teeth: 'Quite an investment,' he said.

'Exactly,' said Julia. 'Now you can see why I need to know what you are up to.'

He sighed and slowly shook his head, snapping the file closed and dropping it on the desk. 'I do realise that I'm in your debt, my dear . . . ' He sounded just a little pompous, as if he were addressing a junior member of his staff. ' . . . but you will appreciate that my responsibilities make it impossible . . . '

Julia held up one hand like a traffic policeman and he stammered to a halt, taken aback by the look on her face. She lowered her hand, reached behind her to the video machine and pressed a key. Max looked up at the screen as the picture flashed on and he began to smile, nibbling his little finger and showing the tip of his tongue, but as the picture changed to a close-up and one of the men moved his leg so that the woman's face came into sharp focus, twisted in the false grimace of orgasm, her head thrashing from side to side, he rose slowly to his feet, the smile dead on his lips.

'Pamela,' he whispered.

He stared in silence as the scene changed and he groaned deeply as he recognised Samantha and Erika.

'My God,' he said. 'I look old.'

'I wouldn't say that,' said Julia, switching off the machine. 'Nice editing, don't you think?'

'Very artistic,' he said, sitting down again. He rubbed his knuckles into his face and closed his eyes. A word formed, two

syllables, clearly enunciated in a whisper.

'No Max,' said Julia. 'Not blackmail. Let us call it information required for services rendered.'

For a full minute he sat motionless before looking up at her.

'Don't sell Jetec,' he said.

Julia smiled, leant across the video machine, pressed the 'eject' button, picked out the tape and flipped it across the desk on to Max's lap. He put it in his pocket and leant back into the chair, taking a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his brow.

'I feel I must warn you,' he said.

'Of what?'

'There's a catch.'

'Look Max, please don't be tiresome. I could lose a lot of money on this.'

'You could lose money,' he stared at her with the suspicion of anger in his eyes. 'What about me? I could be annihilated. Since I became chairman I've acquired a large chunk of the company shares.' He paused, wondering how much he need tell her. He fingered the tape in his pocket and made his decision. Julia Hemmingway would make a better ally than an enemy. 'You know we're into arms,' he said.

She nodded.

'And we've developed and perfected the C One Eleven aircraft engine. If we could only sell it, the shares would go sky high.'

He paused for effect. 'Julia, there's an Arab country that's offering fifty million for engines alone, apart from the missile contract.'

'Then what's the problem?'

'Politics.' He spat the word out. 'Our blasted government broke off diplomatic relations over Israel.'

'I see, so there's no way ...'

'There is,' he said looking mysterious, 'but ...'

'Max, I'm sorry, I am beginning to get a little confused.' She wished that Max could conduct a conversation like an adult human being instead of forever delighting in keeping little

secrets to himself, then offering them like stolen apples to the teacher.

'The word is,' he said, 'that our government needs to re-establish relations.'

'So that will help Jetec presumably.'

'No. Our Foreign Minister is against any volatile arms involvement. He wants an oil agreement with no strings attached but I know that he relies heavily on a junior minister.'

'So this man holds the key.'

Max nodded eagerly. 'Exactly. He is flying out some time soon to clear the ground for talks.'

'And sink the Jetec agreement.' Julia spoke softly, thinking aloud. 'Is this junior minister corruptible?'

Max shook his head. 'True blue. He even stroked Oxford. They lost that year.'

Julia smiled and scribbled on her pad. 'Does he have a name?'

'Smythe.' Max grimaced as if the word had a smell to it. 'The Right Honourable Donald Smythe.'

Julia wrote on her pad. 'And what do you know about him?'

Max shrugged his shoulders. 'He's a nothing. One of those who are born for the job. Short on intelligence and big on protocol.'

'Is he married?'

'I think so. Why?'

Now it was Julia's turn to play mysterious. She winked at him. 'Why don't you leave it to me to find out about Mr and Mrs Honourable Smythe.'

'It's only the Mister I worry about.'

'But it's always necessary to cover one's bets.' She rose from the desk and showed Max to the door. The meeting was over. She had other things to do. She kissed him on the cheek and walked him through the drawing-room to the door, waved him good-bye, then turned and called Lucy, Selena and Carol into the office. She picked up the Jetec file and held it in front of her.

'Ladies, we will be concentrating on this from now on. Consider it, if you will, as top priority. And Selena, the first engagement in the campaign goes to you.'

Lucy looked up. 'Does that mean we don't take on any other business?'

Julia raised one eyebrow and glared at her, speaking in a tone of mock severity. 'There are two rules, Lucy. Never turn away business and never buy retail.'

Lucy blushed, 'Sorry, Miss Hemmingway.'

'All right then. Let us now consider the Right Honourable Donald Smythe of the Foreign Office.'

In his office, Max Rowlands looked at the tape in his hand, the visual record of his sexual exploits and his wife's unashamed infidelity, one married couple and four strangers, and he wondered what he was up against; what sort of a woman was this Julia Hemmingway?

Chapter Six

It was perfect. A perfect day and the prospect of a perfect night. They had ridden for fifteen miles; he was on the big stallion, Julia on the gelding, riding across country to the shore line, moving fast and easily; he had led her in the jumps, over fences and hedges, showing her the way, guiding them both on towards the sea and when the horses had tired they left them by the shore and walked through the surf in their boots, kicking at the waves like children and breathing in the ozone, breathing in each other, long deep kisses with the wind in their hair. Her face had become pink with the exertion but he did not seem to mind and as long as he did not mind, she did not care; he had held her close to him, placed his hand over her face and had blown through his fingers to warm her up, making her sneeze.

Then they walked the horses to the edge of the woods and hobbled them while they went into the cottage, just the two of them alone in the world, making a fire of logs to heat them-

selves, making love in front of it like never before, his hands hard and smooth on her body, his eyes black in the dusk and the flickering firelight. When it was over they rode back to the stables, said good-bye to the horses and drove home; she wanted him again in the car and he laughed, called her names: insatiable, unquenchable, voracious.

She lay with her head against his shoulder, rubbing her cheek into the wool of his sweater and singing along with the radio, a gentle sound, not the screech of steel guitars, just the easy melodies of the American West Coast, simple surfing music to harmonise with.

It became dark quite suddenly, an autumn evening changing into a winter night, clouding over with no interlude of twilight, almost a tropical nightfall and he was being dazzled by the lights of oncoming cars. She shivered a little and pushed her face deeper against his shoulder, nibbling his ear and delighting at his laughter; she kissed him, pulled his head towards her, ignoring his growls to stop because he had to concentrate on the road and it was all she could do not to make love to him there and then; it was the speed perhaps and the heat and the proximity; two bodies alone in a confined space. She felt the moisture rise inside her and she turned his head seeking his mouth as the lights struck again and she was flung back and then forwards, spun round, cushioned by his shoulder so that her head did not hit the windscreen and still the music was playing:

let's go surfin' now
everybody's learnin' how
come on a safari with me.

But it was cold now. She was outside on her hands and knees coughing into the ditch looking downwards towards the sea miles away, the breeze curling through her hair and she murmured his name again and again, his name flashing through her numbed brain and the ache in her jaw; she could not seem to move her limbs properly; where was he? why was he not beside her on his hands and knees staring out to sea and listening to the music?

She tried to stand but her legs gave way so she squatted by the ditch looking over her shoulder at the car lying on its side and his face at the window, all bent and broken somehow, and bloody.

Why did he not come out? Why did he sit there all hunched up? She dragged herself towards him and pulled at the door but it would not open; she smelt something strange, a whiff of burning and the sweet sickly stench of petrol; his eyes were open, staring at her, his mouth moving: 'Julia.'

But still he did not come out and join her; she could not understand it; again she jerked at the door but it was jammed; she crawled back to the ditch looking for a rock to smash the window and get him out, get her hand inside and pull the little nipple thing so that the door would open and he would come out and they would sit side by side holding each other till the pain went away.

let's go surfin' now
come on a safari . . .

with a hissing noise in the background, spoiling the song so that she could hardly hear the words; it was like interference and if there was one thing she could not stand it was interference on the radio; probably a cheap radio, badly made; she would have to exchange it; she knew a shop in Battersea that did it; they gave you a big discount on the old one . . . The explosion sent her sprawling and when she turned to look back, the car was burning and she was crawling forward now towards his poor face in the window, his mouth wide open, silently screaming as the flames engulfed him, screaming her name as he died:

Help me, Julia, please please please please PLEASE . . .

'Please, Julia, please wake up . . .'

She was sitting upright, her back arched, her arms clutched around someone, a hand against her brow, stroking and gently holding on to her, speaking softly in her ear: 'Everything's all right now. Everything is fine, you just had a bad dream . . .'
The words of a mother to her child, calming her.

'Did I wake you?' Julia said, bright-eyed, staring round the room squeezing Lucy's hand.

'You were screaming.'

'I'm sorry, Lucy.' She lay back against the pillow feeling her pulse begin to slow back to normal and the shivering stop. The flames had gone again, until the next time.

'Are you all right now?' Lucy was asking.

'Just a dream,' she whispered. 'But a dream with an awful habit of recurring.'

'Is it horrible?'

'Terrifying.'

'Would it help if you told me?' There was a look of concern on her face and Julia covered herself with the sheet. She always slept naked and as she lay there, shivering with shock, she realised that perhaps Lucy might be embarrassed.

For a moment she wondered whether it might be a good idea to share the dream with her, but she decided against it. The flames were private and sacred.

'It's O.K. I'll feel better if I get up,' she said.

'Can I get you a drink?'

'Yes. Tea, I think.'

They sat in the drawing-room, Julia wearing a silk white kimono, Lucy in her white nightdress acting chirpy, chattering by her side like a hospital visitor cheering up the patient. Julia smiled at her thinking how sweet and fresh and naïve she was, yet how strange.

'When I was young,' she was saying, 'I always had nightmares. I would scream if a light was not left on in my room.' She rattled on, sharing her fears, trying to make Julia feel less foolish, comforting her with shared experiences.

'Do you want a sleeper?' she asked.

Julia nodded. 'I'd better. Just one.'

'Will that be enough?'

'It will have to be. I have a busy day ahead.'

'Don't you always?' She looked at her employer frowning, an edge of disapproval in her voice. 'You need some rest, Julia. I think you drive yourself too hard. There's plenty of time.'

'I don't think so,' she said. 'By the way, what am I doing in the morning?'

'After the meeting you go to the gym at ten and then back at twelve to go over the reports. After that . . .'

'Stop,' said Julia. 'I remember now.'

She lay back again as Lucy chattered on about her dreams, of dragons and bogey men and falling from cliffs, talking non-stop, trying to take Julia's mind off her troubles. At last she paused for breath and Julia quickly squeezed a question into the gap.

'How long have you been with me?'

'Nearly a year.'

'Do you like it?'

'Of course,' Lucy dropped her gaze to the floor and blushed. 'It's unusual.'

'And that's what appeals to you? That it's an unusual job?'

Lucy nodded. 'Would you do something for me?' she asked.

'Name it.'

'Play for me?'

Julia shrugged. 'At this time of night?'

'You know how it relaxes you.'

'Anything in particular?'

'Something peaceful and melancholic.'

Julia stood up and moved to the piano, flicked out the hem of her kimono and settled herself on the stool. Softly she began to play.

Lucy lay on the floor, resting on a cushion looking up at the piano, her face caught in the gentle glow of the lamp.

Julia played for a while, her eyes closed. 'To me,' she said, 'this piece conjures up memories of summer evenings in the country. You know? With the sun – how-do-they-say? – a ball of flame, that's it, a ball of flame suspended in the sky; fields of rich golden corn, people walking towards the village church, young couples sitting under the trees . . .' She opened her eyes and glanced across the room. 'Why don't you ever go out, Lucy?' she asked, as if the thought had only just occurred to her.

'I never want to.'

'But your evenings are usually free and yet you stay in, waiting for me.'

'Yes.'

'Then why?'

Lucy shook her head, lay back against the cushion, her eyes closed, apparently lost in the music.

'Are there no men?' Julia persisted.

'No. None at all.' There was a tone of finality in her voice which Julia took to mean mind-your-own-business and so she did.

She played on, saying nothing, and Lucy curled her legs beneath her, thinking of summer evenings in the country, the sun a ball of flame, fields of golden corn. But there was no one going to church and there were only two people sitting under the trees, only two.

Bernard Hawkins had been sitting in the same position for an hour, looking to his left and right, occasionally smiling as a pretty woman walked past his table. He was enjoying himself. He had not visited Swift's before but he had heard of it and the place was fully living up to his expectations. He was not the type to go clubbing but when it was business, well, he thought, it was quite justifiable, not to mention essential at the price of gin and tonic.

'How much did you figure?' he asked Peter the diary reporter who was sitting next to him.

Peter shrugged. 'The way you're going, you'll be lucky to see change of twenty quid by the end of the night.'

'Good heavens.' He turned to beam at a tall red-head who was passing and he did not notice that he had spilt gin on his tie.

It was an unlikely pairing, Hawkins and Peter; the one being the model of respectability on the newspaper, the other the guttersnipe scrounging in dirt for gossip, but it was an alliance arising out of mutual need. For his part Peter wanted all the insight he could get into the workings of the City. The diary was not too strong in that department and was forever losing out to the opposition, partly because Hawkins in the past had

protected his contacts and sabotaged much of what Peter dug up. But now the man wanted something so Peter obliged. His world revolved around debts and favours owed, regularly oiled by tenners' palmed into greasy fists.

The evening had begun in the pub when he had overheard Hawkins mention the name of Max Rowlands.

He'd gone back to the office, made a few calls and collared Hawkins later.

'If it helps any,' he had said, 'your man was whooping it up in Swift's the other night.'

Hawkins was impressed. He had bought Peter a drink and had decided to look in that night. He was glad when Peter offered to come along. It was just as well he had. Hawkins was no fool and he knew that he would need the little man. This was not his sort of beat at all.

'Lovely singer don't you think?' he said.

'Les,' said Peter.

'Oh?'

'She likes ladies,' he explained.

'Oh, I see.' He paused thinking it over. 'Shouldn't I go and see the manager now?' he asked.

Peter shook his head. 'Not Henry. He's *stumm*. He maintains a silence regarding his members; makes them feel secure; whether he gets part of the take afterwards I don't know.' He nodded across the floor. 'There's our man,' he said, waving over a waiter.

The man appeared at the table smiling and holding out his pad to take an order. 'Hi, Percy,' said Peter, 'I understand our old friend Max Rowlands was here the other night.'

'He certainly was, sir,' Percy grimaced, speaking in a whisper. 'Caused a right old ruckus.'

'What do you know then?'

'I've got a smokoe in ten minutes, sir.'

'Right.'

Peter and Hawkins went into the alley, and now the latter was feeling quite excited; actually scuffling round back alleys at one in the morning with a skinful of G. and T. Goodness knows what the chaps would say. He was really enjoying himself.

They spotted Percy, in traditional fashion, by the glow of his cigarette.

'Mob-handed he was,' Percy wasted no time in getting into his story. 'Five birds, three fellas.'

'Do we know the girls?' asked Peter.

'Usual lot. Samantha Thingy from the chocolate ads and her friend Erika. Didn't know the others.'

'And the men?'

Percy shrugged. 'Dunno. Arabs.'

'Arabs,' Hawkins squealed. 'Where from?'

Percy looked at Peter who shrugged and made a gesture of thumb against index finger and flashed his other hand, palm outwards.

'Of course,' said Hawkins, reaching into his wallet producing a five pound note. Percy palmed it neatly.

'From Kubran,' he said, 'On their way to Washington I gather.'

Hawkins clapped his hands. He was already adding up two and two and making eight. He only half listened as Percy told Peter about some incident . . . 'You should have seen it. Panties on the table, right in front of Lena. Bobby went up to him with the card and said, "Do you want more champagne or have you enough on your plate?" But Rowlands didn't laugh . . .'

They went back to the club for another half hour. Hawkins was thinking it through. Already he had enough to do a speculative piece linking Jetec with Kubran, but he would not do it. He would wait and get the whole story; no point in tipping off the other papers. He had another gin and became distracted by the attentions of the red-head who had previously ignored him but who now seemed to find him interesting. He was all set to go across to her table when Peter tugged his sleeve, told him she was on the game and it would cost him fifty.

'Oh my goodness,' he said. 'Do you think she takes credit cards?'

'She'll take anything,' said Peter.

'American Express?'

'Shouldn't wonder.'

'Right then.'

The next morning despite a mild hangover Bernard Hawkins was in the office early, his message already typed out to the Washington correspondent.

The foreign editor looked at it and shrugged. 'He'll do his best, Bernard, but he's pretty tied up right now, you know.'

'It could be a big one,' said Hawkins enthusiastically.

'O.K. then.'

The diplomatic correspondent was leaning against the desk and peered over the foreign editor's shoulder. He glanced up at Hawkins.

'Looking for Rowlands, are you?'

'That's right.'

'Well if I were you I'd have a go at the Foreign Office. They don't like him one bit.'

'Thanks. I will.'

'Try Donald Smythe. He's your man.'

'Great, lovely, thank you.' And Hawkins went back to his office a happy man.

Chapter Seven

The little man stepped out of the taxi and made his way round the back of Harrods to a side street, looked around him and scurried down a set of steps into a basement. He stopped at the door, briefly scanning the notice and mouthing the words: 'Health Club. Members Only'. Gently he pushed the door open just enough so that he could see a white-coated receptionist sitting at a desk, flipping through her files. He closed the door, squatted on his haunches and waited, counting slowly to one hundred. Then he stood and opened the door once more. The woman was still there. He squatted again. Five times he repeated the process until he saw that she had left her post. He slipped quickly inside, tip-toed across the carpet and round the desk to the door marked changing-room. He ignored it, moved on past the pool to the swing door. He took a breath and pushed his way inside standing marvelling at the sight before him: women lying on machines, on their backs, on their stomachs, women being spun round by belts whirling across

their breasts, women pushing weights and squatting under bar-bells, women cycling on stationary tandems: and all dressed identically in black one-piece costumes, a herd of elephantine ballet dancers. Never had he seen so much flesh in one place.

He stepped cautiously into the gymnasium and the women stopped what they were doing to stare at him. He walked past them ignoring the tutts and the muttered grunts of disapproval, keeping an eye on the largest of them, the one swinging the dumb-bells. He had spotted the woman he was looking for. She stood out amidst all the rolls of fat, a tall elegant creature swinging rhythmically between a set of parallel bars.

In spite of himself he felt his manhood rise towards her. He gaped at the long thighs as they swung in front of his eyes and he cowered in embarrassment, tucking his chin into his shoulder and moving faster.

‘Miss Hemmingway?’ His voice a whisper, looking up at her.

She nodded at him but said nothing. He glanced over his shoulder, turned back towards her and hissed, ‘Try not to notice me. I am the one you are expecting. I have come on the personal orders of the Count.’

Julia stopped in mid-swing, legs pointing in the air, supporting her body by her hands, a perfect hand-stand on the bar.

‘You must understand he cannot meet you personally and he has left it to me to make the arrangements . . .’

She tipped over and tucked in her knees, her legs hurtling past his head.

‘It was impossible to reveal the details on the telephone. No one must be aware . . .’ He paused, whispering even quieter. ‘We are assured through diplomatic sources that we can count on your discretion.’

Julia let go her hold and somersaulted to the floor landing in a perfect crouch, her feet apart, hitting the floor almost without a sound. She stood erect, bent to touch her toes, dropped on the floor and did ten press-ups, jumped again to her feet and moved to one of the bicycles. She was moving fast, pedalling hard, head down when the little man appeared again at her elbow.

‘Obviously, in his own country the movements of the Count are very restricted . . .’

She left the bicycle and walked towards the showers.

'Even here in London he is followed everywhere.'

He stopped momentarily as she stepped into one of the cubicles. Glancing behind him he darted inside the shower area. Julia had vanished behind a curtain. He waited, unsure of himself and blinked as a leotard floated over the rail and landed on his head. Leaning towards the shower as the water began to hiss, he shouted:

'I cannot impress too highly upon you the need for absolute secrecy. No one must know of our conversation or about anything that may come of it.'

The curtain snapped back and Julia emerged draped in a towel. Stepping out she crossed the floor to a massage table and vaulted on top, stretching her legs to lie on her back. From behind a curtain stepped a large masseur. He ignored the little man and began to slap oil on Julia's legs. She spoke for the first time. 'Don't worry. Victor is completely deaf.'

He frowned and shuffled behind the masseur, turned and violently clapped his hands by the man's ears. There was no reaction. Still frowning he returned to Julia and squatted by the table.

'You must understand that in our country the Count has - uhm - liaisons with only the highest-born women. And when he is abroad anyone he comes into contact with is screened most carefully so that the standards of his relationships are maintained in accordance with the dignity of his royal birth.' He paused. 'His Royal Highness is a man of peculiar taste.'

Julia looked down at him. 'I can fit him in tonight. Wait behind and give me the details.'

She turned her head away and closed her eyes, relaxing to the skills of the masseur. The little man bowed and backed out, turned and scuttled through the gymnasium, trying not to trip over women on his way out.

Lucy was confused and becoming just the tiniest bit agitated. She had been waiting for Julia to emerge from the bathroom for . . . she glanced again at her watch . . . forty minutes! She could not think what was keeping her. There was business to be

done and decisions to be made. Julia never took forty minutes just to dress and make up. Lucy could not understand it and when she did not understand things she tended to become impatient; not that she would ever show it of course, but she liked things to go smoothly.

She knocked on the door.

'Come in,' a sing-song voice replied.

Lucy pushed the door open and stood speechless at the sight before her; sitting by the mirror was a slut, a gorgeous slut admittedly but a real hundred per cent trollop complete with tight skirt and sweater showing a cleavage and the hint of nipple, a scarlet slash of a mouth and big green eyes, daubed in black. Julia stood up and struck a pose, the knee bent and jutting through the slit in her skirt, pouting, then running her tongue around her lips.

'You like the image?' she growled in a strange husky voice.

'It's unusual,' said Lucy diplomatically.

'Where I'm going I don't want to appear conspicuous,' she explained, smiling at the confusion on Lucy's face.

'Is this Jetec?'

Julia shook her head, blowing her hair from her face. 'Nope. This comes under the heading of any other business.'

'Well, I only hope it is profitable.' And there was the trace of a sulk in her voice.

'It could be. This is an investment. After this evening a gentleman of some influence will be in my debt.'

'Another?' said Lucy, sniffing.

Julia swayed up to her, Mae West style, and kissed her on the cheek, depositing a smear of lipstick. 'Don't wait up for me sweetie,' she said, tickling her under the chin.

Lucy drew back. 'Selena's here,' she said.

'Already?'

'You did say it was top priority, Miss Hemmingway.'

Julia followed Lucy into the office and leant against the door, hand on hip. Selena looked up and grinned but said nothing.

'How did it go?' Julia asked.

'Interesting.' She reached into her jacket and flipped out a notebook, cleared her throat and began to read:

'Tuesday the twenty-fourth, at one o'clock, the subject left his office and made for St James's . . .'

'The club?' asked Julia.

'The park.'

'Ah.'

'At 1.03 he took a seat by the lake and had lunch . . .'

'Lunch? You mean he eats sandwiches?'

'Chicken and liver. And paté.'

'Good Lord.'

'He read the *Financial Times* and at 1.44 he crossed the Mall into the West End. At 2.05 he entered the Jacey Cinema in Piccadilly. He left an hour and a half later, at 3.32 to be precise, and caught a cab back to the office. He is apparently a regular at the Jacey, according to the girl in the box office.'

'Excellent,' said Julia. 'And do we have anything on the wife?'

Selena turned a page. 'Very County. Mid thirties, good figure. Two children both at boarding school. Said to be loose tongued and something of an embarrassment to FO functions.'

'In what way? What does she say?'

'Nothing important. The way I see it, she is simply vivacious. Laughs a lot. If you laugh you can embarrass the FO.'

Julia smiled. 'What about her reputation? Any lovers?'

'None. She's clean.'

'Nothing in the past?'

'Not that I can find.'

'Then we shall have to think about the future. What are her interests?'

'Horses.'

'She plays?'

'She owns,' said Selena, snapping her notebook shut. 'Each morning at dawn she rides on Hampstead Heath.'

'And that's it?'

Selena nodded. Julia thanked her and turned to Lucy. 'Right then. Tomorrow it's healthy exercise. Up with the dawn. But tonight we plumb the depths.' She turned, waved over her shoulder and shimmied out of the flat.

The Panther had stood for fifteen minutes outside the Albert

Memorial and in the back Julia glanced in mild irritation at her watch. Punctuality, she thought, is next to godliness. She tapped her fingers on the back of the seat and told herself not to get annoyed. Perhaps it was the way she was dressed; if you wear a hooker's clothes maybe you think like one. Idly she wondered what fifteen minutes of her time might be worth; one hundred pounds a night, meaning perhaps five hours, which is a quarter of twenty . . . she was interrupted by Luke pointing to the park. A tall, graceful figure was hurrying towards them. He stopped on the pavement, briefly glanced behind him and moved forward. Julia pushed the door open.

'Miss Hemmingway?'

'Do come in.' She shifted over and his eyes automatically dropped to her thighs as they flashed in front of him. 'I think Julia would be more appropriate for tonight, don't you?'

He smiled and settled himself beside her, picking a piece of fluff from the sleeve of his red velvet tuxedo. 'I'm sorry I'm a little late,' the voice had just the trace of a mid-European accent. 'But, as they say in the movies, I had to shake my tail.'

'It's a wonder you could get away from anyone wearing a jacket like that. Couldn't you have dressed a little less conspicuously?'

He looked surprised. 'This is my normal dress,' he said.

'Fine.' Julia shrugged her shoulders, leant forward and snapped open the cocktail cabinet. A pewter shaker lay in a small bucket of ice. She poured two drinks, handed him a glass and raised hers in a toast.

'May we sink to the depths of your desires,' she said.

'All the way down,' he agreed.

They sat in silence as Luke drove through the park. Occasionally Julia glanced at him and he smiled at her nervously. He was handsome, no doubt about it.

'You have the money?' she asked. He nodded, reached into his tuxedo and handed her a large brown envelope.

They turned into Ladbroke Grove and as they rode over the hill past the large expensive houses, set back from the road, which gave way to the run-down flats of North Kensington where the gutters ran full and groups of men, shabbily dressed, scuffed their feet at street corners, Julia felt the adrenalin begin

to pump inside her. It had been a long time since she had travelled into the badlands. She was getting soft. In the past eighteen months life had centred round Mayfair, Knightsbridge and the park with regular trips to the more expensive areas of New York, Paris and Rome. Business had been good. There had been no need to venture into areas like North Kensington. Maybe one needed a visa these days, she thought. She noticed that the Count was sitting hunched forward, hands clenched round his glass, his knees pressed together and the pulse in his jaw twitching. Perhaps he was apprehensive, or was it merely the eager anticipation of the dubious delights that awaited him.

Luke drove carefully and made three turns until he reached his destination. Julia looked around, pleased to see that there was no one around. It was dark and dismal. She could not help thinking that in Regent's Park she had left a warm light summer evening, but here it could be winter, the buildings colourless and ugly, the streets treeless and littered with garbage. But at least it was quiet, only the muffled shouts from the pubs of Portobello Road to disturb them.

Luke opened the passenger door and helped the Count on to the pavement. Julia could see that the man was trembling quite visibly now and she hoped that he was not going to pose any problems.

'You will be all right, madam,' Luke said.

'Of course. But don't wait. The car is a little too spectacular for this part of the world. Drive around for ten minutes and meet me back here.'

Luke frowned but said nothing and Julia led the Count along an alley and up the steps of a crumbling three-storey building. There were no lights anywhere. The whole area appeared to be derelict.

She pushed the bell and smiled at her companion. He was staring ahead of him, eyes bulging, biting his lip. The door was opened a fraction of an inch and a deep male voice grunted something unintelligible. Julia tried to put some spirit into the proceedings.

'I reserved,' she said. 'Table for one. A Mr Jones.'

At first there was no response and then the man coughed

and spat. The door was swung open and they moved slowly along a darkened corridor. There had been no concession made to eroticism. The peeling walls were painted in a dark dismal green. The staircase was black and rotten. At the foot Julia could make out the shapes of three men; two were white, she thought, and one a West Indian. Again she said she had brought Mr Jones. 'I called earlier,' she said, annoyed that there was a catch to her voice. This was no place to sound nervous. One of the men moved towards her, his hand held out. She gave him the envelope and he moved back into the gloom. She could hear his thumb rasping over the notes and the snap of his tongue as he licked his fingers to count the money. Eventually he grunted. 'The very top, right-hand side.'

Julia took the Count's hand and led him up the stairs. The place smelt like a farm. There was no lighting and they had to feel their way along the walls. At the first landing a door stood ajar. Julia stopped as a sound came from inside and through the door she could vaguely make out the shape of two bodies crushed together on a mattress, moving fast. The Count was shaking now and as he bent forward for a closer look, a large brown foot was raised from the floor and the door was kicked hard in his face, a deep male voice grunting a curse followed by the squeal of a woman.

As they moved up the next flight, a figure lurched into them and Julia stepped back against the wall, holding her breath so that she would not choke on the sweet stink of sweat and whisky which hung round it like a fog. A girl lay on the landing, dressed only in a shirt, her legs apart; she stared blankly at them and Julia felt the Count's hand tighten in hers, the perspiration running off him into her palm and down her fingers.

Finally they came to his room. As Julia pushed the door open he muttered something in a language she did not understand. He looked in and she whispered that perhaps they would meet again but he refused to drop her hand. He turned and spoke again, but she could not understand and he repeated himself in English. 'You must stay.'

'Oh no,' she shook her head. 'That was not part of the deal.'

'Please,' he pleaded, 'just for a few seconds and then you

leave.' She looked at him and gave in. If that was what he wanted. But it would all go down in the book on the credit side.

The room was bare but for a single bed in one corner and lit by a naked bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling. A girl turned towards them as they entered. She was small, a West Indian, very black with a child's face. They had said she was seventeen but Julia doubted it. She was wearing a full-length white wedding gown, the veil trailing to the floor and she held a posy of forget-me-nots in one hand. Slowly the Count freed his hand from Julia's and moved towards the girl. Julia stood with her back to the door watching fascinated, looking into the girl's eyes and trying to read something in them, but they were expressionless, fixed on the man approaching her.

Julia moved to one side so that she could see the Count's face, the expression she knew so well, that she had seen so often on others, the gaze of single-minded, blinkered lust; but there was something more, just a suggestion of gentleness as if he were approaching something sacred; she did not dare try to guess what it was in his past that drove him to such an odd sexual need. She wanted to leave and let him consummate whatever strange relationship he had paid for; in her mind flowed a mixture of curiosity and excitement flavoured with a pinch of age-old disgust. She would stay just a moment longer.

Twice the Count circled the girl, staring at her but making no attempt to touch. She returned his gaze with an expression of such innocence that even Julia was tempted to believe. At last he reached for her and took the flowers from her hand. He stepped back and nodded to her. Slowly she dropped her gaze and unfastened the gown, freeing the bow at her neck and popping the buttons which ran down the front. The dress slipped slowly down her body and she stood in a short white slip and a pair of white stockings.

Julia heard the man's breath hiss out of him and he swayed slightly before nodding again. The girl lifted one leg, balancing perfectly as she removed first one stocking and then the other; she waited for a moment before slipping the strap over her shoulders and letting it drop, hunching her shoulders so that

the garment slid to the floor. Julia was puzzled, curious as to why she had not pulled it over her head, then she scolded herself for her foolishness. Finally the girl was naked but for a tiny pair of white panties; she was exquisitely built, just out of childhood, the large brown nipples still puffy and the surge of the lower belly only beginning to show.

She stood with her legs together and her hands at her side but as the Count knelt before her, she moved like a soldier, standing 'easy', her legs spread wide. Slowly the Count bent forward from the waist, pushed his face between her legs and looked up at her before moving his tongue around in a circular motion, first one thigh and then the other, moving higher until he could go no further and the girl gasped, it seemed involuntarily, a small girlish sigh and his back stiffened as she brought her hands to his head, as if to bless him. But when Julia looked up at the young face she could see that this was no child fresh into adolescence and as she turned to go the girl offered her an enormous lecherous wink before reaching down, lifting the Count up, her hands under his arms, then dropping in turn to her knees, grasping for his trouser buttons, her little pink tongue spitting cobra-like from her mouth.

Julia was glad to be gone from the room but something made her stay for a moment at the door. She listened to the cries of the Count as he lost control of himself and then she moved away to the stairs. The woman was still sitting on the landing and, as Julia passed, she held up her hand in salute. Julia returned the gesture and walked past her. Dimly down the well of the stairs she could see the three pimps talking together and as she reached the first landing a man came out of one of the rooms; it was the one who had kicked the door shut. He was an enormous bear of a man, naked and still in a state of high sexual excitement, clutching himself in his hands and licking his lips when he saw her come towards him. Julia was reminded of a heavyweight boxer as she looked into the dull eyes, the one Muhammad Ali had beaten, what was his name? Sonny Liston. He moved forward to block her path, gesturing an obscenity with his fist. She stared down at him and shook her head, hoping to stall him, thinking that he may decide to go back to his woman who was shouting his name but instead

he turned and yelled something to the pimps. They looked up and began to climb the stairs. Julia saw that one of them was smiling and she knew that she could not rely on their help. They had been paid, after all; she had no hold over them.

As the big man turned back towards her she kicked out, catching him where he was holding himself. It was a brutal blow; he grunted and bent double and she grabbed his ears, bringing her knee hard into his throat, throwing him back into the bedroom where he hit the floor with a thud that shook the landing.

The men on the stairs stopped and Julia smiled down at them. She knew that she had a two or three second advantage over them during the psychological moment of shock when something unexpected happens and the mind freezes the body into inaction; for a brief time she had them in her power but she knew that she had to move quickly. If the big man was their friend and they decided to attack, she knew she would have no chance, not in such a confined space. The Count would be no help. Even if he was to hear the sound of the fight he would not leave his young black bride. All this went through her mind as she stepped among them. She eased her way past the first two men, the West Indian and the small swarthy one, smiling graciously as if she were on a country walk. But the third would be the test; an ugly bald character, he was grinning while the others stared motionless, their expressions blank. He leant against the wall one step below, his tongue showing through broken yellow teeth. She could smell the stale breath of them as she moved one step down and she thought she might have made it until the ugly one held out a hand in front of her.

'Where do you think you're . . .' A broken, flat guttural whine and then a scream as she stabbed at his eyes, a short blow from the elbow turning her fingers as they hit flesh under the socket; as he fell backwards she jumped but her foot caught on his body and they tumbled down the remaining stairs, arms and legs wrapped round one another.

Julia was first to her feet, stumbling for the door, reaching for it and praying it would open smoothly. If it were locked from the inside then she was in trouble; behind her the others

were picking their way over the body and she could hear their grunts, mingled with his moans and she grabbed the lock and twisted. The door swung open and she was out and staggering, half falling down the stone steps into the alley, landing on the pavement on her hands and knees and rising fast like a sprinter off the block, fast towards the safety of the car, the curses of her pursuers polluting her ears.

She had about eighty yards to run to reach Luke and she knew she could make it; she was safe but she was angry, furious that she had let herself be caught in such a position, brawling in a slum and putting herself at risk merely to satisfy the strange needs of a man she did not know; and for what? So that perhaps he might be useful to her one day, and perhaps she may never see him again.

She could easily beat them to the car but the hell with it. She did not want them to see it. The Panther was unique. They could trace it if they wanted to and they would be able to find her whenever they felt like it. No, it was not good enough . . .

In the house, on the stairs, she would have been torn apart, but here on the street, on the cobbles . . . the hell with it.

She stopped and spun round. The West Indian was in the lead and she kicked out at him, right-footed, aiming high, a ballet kick reaching for his throat but landing instead on his upper chest hard enough to throw him against the wall.

The other had skidded to a halt now and dropped into a crouch, moving sideways, crab-like towards her. She knew she had not much time before the West Indian realised that nothing was broken. She struck out with her fist for his face, feinting to the left so that his left hand came across to guard his jaw, and she caught him a short jab to the kidneys with her right. He gasped and drew breath and she stepped into him and cut a heavy blow, side handed with her left, chopping down across the neck where it met the shoulder and she felt the collar bone snap and heard him scream.

She turned but the West Indian was looking warily at her now, the glint of pursuit gone from his eyes; as she walked towards him he made a fast decision, spun away and ran back towards the house.

Julia looked at the man writhing at her feet, stepped over him and made her way smartly to the corner. Luke was standing fifty yards away, leaning against the car, smoking. Quietly he opened the door for her.

'Where to now, madam?'

'Home,' she whispered, feeling the adrenalin leave her body and the bruises rise to the surface. Suddenly she felt weary. She was due to be up with the dawn, to ride a horse on the Heath and, right then, after the squalor, she thought it would be just the therapy she needed. But first she needed a bath and a full night's sleep.

Chapter Eight

Liz Smythe awoke slowly and reluctantly as the dawn broke through the chink in her curtains and lit up her dreams. She groaned and turned over, surfaced through her imagination and raised her eyes to the ceiling. Liz had a routine in the summer months. Her bedroom faced south and she left her curtains open just enough so that the sunlight zipped straight on to her pillow and she never had any need of an alarm clock. As the summer wore on she would move her pillow so that she always caught the light.

But occasionally, like this morning, she struggled to stay locked into her subconscious, fighting to remain in the exciting and erotic world of her imagination, aware even as she awoke that the dream would be irretrievably gone. Lazily she stretched under the sheet, pointing the toes of her left foot until she could feel the tension in her calf muscle. She repeated the process with her right foot, stretching her arms at the same time, still heavy with sleep and aroused by her dreams. If only

she could remember . . . just a fragment would be enough. Who was it? Where was it? She remembered only that it was in colour and that it was violent.

She brought one hand to her mouth and lazily licked her fingers, stroked her neck and brought her hand down over her breasts and across her stomach, testing for firmness through the cotton pyjama shirt, and finally over the mound of flesh down into the moisture between her thighs. She groaned and turned her head to one side, sucking her lower lip, trying to remember, fighting to bring back the fleeting images, tightening her grip upon herself until the sound of a rasping cough made her body stiffen; another cough and a gargle from the wall as her husband turned in his sleep in the next room.

Liz could hear him gurgle up phlegm from his throat and grunt, a little machine-gun burst of a cough and a muffled snort coming through the plaster board which had served as a Berlin Wall to their sexual lives for the past five years.

'All right, you bastard,' she said aloud. 'You win.'

Angrily she threw back the sheet and vaulted out of bed, shivering in the early morning chill; she wrapped her arms round her body and shuffled across to the shower, glancing at the clock. It was 5.30 which gave her time for a long exhausting ride.

The sun had drawn a light mist out of the ground and Liz raced fast through it, her buttocks high out of the saddle, her head down by the horse's neck, murmuring to the beast, looking straight ahead through the trees, breathing in the very taste of the dawn. She had been in the saddle for half an hour, cantering and strolling, occasionally giving the big gelding its head and delighting in the feeling of strength in her legs and arms as she guided it through the trees, thinking she could go on for ever, just gallop off into the sunrise and keep going, never stop, never return, just gallop off the edge of the world . . . but the horse's chest was heaving and its breath shortening, a rasp in its throat, reminding her of Donald. Slowly she reined in, letting the horse rest, and rejected, for the moment, her fantasies.

As she stood in the stirrups she became aware that someone

was watching her. She looked to her right and saw a rider a hundred yards away motionless on the skyline.

Her first feeling was that of annoyance. Normally at this hour she had the Heath to herself, but it was with a slight shiver of disappointment that she noticed the rider was a woman, cantering easily towards her now, tight in the saddle American-style. Liz swung the head of her mount around to meet her and as the woman approached she could not help but feel impressed by the elegant cut of her costume, the finely shaped features and the silken hair streaming out behind her.

Liz was the first to speak, slightly out of breath, smiling and shouting a hello, agreeing about the weather, complimenting the other woman on her horse, completely at home with the stranger, their common interest breaking through the traditional reserve, talking freely like owners of identical sports cars or mothers discussing their children.

'You're a stranger,' she said, stating the obvious. 'No one round here gets up this early.'

'I hope I'm not intruding.'

'Don't be silly. It's a free world and a beautiful morning.' Liz shook the hair from her eyes and breathed deeply, calming her horse which was shying away from the stallion. 'It's nice to have someone to talk to. Which way are you going?'

In reply the other woman spurred her horse and waved, moving fast through the trees towards the open space. Liz followed and they rode together in silence savouring the freshness of the hour before the rest of the world awoke. They pulled up at a fence and Liz dismounted.

'Don't I know you?' she asked. The face seemed familiar but the woman shook her head.

'I'm sure we have met somewhere,' Liz insisted. 'I'm Liz Smythe.'

'Julia Hemmingway.'

Liz snapped her fingers in recognition. 'Ah, now I know. I remember seeing you on the front covers dressed in gorgeous clothes. I was green with envy.'

'That's all in the past now,' said Julia. 'I stopped modelling some time ago.'

Liz remounted and pointed back the way they had come. 'I

live over there, by the stables. Won't you join me for some coffee?"

'You're very kind,' Julia smiled and Liz was happy. Julia Hemmingway, she thought, top model, or at least, ex-top model, and a friendly ex-top model at that, coming for coffee; what a pleasant surprise. As they cantered back together, talking of nothing in particular, Liz was suddenly conscious of her own loneliness, that she had had no one for years to talk to and laugh properly with. But the feeling passed as quickly as it had come and when she led Julia through the back gate into the garden and through into the kitchen she was smiling, her face flushed with exercise, ready for anything.

'I remember you were always photographed in the most exotic places . . . ' They were sitting in the drawing-room. They had showered and changed, Liz lending Julia a sweater and a pair of jeans and being childishly delighted to see that they fitted. 'Greece, the Caribbean, places like that. Why did you give it up?'

Julia shrugged. 'I got bored. Those were the days we were mere objects, totally manipulated by men.'

'I know what you mean.' Liz pulled a face. 'Are you married?'

'No, are you?'

Liz nodded. 'With two children, both away at school.'

'What does your husband do?'

'Foreign Office.'

'Sounds important.'

'It's too important.' She looked down into her cup. 'I ride out every morning to get away from it.' As she spoke she wondered why she was giving herself away. After all, she had only just met the woman.

'Get away from what?' Julia looked puzzled.

'Claustrophobia.' Liz looked up. Julia still had that slightly puzzled expression on her face. She obviously had no idea. How could she? An ex-top model. How could she know? Liz was suddenly seized with the desire to spell it all out, but she decided against it. She did not want to bore the woman. 'You'd know if you were married,' she said dismissively.

They talked about horses for a while, comparing notes and swapping tales. Liz told her the story of her big fall, when she broke an arm; and the incident in the country when she thought she was being followed by the local farmer.

'You thought he was chasing you?' asked Julia.

Liz nodded happily. 'I felt like the fox with a wild pack of hounds on my trail.'

'But he didn't catch you?'

'No. More's the pity.' And they laughed together.

Liz showed her the house and walked her through the garden. They had been together for little more than an hour but she felt she had known Julia all her life. Perhaps, she thought, it was because she seemed so interested; not nosey, or pushy, just genuinely interested, a real live human being; what was the word she had read recently? In Italian? *Simpatico*. That was it. Julia was *simpatico*.

They were moving back towards the gate where the stallion stood munching grass. Julia was talking about the delights of feeling the power of the beast underneath her and Liz found herself interrupting.

'It's funny how men see us, isn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

Liz paused. She knew what she meant but she did not know whether she could put it into words. 'Well, you know, their ideas of young girls masturbating on horseback. Ridiculous isn't it?' She glanced quickly across at Julia, wondering if she had made a fool of herself; somehow the words had just tumbled out. But the other woman showed no sign of annoyance or embarrassment. 'I don't think it's odd,' she was saying, as if they were discussing nothing more than cooking a steak. 'Surely you have had that sensation at full gallop.'

'Well, no.'

Julia stopped and looked at her. 'Not even in your imagination? Are you sure?'

Liz shook her head. 'I think I'd sooner leave the men to their illusions.' It was a strange conversation, she thought, but perhaps these people talk about these things all the time, and now Julia asking about fantasies, saying that her dreams would make her hair curl. Liz decided to play along. If Julia

was not embarrassed, why should she be?

'My fantasies are strange,' she said, quite boldly. 'I've always wanted to be abused. You know, taken by force and not just by one man either. I've even bought books about rape and hidden them from my husband.' She blushed. Maybe she had gone too far. 'Isn't that awful?'

Julia was shaking her head. 'Not at all. But doesn't your husband . . . ?' She left the sentence hanging in the air, giving Liz the opportunity to take it up or ignore it.

'He's interested only in the Foreign Office, I'm afraid.'

They had reached Julia's horse now and Liz patted its neck. She found that she could not let the subject rest. 'Another thing I adore are wrestlers,' she said, looking away from Julia, talking into the horse's face. 'It's amazing. The very smell of them gets me excited. Shocking, don't you think?'

'Not at all.'

'Well, it's so primitive. Back to the stone age; men dragging their women back to the cave by their hair.' She laughed, a little embarrassed chuckle, but she could not seem to stop. 'I must have seen the Clockwork Orange movie a dozen times, just for the rape scene.'

'And that's what you secretly desire?' Julia asked as she swung herself into the saddle.

Liz nodded. 'Crazy isn't it?'

'Then you shall have it.' She spurred the horse into movement and was away before Liz could say good-bye. As she watched her disappear into the trees she realised that she was still wearing her jeans and sweater, which meant she would come back soon. She would look forward to that. But what a strange thing to say, she thought as she walked back to the house, 'you shall have it'. What on earth did she mean?

Chapter Nine

Donald Smythe arranged himself comfortably on his seat in the park and glanced stealthily around him. It seemed that there were more of them out than ever; dozens of them, blooming and blossoming, exposing their sharp little buds and browning themselves in the sun. The warmer it became, the more they surfaced in small groups of twos and threes and sometimes little clusters. One of them caught him looking and stuck out her tongue so that he was forced to hide behind his paper.

He turned to Bernard Hawkins' column and frowned. What did the man want. He had been pestering him for a week now, at least; he had not actually pestered *him*, he could not get through to bother him personally but he had been pestering the office, calling up the Press Officer daily asking for an interview. It was all too boring, and the dreadful man would not give a reason; just said he had to speak directly to him. Inquisitive, noseey little man.

He was deeply into the foreign reports, chewing his cheese

sandwich primly, rabbit-like, and at first he paid no attention to the voice.

'Allo. Could you help me?'

He was not being rude by ignoring her. He simply assumed she was talking to someone else. No one ever approached Donald Smythe in the park.

'Allo.' And a gentle tap on the back of his newspaper.

Smythe looked up. The girl was wearing a neat blue summer dress, bare-legged with sandals, carrying a satchel over her shoulder. She had short dark hair, a snub nose and large brown eyes. He thought that she must be about nineteen.

'I must not disturb you,' she said.

He thought it was a strange thing to say. French probably. *I must not disturb you.* A quaint grammatical choice. As he thought about it she turned and moved away, the swell of her buttocks moving inside the light cotton skirt. She was ten yards away by the time Smythe had risen to his feet, mumbling at her back. 'Ah, no, ah sorry. I mean, how can I be of assistance?'

She turned and smiled at him. 'The Royal School of Music.'

He liked the way she spoke; the 'r' sound in the back of the throat, and 'moo-zek'. He thought it charming. Beside her, the girl who had stuck out her tongue was nudging her friends and giggling behind her hand. They had no charm, the English girls, he thought, not by comparison.

'It's a long way from here,' he said, stammering slightly.

'Ah,' she pouted. 'My feet are so sore and London is so big.'

She seemed to be waiting for something. Smythe swallowed, brushed a breadcrumb from his mouth and noticed that he had crushed his sandwich in his palm. 'Please sit down,' he said, surprising himself by his boldness.

She smiled graciously, whispered 'merci' and settled herself on the bench, sitting primly, knees together, her hands clasped on her lap, face turned upwards, eyes closed to the sun.

Smythe sat next to her, his sandwiches between them. He picked up his paper as if to read it, put it down again, ignored the girls sniggering opposite and decided he would be civil and urbane.

'So you are a musician?' he asked.

'A student,' she said, still facing the sun, raising her head a

little to catch the full force of it. He saw that she had the most delicious neck, long and smooth, just ever so slightly brown. He would have given a year's salary just to run his finger down the length of it, from her lower lip, over her chin and down over her chin and perhaps further to the rise of her breasts . . .

'What do you play?'

'The cello.'

'A sad instrument,' he said, wondering how such a soft, petite girl could handle such a clumsy thing. 'But isn't it rather large for you?'

'Oh no.' She opened her eyes and turned her head to look at him. 'My legs, go round it, like so.' And she spread her knees, lifted her arms as if playing the cello in mime, apparently oblivious to his embarrassment.

'Do have a sandwich,' he said quickly, offering the paper bag. 'Cheese or paté.'

She thanked him, picked one out and gently bit off a corner.

Smythe stared ahead of him for a moment wondering what to say next. 'You - ah - find us cold fish,' he said. She frowned at him, puzzled. 'I mean, you French think that we English are reserved and inhibited . . . don't you?'

She nodded. 'And you call us, how do you say . . . ? Froggies?'

He had fallen in love, completely and utterly, head over heels. He did not care if anyone from the office saw him sitting talking to her. Indeed he hoped someone would see him. He wanted to take this girl by the hand and show her to people, so that they could hear her say 'froggies' and they would fall in love with her also. How could anyone help himself? But no one had better try to touch her, that was all, not with him around. He coughed and pulled himself together. This was outrageous and childish. He did not know what had come over him. He resolved to get a grip on himself.

'Is this your first visit?' He hoped that he sounded dispassionate, like an immigration officer perhaps, polite but detached.

'Yes. I always wanted to see England.'

'Are you here with your parents?' Polite but detached, a simple question.

'No, I am alone. Quite alone.'

Thank God, he thought.

'It's a big city,' he said softly as if someone might be listening. 'You must be careful. There are young men who would think nothing of . . .'

She blushed and looked down at her hands. 'No, it's all right. In any case, I prefer older men. Not boys.'

Smythe dropped his sandwich on his lap and brushed the crumbs away, flicking his fingers over the ridge that had built up in his lap. She was watching him and smiling. Why was she smiling?

He heard himself ask a dangerous question. He shouldn't have said it, but there it was; it was out, five explosive words: 'Do you like the cinema?'

'Oh yes. I am always at the movies.' She nodded seriously as if it were a perfectly normal innocent question. Smythe continued, his mind forcing him to stop, his reason telling him not to be so foolish, but still he spoke as if his voice had a will of its own, a wicked, wanton strength working against him and sabotaging his better instincts. 'If you feel . . . I mean, would you like . . . ?'

'Excuse?' She was giving him a chance. He could back out now easily, retreat and return to the office; she would cross the park, catch a bus to the college and out of his life.

' . . . to come to the cinema with me?' The words came out fast, in the correct order, as if rehearsed.

She looked seriously at him. 'Now?' she said.

He nodded, blinked, unable to say anything more.

'I shouldn't. I am very young. You know?' And she turned away.

Smythe mumbled something that sounded like an apology. He had tried. He had almost made a fool of himself but of course she was quite right. He only hoped she wouldn't mock him or laugh in his face at his effrontery.

'You promise not to take advantage of me?' She was leaning towards him, peering into his eyes, her face the very expression of innocence. Smythe again heard himself talk, something vaguely bumptious, that he had been an officer in the Queen's Own Regiment and had never taken advantage of a woman

in his life. He hoped he was not sounding too pompous; fatherly perhaps, but not pompous.

'O.K.,' she said sweetly. 'I will trust you. Come. We shall go.'

As they walked through the park Smythe pointed out the sights of London, acting as a guide, occasionally touching her shoulder to turn her in the right direction. She seemed to be fascinated and murmured '*incroyable*' and '*formidable*'. He could see other men watching him enviously and he walked with his head erect, chest puffed out, the model of hospitality, the perfect host, holding in his stomach to give some space to his burning erection.

When they reached the streets of St James's, the girl looked around gleefully. The shops were fabulous, she said, and so cheap, compared to Paris.

'It's the exchange rate,' he said. 'You are thinking in francs.'

'Of course.' She took his hand and dragged him to a jeweller's window excitedly pointing to bracelets and necklaces. He stood self-consciously gazing at his shoes, hand in hand with her until she let him go, apologising and hoping that he would forgive her.

At the Jacey he stopped and guided her into the foyer holding his breath and wondering what she might think. She looked up at him, a small puzzled frown on her face.

'This is . . . *erotique*, no?'

'Truffaut, I believe,' he said.

'Ah,' she smiled. 'Excellent.'

The girl at the box office gave no hint of recognition and they moved quickly through the foyer, Smythe pulling her past the still photographs. There were only eight people inside, all seated apart from one another. He led her towards the back so that no one would get behind them, but she would not go too far. 'My eyes,' she whispered by way of explanation.

They sat down and made themselves comfortable. For ten minutes Smythe stared at the screen, scarcely blinking. He tried to pretend that he was alone and attempted to contain himself, biting his lip to distract himself from the throb in his groin. He was well acquainted with the plot up there on the screen, such as it was; in a few moments the lady of the house

would seduce the gardener in the stables and the girl sitting next to him would tutt scornfully and take her leave. He hoped she would not make too much of a scene. But for the moment she sat quietly, her forearm lightly touching his on the armrest and through his jacket he thought he could count each of the soft blonde downy hairs . . .

As the passion on the screen began to intensify and clothes were discarded among the bales of straw, he felt the girl squirm. Her arm moved, just slightly, almost imperceptibly. Out of the corner of his eye he could see her squeeze her legs together and he attempted a quick sly glance at her face. Her eyes were wide open in an expression of horror, she was biting her bottom lip, as he had done and she was breathing quickly as if she had run a mile. Perhaps it was all too much for her and she would go soon.

His heart thumping he leant towards her, asking softly if she was all right. She turned and blinked, her eyes roaming over his face and finally coming to rest on his lips. 'I'm so sorry,' she said and he thought there was a tear at the corner of each eye. 'But you have been so kind.'

'Shhh,' he said.

'You have been so kind,' she repeated in a whisper. 'But I cannot stand this movie. It makes me so . . . excited.' She looked up at him, her face almost touching his. 'Look, feel,' she reached for his hand and placed it on her neck, forcing it slowly downwards until his palm covered her left breast. 'The nipple,' she said. 'You can feel?'

Smythe could feel. He could feel so much that he almost fainted and when she stifled a sob and began to kiss him, her tongue licking around the corners of his mouth, making small whimpering sounds, he knew he would faint and he had to hold on to her arm tightly to prevent himself from exploding through his clothes.

'I am so sorry,' she was saying. 'I cannot help it.' She moved his hand to the hem of her dress and up her naked legs and it was all he could do not to scream when he reached the soft dampness of her thighs. Silently now she leant away from him, watching his face. For a moment they sat motionless and then she silently mouthed the words: 'Continue. Please. Your hand.'

As he moved his fingers inside her, stroking and rubbing the small nub of erect flesh, she reached for him, grabbed him in her fist and pulled him towards her, deftly unzipping him and freeing his erection at last. She placed an arm round his neck and guided his head so that the girl who had arrived and was sitting one row behind and to their left could begin to snap off a series of shots.

Two hours later in her apartment off the Edgware Road the girl picked up a telephone and dialled. It answered on the first bell.

'Lucy, Evette here. Is she in?' She waited a moment. 'Hello Julia, I've just got back . . . ' As she spoke she raised one leg and then another, crushing her panties in her hand and walked through her room towards the bathroom, trailing the cord of the telephone behind her.

'Simple,' she said. 'He leaves on Thursday. The ten-thirty Concorde to Bahrain.' She dropped the panties into the wash-basin and turned on a tap. 'Thank you, Julia,' she said, smiling. 'It was a pleasure . . . any time. Good-bye.'

Chapter Ten

At first when his secretary told him that Julia Hemmingway was on the line, Max Rowlands pretended to be out; he wanted to be away, miles away, maybe even out of the country. Somehow, whenever Julia Hemmingway came into his life there was some kind of major incident, and besides, he owed her. He owed her for Samantha and Erika and he owed her for Pamela. My God, he thought, what had she ever done to Pamela in just one afternoon to turn her into this creature who swanned round the house like some latter-day Dietrich; when she was in, that is; most times she seemed to be out God knows where and had always that mysterious smile on her face and the occasional smudge of a bruise in places where one doesn't normally bruise oneself, not doing housework anyway; although she hardly did any of that any more what with Joe and Jill or whatever their names were, virtually living in.

And at night, smiling in her sleep and muttering strange names, awakening a long-dead quiver of jealousy in him

attacking him in his sleep, a ravenous man-eater. My God, did he owe Julia for Pamela. She was just too efficient that Julia Hemmingway, not a lady for half measures, by any means.

'Yes, yes, I'll take the call,' he said irritably. 'Good morning, Julia. What can you do for me?'

He heard her laugh, a low appreciative chuckle. 'Can we meet?' she asked.

'Where? When?'

'The Stock Exchange at eleven. How would that suit you?'

'Home from home,' he said and hung up, wondering what in God's name she was up to now.

They stood above the main hall, Julia's arm linked through his, gazing down at the bustle below, watching the jobbers and the clerks rushing around frantically.

'Just like ants,' said Julia.

Max nodded. 'And devoted solely to man's primeval endeavour to make money.'

'What's the index?'

'Bearish,' he said. 'Touching four-twenty.'

'And Jetec?'

He looked sharply at her. So she hadn't forgotten Jetec. So that was what it was all about. Again he wished he was gone, somewhere quiet where the women wore sarongs or something and thought they were doing well if they were let out of the kitchen at night.

'Hmm?' she was asking.

'Very sensitive at forty-three.'

'Are the other directors aware of your stake in the company?' He wondered whether she was asking as an acquaintance or as a major stockholder and of course, it would be the latter.

'Look Julia, I've been buying steadily for a year and I borrowed heavily to do it. Even a whisper and the price would bottom.' He paused, wondering if he should tell her, but it was better not to have her guessing. If he was frank with her then she might be on his side if things went badly. 'I bought most in at sixty-four.'

'Is the company as weak as that?' she asked.

'Let us just say that the arms deal has to go through.'

'And if it does not?'

'Simple,' he said, glancing at the board which showed the changing prices. 'The price will fall to liquidation. They'll be taken off the market.'

Together in silence they watched the activity beneath them, Max frowning, the creases round his eyes which he referred to coyly as his 'laughter lines' were deep furrows cutting through his tan. Julia glanced at him, wondering how he would look if he ever decided to make the big leap out of his board-room window. But he wouldn't, not Max. He was not the suicidal type. As if to confirm what she was thinking he continued: 'You recall the other day I advised you not to sell Jetec? I'm not so sure it was good advice. I am seriously considering cutting my losses.'

'But you are a large shareholder. If you sell out now there will be a run.'

Max shrugged. 'As long as I get a price, who cares?'

'And the company and the small shareholders?'

'They'll be annihilated.' The tone was emotionless. Julia glanced at him. He looked worried but the concern on his face was for himself alone. She spoke sharply.

'Am I to take it then that you don't worry about them? The company and the shareholders?'

Max shook his head. He was enjoying himself. There was nothing he enjoyed more than playing the part of the hard-headed businessman fighting for success in the fiscal jungle. He did not stop to think why Julia should be probing him.

'Why should I worry,' he muttered happily. 'It's a hard world and those who can't take the knocks shouldn't have joined. That's the money game.'

Julia watched him preen for a moment. 'You won't mind if I don't take your advice?' she said.

'What do you mean?' he looked startled.

'I think I'll invest further in Jetec.'

'Are you crazy?'

'Not at all.'

And now the worry lines lay deep on his face. Julia was up to something. He did not know what and he hated secrecy, especially if his money was involved. 'You can be very frustrat-

ing at times, Julia,' he scolded, like a pompous schoolteacher. 'What are you talking about?'

In reply, Julia delved into her shoulder-bag and picked out a buff-coloured envelope. She tapped it on the rail, smiled mysteriously and offered it to him. Max took it and opened it, pulling out the contents, then closed his eyes, quickly slipping them back. 'Jesus,' he said. 'These are strong.'

'Did you recognise the gentleman?'

Max shook his head.

'Then take another look. Go on, Max, you would make a delightful voyeur.'

He peered again at the top photograph and whistled through his teeth. 'My God. It's the honourable Donald. How did you get these?'

'Infra-red camera. That . . . ' she tapped the print, 'is the interior of the Jacey cinema. You didn't know Smythe was a film buff, did you?'

'Incredible!' Max had lost his initial feeling of embarrassment and he was thumbing through the prints like a schoolboy. 'We've got him,' he whispered, beaming at Julia.

'He's booked on the next Concorde to Bahrain.'

'Excellent. I shall join him. He'll be eating out of my hand once he sees these.'

Julia smiled. Same old Max, no word of thanks. As far as he was concerned, he, Max Rowlands, had got Smythe in the vice and already he had forgotten who had supplied the tools. But this was not the time to remind him. Julia made a move to leave. 'Shall we be bulls and invest more?' she said. 'It's not often we have access to such vital information.'

Max nodded happily, then snapped his fingers. 'Hold it. There's just one more hurdle. Can you come with me tomorrow. There is someone I have to impress.'

'I'll check my diary.'

'Good.' He tucked the envelope into his jacket pocket and spun Julia round to face him. 'Dinner tonight to celebrate. You can't refuse me this time.'

Max was interrupted by the arrival of a tall balding gentleman smiling at him, a crooked sardonic smile.

'Rowlands, how are you?' he said, his hand extended. Max ignored it.

'I've recovered from our last meeting,' he said crisply.

'You've been reading my column?'

'No,' Max shook his head. 'It may strike you as odd but I find it unutterably boring.'

Julia stood watching the two men sparring with each other, waiting to be introduced. So this was Bernard Hawkins, she thought; he could be trouble. She cursed herself for not organising Hawkins sooner.

'You've been suspiciously quiet of late,' he was saying. 'I know you are into some deal. Shall we have a drink and you can tell me all about it?'

Max glowered at him. 'Hawkins, first of all, I'm into no deal, as you put it and secondly, if I was, you would be the very last person I would inform.'

Hawkins's smile remained on his face and he held up one hand as if to stem Max's anger. 'Don't worry, dear boy. I'll find out all about it anyway. Remember your Danish property scandal?'

'You know perfectly well that I was not implicated in that.' Julia could see that Max was losing control. He was beginning to point his finger, jabbing it at the other man. But Hawkins was not to be intimidated.

'Maybe not,' he said, 'but those who lost heavily are not so easily convinced.'

'Let me tell you something,' said Max menacingly.

'Can I quote you?'

'I couldn't care a fuck about you.'

'Oh,' said Hawkins, still smiling. 'It is strange that we always argue when we meet. I'm usually quite a likeable person.'

Max turned away from him muttering that he had not the time to waste on the likes of Hawkins.

'You're being very rude, Rowlands.' He turned his smile on Julia. 'You have not introduced me to this charming young woman.'

'Julia, this is Bernard Hawkins, City Desk of the Daily Something,' said Max gruffly. 'Julia Hemmingway.'

'I knew it,' said Hawkins. 'I have often admired you at a respectful distance.'

'I don't remember seeing you,' said Julia.

'You wouldn't. I have that type of face. May I say though that although I have no regard for Mr Rowlands's taste in business, his taste in ladies is . . .'

Max interrupted with a snort. 'Christ, Hawkins, your dialogue is as antiquated as your column.'

'Apologies, Miss Hemmingway. May I arrange a meeting with you sometime?' The smile had never left his face.

'By all means.' Julia produced her card. 'Ring my secretary.'

Max took her by the arm and pulled her away leaving Hawkins gazing after them, feeling pleased with himself.

Julia strode into the office ignoring Lucy's smile of welcome and telling her to get Carol on the line. As she waited, she swivelled round in her chair tapping her teeth with a pen wondering what Hawkins could find out. Obviously Max was not worried but then Max was a fool. He would always be in danger because he constantly left his back unprotected and underestimated his potential enemies. He had discounted Hawkins because of the man's silly smile. It was a foolish thing to do.

The light on the receiver flashed and Julia grabbed at it.

'Well, what about Bernard Hawkins?'

'Very little, I'm afraid,' said Carol. 'No obvious Achilles heel. I've spoken to a number of . . .'

'Yes, well, never mind the details,' Julia said sharply. 'If you say he has no weaknesses, then he has no weaknesses.' She paused briefly. 'What about his aspirations? Is he happy in his work?'

Carol was silent for a moment. 'A couple of people said the same thing. They suggested that he really wanted to be one of those hot-shot investigative reporters; you know, uncovering scandals, wearing a dirty mac. You know the sort of thing?'

'All right,' said Julia, 'let's work on that. Come to the office this afternoon and we shall think it through.'

At first, when the call came through, Bernard Hawkins was

inclined to ignore it. His secretary said that it was someone with something to tell him, a woman, and she wanted to talk to him alone and it had to be now. She would not give her name. It was all too dramatic for words. He told his secretary to hang up and the woman rang back immediately.

'Look I thought I told you . . . ' said Miss Smith. She paused, held her hand over the mouthpiece and cleared her throat. 'Mr Hawkins, she says that she had been told to come to you first and then if you failed her, she was to go to the *Express*.'

Hawkins frowned and took the call. He could not risk losing out on something important. What was it the other reporters said? It was worth taking a hundred dud calls just to get the one good story; and besides, he would be in trouble if the *Express* came out with some great City exclusive, and no mistake.

He was brusque and businesslike and he did not see why he should meet her in her hotel. Why did she not come up to the office?

'I know it's on your way home,' she said.

How did she know that? It was a wonderful voice, deep, chocolatey.

'I'm in the middle of packing,' she was saying. 'I have to go out of town to meet the people involved. There's not much time. If I am to see you, I must do it soon.'

It was all too childish.

'Please,' she said.

'Oh, very well. How will I recognise you?'

'You will,' she said mysteriously.

It was all too silly.

'Look, why don't you carry an *F.T.* under your arm or something,' he said.

'All right. I will.'

In the cab he chided himself. She would not even tell him what it was about. She would not even give him a clue over the phone; as if it would be bugged. It was crazy. But, he thought, on the other hand, I would only be going home now, to the television and an omelette. There was nothing to lose and he had to admit that he was just a tiny bit excited.

She was sitting at a table at the back of the bar, the *Financial*

Times tucked under her arm but almost hidden from sight by the surge of the heavy breasts trapped inside a patterned shirt. The long red hair fell in a cascade of curls to her shoulders and she smiled at him as he came in and stood, uncrossing her legs and holding out a long brown arm.

He accepted a drink and vaguely listened as she explained the story: something about a pension scheme fraud, tied in with a large trade union with some kind of complicated link to an M.P. at the European Parliament in Brussels.

She spoke slowly, looking straight into his eyes and it seemed to make sense. He certainly could not find any obvious holes in the story, but then again, he was not all that experienced in such matters. Maybe she was right. Maybe not. It was one for the news desk and an experienced reporter.

'I have to leave tonight,' she was saying. 'Cornwall.'

'Lovely this time of year,' he said.

'Glorious.'

It had taken forty minutes to go through the story, and three whiskies.

He stood up to leave, saying he would make a call. She looked puzzled. 'This needs someone with a certain experience of . . .'

But she interrupted him, seeming to know what he was going to say before he said it.

'But you're the best, or so I was told,' she said.

'Well that's very kind but I do think someone . . .'

'You don't mean I have to go through the 'whole thing again.' She frowned, shook her head and stood up. 'No, that's not really good enough. But if you want to phone, do it from my room, while I pack.'

They rode the lift together. There was a decanter of whisky in her room and she poured him another glass. On her bed he noticed his book: *The Structural Deficiencies of The Unit Trust*. And he smiled a happy smile. He had never seen a copy outside his own office.

'You are very well known,' she said by way of explanation.

She walked past him, and pulled a dress out of the closet, threw it into a valise and pulled open a drawer. He had to close his eyes as she picked out an armful of underwear, a

black lace negligee, blue silk panties trimmed in white and laid them delicately on the bed.

'I really would prefer it if you came along,' she was saying. 'But I expect you are too busy. I can understand that. The telephone is over there.'

Hawkins hesitated. He had two weeks holidays owing and things could be postponed.

'Cornwall did you say?' he mumbled.

'Mmmm. Gorgeous down there at this time of year.'

Two hours later from a cocktail bar off the A30 Carol put in a call to London.

'Hello there,' said Julia, 'how is it going?'

'We're half-way to the West Coast,' she said. 'And I guess I can keep him out of town for as long as you like.'

'Excellent. Just a couple of days should suffice.'

'And you? I thought you were going out tonight.'

'I waited in for your call. Missed the première of *The Silent Kiss* because of you and your machinations.' Julia put on a hurt, little-girl voice, a sulk.

'I'm so sorry,' said Carol. 'That's Wayne Bentley, isn't it?'

'It is. Looks like I'll just have to make do with the party now.'

'O.K. Have fun.'

'And you. Watch out for his column.'

Chapter Eleven

Wayne Bentley was thirty-four years old and weighed one hundred and eighty-two pounds in the shower. His eyes were blue and his hair was black and sometimes curly. He lived in Malibu, California, had never married and in his last four pictures his name had appeared above the title. He was an expert skier and surfer, a mean squash player and had driven on Daytona Beach at over two hundred miles per hour. Also, he could be seen almost daily in one or other of the columns, pictured with famous ladies. His name had been linked with actresses, princesses and lady writers. There had been speculation that he would marry one of the most wealthy American women in today's society. Only last month a spectacularly bosomed Paramount starlet had filed a paternity suit against him before hurling herself off the 'H' of the Hollywood sign into the hills above the studio.

Julia turned all this over in her mind as Luke drove through the West End. She had asked Lucy to find out about Wayne

Bentley and she had come up with all kinds of information most of which Julia discarded as fan-mag junk. But, she thought, as they say in the business, if only one per cent of it was legit, then Wayne Bentley did not get much sleep nights.

His latest date was said to be the incredible Jane Walker, the sex queen of the movies. Jane was five years younger and her name had appeared above the title for four years. She was the girl who, the gossip writers said, had put the juice back into the sex-goddess image after the antiseptic reign of Raquel.

Julia recalled some of the headlines: JANE WALKER ADMITS TO NEW LOVER . . . U.S. MARINES VOTE JANE THEIR NUMBER ONE . . . TWO MEN CLAIM: 'JANE LOVES ME' . . . MISS WALKER: RUMOURS OF SECRET WEDDING . . . THE MEN IN MY LIFE: by JANE WALKER.

There was no doubt that any movie coupling Wayne and Jane would be a certain box-office hit.

In the States *The Silent Kiss* had been breaking local records and even on its opening night in London the studio chiefs back at H.Q. had decided to invest a lot of money in extra publicity to ensure it became a success and perhaps even got an Oscar nomination.

A small crowd was still waiting outside the hotel as Jane arrived. They had followed the stars from the première and were waiting to see who else might turn up. Jane looked at her watch; the party would have begun. It was time to move in. She had counted back the days to the Sunday in the country; a long time, she thought, far too long.

There were squeals as the car coasted to a stop. Jane got out, was ushered inside by a doorman, and the crowd argued over her identity. The doorman did not ask to see her invitation when she mentioned the party. She never needed an invitation. Doormen tended to ignore the formalities when the de Ville drew up. Ladies who dressed in mink over a Mendel gown and who looked like Julia were their own best invitation; most doormen figured it that way.

She stood near the entrance to the cocktail bar for a moment and surveyed the crowd; a gathering of expensive evening dress, groups of people engaged in mutual praise-giving. Again there was a hiccup in the conversation as heads

turned towards her and teeth were flashed in her direction, grimacing at her; enough, she thought, to light up Oxford Street.

A tall blonde threw up her hands and swayed across the room towards her, arms outstretched, the celebrity mouth pouting a welcome, the breasts rigid and high slung in the gold dress.

'Baby,' said Jane Walker.

They kissed, bending forward from the waist, Jane holding Julia in a bear hug, squirming against her, then pulling back to look into her face. Julia felt that she had been half crushed to death and when she spoke she was breathless.

'Wonderful to see you, Jane. How long have you been in town?'

'Flew in yesterday, for the opening.' She stood back, looking her up and down. 'You look fantastic. How do you keep that amazing body in trim?'

Julia started to say something about daily workouts but the star was not listening. 'My problem,' she was saying, 'is I like eating too much. I eat like other people breathe. You know? I've put on four pounds since yesterday.' She ran her hands over her hips and threw back her head, tossing her hair. Julia laughed. 'You should try using self-control.'

Jane raised her eyebrows and laughed. 'Hah!' A short, derisive cackle. 'Self-control? You got to be born with self-control. I got none. You of all people should know that.' She winked conspiratorially. 'Come on, circulate, why don't you?'

She led her through the room smiling and acknowledging the compliments.

'... you were simply divine, darling.'

'... the scene in the beach hut, my God. I have not seen such legitimate humping since Warren and Julia by the fridge.'

'... I mean, that was real fucking, now was it not real, man?'

'... do you think it will be too strong for Macclesfield?'

They circulated among the guests for ten minutes before finding themselves alone in a corner.

'I'm sorry I missed the film,' said Julia. 'Something came up. You know how it is.'

Jane waved her hand dismissively. 'You missed nothing.'

'Not even your Oscar-winning performance?'

'Listen,' Jane moved closer. 'You see that hunk of male flesh over there?'

Julia had seen. She had recognised him as soon as she entered. One hundred and eighty-four pounds, black curly hair, bronzed, he was leaning against the bar, drink in hand, holding court to a group of admirers.

'Your leading man?'

Jane nodded and curled her lip. 'Yes,' she said.

'He has a beautiful body.'

'Big,' said Jane, sneering. 'And with a head to match. He *needs* Cinemascope, that baby.'

Julia smiled. 'He looks pretty good to me. Anyway,' she said smiling, 'I read that there was a big thing brewing between you two.'

'Promotion,' said Jane. 'You know he's not my kind.' She leant closer and whispered. 'Can we arrange something, Julia? I'm staying here, at this hotel.'

'You're thinking of something along the lines of your last trip?'

'Yep. Can you fix it?'

'When?'

'It will have to be tonight.'

'What time?'

'Anytime after midnight.'

Julia looked towards the ceiling for a moment and narrowed her eyes. Then she nodded. 'Yes, all right. I'll make a call.'

'You're a genius,' whispered Jane.

'I try to please.'

The pungent aroma of after-shave interrupted them and Julia turned to see the flash of a smile in the big sunburned face.

'Jane,' said Wayne Bentley. 'You've been ignoring me.'

'I didn't want to spoil the continuity. Excuse me. I must mingle.'

She moved quickly away and Julia was left face to face with the man she had come out to see. He was nodding towards Jane's departing back. 'I'm afraid we don't see eye to eye.' It was a deep voice, a relaxed, practised diction,

'It does happen sometimes,' said Julia.

He smiled again and moved straight into a routine. 'I haven't been able to take my eyes off you.'

'I noticed.'

'You're Julia Hemmingway, aren't you?'

Julia nodded.

'I've read about you.' The smile was still on his face and she wondered whether he could talk without it.

'And I you,' she said.

'You shouldn't believe everything you read.'

'I don't, but nonetheless your reputation travels before you. The uncrowned stud of Hollywood, I believe. Is that not what they say?'

He shrugged and leant back against the bar, looking down at her through half-closed lids. 'All press-agent crap,' he said.

'My old grandmother used to say that there was no smoke without fire.'

He held up his hands as if someone had produced a gun. 'All right, I admit it,' he drawled. 'I am perfectly healthy with a generous appetite.'

'Voracious, I think may be the better word,' she said.

'Well, if the orchard is full . . .'

'Yes, I know. Why not pluck a few. My old grandmother told me that also.'

He looked at her and licked his lips, searching through his repertoire for the correct phrase. He found one. 'I bet *your* toes don't get cold at night.'

Oh my God, thought Julia, cold toes indeed. 'Sometimes they do,' she said. 'But I'm half Danish, which means I'm accustomed to the cold.'

'So you don't sleep around?' He had decided that the sparring was over and it was time to go for the knockout. She could tell. He was no longer smiling. She decided to play along.

'When the time and the man is right,' she said.

'And then?'

'Nothing. No commitment.'

'The fond farewell?'

'Why not? It's a question of using one another, don't you think?'

Wayne frowned. 'You make it sound quite clinical.'

'No. Just honest.'

He looked at her strangely and she smiled to herself, realising that she had broken through the cold-toes level of conversation she had not gone very far beyond, she admitted, but at least he had stopped giving her the profile and trotting out second-hand lines from one of his old movies.

He was thinking again, looking at the ceiling. 'Honesty, huh,' he said. 'Well maybe I'd like to test out that honesty of yours one day.'

'But you're going back to the States in the morning.'

'That's right. How did you know?'

She tapped her nose with her finger by way of reply. 'And you're staying at the Heathrow Hotel.'

He nodded.

'Then we are wasting time. My chauffeur is booked in there also. I'll see you in the bar at . . . let me see, twelve thirty?' She smiled, turned and made her way through the room, said good-bye to Jane and left. Wayne gave her two minutes and followed.

'Orgasm.'

'What? What did you say?' Wayne was breathless, his body heaving.

'Orgasm,' said Julia, her cheek rising and falling against his chest. 'It's hardly a word. Not really enough.' She spoke quietly, aware that she was rambling, but not caring. 'In Danish it's "*udlösning*" which is better. But it's still not enough is it? Not really.'

'Mmm,' said Wayne.

'I mean, it's so powerful. God, it's powerful. Don't you think?'

'Uh huh.'

'So different for a woman. Can you imagine yourself having multiple *udlösning*? Mmm? Just one *udlösning* after another, on and on and on . . .'

Wayne groaned.

'One after the other, each one more powerful than the last . . . ' She yawned and stroked his legs, turning over on to her back so that her nipples were free, pointing to the ceiling, hardening again as the perspiration dried on her.

Wayne grunted and moved his arm, stroked her forehead. 'This is the time I'm usually told how wonderful I am.'

Silence.

'You're not going to tell me how wonderful I am?'

'You already know,' said Julia.

'Yeah, I suppose so.'

Julia lay back with her eyes closed, feeling gorged and replete. Overhead she could hear the traffic stacking round the airport and the big jets coming in to land.

She was conscious of him breathing heavily beneath her. She shifted position, raised an arm and stroked his cheek. He grunted: 'Did you want to go to bed with me because of who I am?' The old, old question.

'Not *just* that,' she said.

He yawned, as if unconcerned. 'What was it then, that attracted you?'

'Your arrogance,' she said, turning to sit up, digging an elbow into his stomach so that he squealed.

'You like arrogance?'

'Only to destroy it. I like confidence. Confidence is appealing but the attraction of arrogance in characters like you is to see it crumble away. When I see a man puffing out his chest and gazing at me as if I was something up for grabs, I go for him; get in the first punch, so to speak.'

'You're like one of those insect things, like priests, what do you call them?'

Julia smiled. 'Mantis. Praying mantis. The female allows herself to be mounted and then hypnotises the male.'

'That's the one. I remember. Then she eats him in the act of copulation.' He paused, thinking it over. 'And you think you've eaten me?'

'Just a nibble.'

They lay in silence for a moment.

'Have you ever married?' he asked.

'No.'

'Sounds definite. Are you against it in principle?'

'No. Just in practice. I don't know many happy marriages.'

Again there was a pause. The conversation stuttered along lazily. They lay quietly, content to find out about one another slowly and lethargically, dulled by the aftermath of sex.

'Fly out with me in the morning,' he said suddenly.

Julia turned and stared at him momentarily confused, thinking at first this was some bad joke but realising almost instantly that he was serious. She was not accustomed to being taken by surprise. Normally she had all the angles worked out well in advance, the reactions of people, how they think, what they are likely to do or say in any given situation; she always had the various options figured and her exits covered. But this was a surprise, almost a shock.

'Are you serious?' The words came out jumbled and she felt unusually vulnerable, taken aback, and she was not sure that she did not like it.

'Never more so.' He smiled at her confusion. 'I have a place on Malibu.'

'Yes, I've seen pictures of it.'

'We can swim all day. Do all kinds of things. It's a wonderful place.'

Just for a moment she considered it, her mind leaping ahead of him as he spoke of the big bungalow with the private beach and the seduction of easy irresponsibility. It would be different just for once to put herself in the hands of someone else, to give up total responsibility for herself, let someone else take over for a while. She needed a holiday from herself.

Maybe it was the relaxed manner he had or the size of the bed or the effect of Jane Walker's wine which had lulled her into a dream, but for a moment, the briefest of moments, Wayne Bentley had succeeded in getting through her carefully constructed emotional defences.

'No,' she said. 'Thank you very much. But no.' She was back on keel, in charge once again. He wanted to know what was wrong with his offer.

'Like wine, I don't travel.' She was back to normal again. It had been a temptation but it had passed. To keep her mind off

it she told him the story of the railway compartment in Denmark and as she reached the end she could feel him becoming aroused once more. His hand tightened in her hair and he pulled her up into a sitting position. And the look was back on his face, the blinkered stare of the aroused male.

'Do you collect trophies?' she asked and now it was his turn to look confused.

'Huh?'

'Trophies of your conquests? Are you that kind of guy?'

He shook his head.

'What about medals?'

'No. Why? Were you thinking of awarding me one?'

'Maybe a bronze,' she said grinning at him.

'What?' he sat up scowling and she kissed him. 'Let's try for gold,' she said.

And so they tried and they won their heat and they went for the final, moving together, striving for the winning line, pushing their bodies to the limit of their endurance, struggling for the ultimate prize until the bed shook and the room shook and the walls seemed to be crumbling and Julia was hardly conscious of her own screams.

'What is it?' she yelled at last as the noise smashed into her eardrums.

'Don't worry,' Wayne gasped, his mouth at her throat. 'It's reverse thrust.'

And as she heard the big Jumbo screech to a stop only a few hundred yards from their room, the engines blasting to a halt, she began to giggle and he started chuckling and they laughed together, locked round and into each other, rolling across the bed, laughing till it hurt...

Jane Walker left the party at midnight in a swirl of curls and good-bye kisses. She was escorted from the lounge by the tall Italian who had been her date for the night. The journalists at the party had made a note of his name and the fact that he was a ski instructor who was writing a screenplay which Jane herself was going to produce. In the foyer a photographer snapped off a couple of shots, the Italian glowering at the invasion of

his privacy, Jane smiling and looking devoted. They were swept upstairs in the lift to the sixth floor. The Italian held the door open for her, bowed, kissed her fingers and wished her good-night. Jane turned and made her way to her suite twirling her key and humming a soft tune.

Now she lay relaxing in her bath, lying back in the bubbles lazily massaging herself with a sponge glove. It was an eight foot bath, brick-built with a small ladder to climb down into the depths, the whole contraption set in a large tiled bathroom. The taps and shower unit were gold, the rail was gold and the whole thing was lit from above by coloured lights sunk into the ceiling. The walls were velvet, the floor mosaic. Jane took all this in, aware only that it satisfied her normal standards. She was accustomed to luxury. Anything less than this and there would have been complaints. But as she lay soaking, she was happy. Everything was just fine. She was half asleep and listless and at first she did not hear the knock on the outside door. The second rap was more insistent.

'Who is it?'

'Hello. Miss Walker?' The voice of a young woman.

'Come in, the door's not locked.'

She heard a click and a silence. 'Miss Walker?'

How sweet, Jane thought; she's standing in the hallway looking for me, not daring to come in.

'I'm in the bathroom.'

The door slowly opened and a girl stood blinking at her, a tall red-head dressed in a flared green jacket and a tiny short skirt. It was the skirt which first caught Jane's eye. She had not seen a mini-skirt in years; and those long brown thighs.

'My goodness, you're pretty,' she murmured appreciatively. 'What's your name, honey?'

'Cathy.'

'How old are you?'

'Nineteen.'

Jane whistled, continuing to soap her breasts, switching her gaze from Cathy to her own reflection in the mirror and back again to the girl.

'Am I early?' There was a hint of apprehension in her voice and Jane smiled; it was perfect, the innocent girl in the mini-

skirt, just absolutely one hundred per cent perfect, Julia was a genius.

'Not at all. Your timing is just right.' She smiled, holding the silence for a moment, enjoying the look of embarrassment that crossed Cathy's face as she reached behind her, exposing one famous breast, and pushed a lever to operate the whirlpool. With a gush and a gurgle, water began to boil around her knees, thrashing bubbles up between her thighs.

'Well, Cathy,' she said at last. 'Are you going to stand there all night? Come on in. The water's lovely.'

Cathy nodded and smiled, took off her jacket and slowly began to unbutton her skirt.

Chapter Twelve

In the car taking him towards Kensington Max Rowlands relaxed, tapping his fingers on his briefcase; a happy man. Julia sat next to him listening to his briefing, nodding attentively. Max was enjoying himself. He was in his own car, going to an appointment *he* had arranged. He was telling Julia how to react to the various possible alternatives. He was in charge and he was having fun.

'Shall I go over it once more?' he said.

'If you wish.' She glanced at him, feeling like his older sister, humouring him.

'Right. The embassy is being used as a caretaker for Kubran and Frederik is the man they listen to. Therefore it is imperative that we get his signature on a letter recommending the C One Eleven.'

'Check,' said Julia, stifling a yawn. Max noticed and looked sternly at her.

'Did you have a late night or something?'

‘Or something,’ she replied.

He frowned. ‘Just remember, will you, that Frederik is very much of a ladies man and although you are supposed to be my secretary, you are really coming along as decoration. If things start to get rough, flirt a little so that he is thrown off balance.’

‘Oh Max,’ she sighed. ‘I know exactly what I’ve got. When the time is right I am well able to use it.’

‘Very well then.’ Max sat back deeply into his seat and crossed his legs, the businessman on an important assignment with his sexy secretary at his side. He smiled happily, picked up his paper and flipped through, scowling when he reached a page towards the back.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Julia.

‘Bloody Hawkins and his bloody column.’

‘Is it about Jetec?’ she asked, leaning forward to glance at the page.

‘No, no, no.’ he muttered. ‘Just his usual half-baked analysis.’

Julia sat back, relieved. ‘Yes, well, you won’t have to worry about him any more.’ But if Max heard, he paid no attention.

The embassy was situated in a terrace of foreign consulates and ambassadorial offices in Princes Gate overlooking Hyde Park. From the outside it seemed modest enough: just a small flag and no sign of police at the door or any obvious evidence of security. Max got out first, leaving Julia to follow with his briefcase. He announced himself at the door and they were admitted to a waiting-room on the second floor. It was elegantly and tastefully decorated and Julia looked round, admiring the heavy leather armchairs, the walnut panelling, the understated simple style of real wealth.

After ten minutes Max was showing signs of impatience, being an important man unaccustomed to delays. He kept glancing at his watch and sighing. Julia sat silently, knees together, the briefcase on her lap, enjoying her role as the model secretary – for the moment.

An aide looked in and asked them to follow him. They were led across the landing and down a corridor to a set of double doors. The aide pushed them open and ushered them through. It was a large office, bright with sunlight and beautifully,

decorated, and Julia was reminded of the Washington politician two summers ago and the visit to the White House. Here was the same sombre air of splendour; an enormous antique desk dominated the room, solid and apparently immovable, a permanent structure. The man they had come to see was standing by the window, his back to them, looking out over the park.

As they were announced he turned to greet them, his welcoming smile freezing on his face as he saw Julia. She suppressed a smile thinking that this was a piece of good fortune: if things are worked out well enough in advance then you can count on a little well-orchestrated luck; chickens come home to roost eventually. So all that running around in North Kensington may yet prove to have been useful . . .

'Julia.' He had some difficulty controlling his voice but the smile was back on his face. Max gaped, first at the Count, then at Julia and back again.

'You two know each other?'

Frederik nodded. He had quickly recovered his composure and gestured towards the armchairs. He moved over to the desk, leant against it and turned his smile on Max. 'Now then, what can I do for you?'

Max frowned. 'I thought . . . I *did* telephone . . .'

'Yes, I'm sorry. The surprise of seeing Julia clouded my memory.'

Max nodded, pleased with the way the negotiations had begun. In the delicate area of office skirmishing Frederik had just lost a couple of early points. But Max wished that it was he and not Julia who had won the initial advantage. Somehow, he thought, with a flash of uncharacteristic self-knowledge, he was always being upstaged by Julia Hemmingway.

Frederik was reaching for a file on the desk. He coughed, picked it up and began flipping through the pages. 'Well, Mr Rowlands, I have studied your proposals thoroughly.'

'I trust you find them in order.'

There was a silence and Max continued: 'I can guarantee the contract at price and delivery. On your signature the first of the components will be delivered within six months.'

'That's just the point.' Frederik looked directly into Max's face. 'I cannot put my signature to it.'

'Why?' Max spoke softly with what he hoped was a hint of menace.

'I do not think it would be in the best interests of Kubran.'

Julia stared at Frederik wondering how powerful her hand was and when she should show it. She decided to wait. Frederik knew that she was in a position to embarrass him but nonetheless he felt strong enough to turn Max down. He was prepared to bluff it out. Perhaps he was relying on his judgement of her, that she would be too much of a lady to play the ace that she held; in that case, he was making a mistake; but it was also possible that he did not care. Perhaps he was secure enough not to worry whether the truth came out about his peculiar sexual predilections; it could be that his superiors and his countrymen were understanding and compassionate regarding the weakness of human nature . . .

Julia was thinking all this through, wondering when to make her move, when the doors opened and a boy entered the room followed by a woman. The boy was dressed in silks and wore a skullcap and embroidered shoes. His face was perfectly oval with large deep-set brown eyes, a strong aquiline nose and a full mouth, the lips bow-shaped. Julia thought he was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen and images of young deer flooded into her mind, sleek smooth limbs and innocent eyes. She guessed he must be around sixteen and the stooping woman in the veil was probably his mother. In only a few years, she thought, this child is going to be breaking hearts all over the world. All he would require was a white charger to be every young girl's fantasy.

Frederik had been leaning casually against the desk but now he stood stiffly to attention. For a moment Julia thought he was going to salute.

'Your Highness,' he said to the boy, 'may I introduce Miss Hemmingway and Mr Rowlands . . . his Highness Prince Ahmed, heir to the throne and Her Highness, his mother, the Begum.'

Max stood and nodded to the couple, a bow of respect. Julia smiled and the boy looked at her, the large eyes unblinking, gazing at her face and in an instant she realised that there was no longer any need to concern herself with the

Count. He had been made redundant. The answer lay in the young prince. At first she would not allow the idea to lodge in her mind. He was, after all, so very young, but the look on his face was ageless; something had happened, that instantaneous irresistible attraction, the connection that every poet and song-writer had striven to catch in words, something chemical; the boy was caught, trapped, and Julia knew that all she had to do was nod her head.

Idly she wondered if, under that olive skin, he was blushing and she realised with something of a shock that she was wondering how it would be with this child; briefly she recalled the clumsy boys of her youth, the giggles and grunts of puberty but she knew that this would be different; already this child had a certain mastery over her; he was in his own embassy, in a small piece of his own country where for centuries they believed in the irrefutable fact of male dominance over inferior women. For all his lack of years he would consider it natural to be in charge and to bestow upon her only the favours he was prepared to grant. Here was unquestioned superiority, the most potent and irresistible form of arrogance.

Reluctantly Julia realised that she wanted this boy; she was surprised and slightly shocked that the bruising, crushing encounter of a few hours ago with Wayne had not been enough. She had assumed that the fires were temporarily quenched and the fevers calmed, but the sight of this child, so beautiful, so powerful and yet so obviously vulnerable, caused her to catch her breath and it was all she could do not to demonstrate there and then that it would be all right and that she was ready for him.

If the prince understood, he gave no indication. But his mother had noticed the silent communication between them.

'I am sorry we are interrupting,' she said to Frederik. 'It can wait. Forgive us.'

As she left the room she turned back and looked at Julia. 'You are very beautiful, Miss Hemmingway,' she said. It was the simplest of statements but to Julia it meant that she had understood and in her voice there was the age-old request: be gentle with him.

Julia returned her smile, hoping she would be comforted.

I will be gentle, she said silently, if he wishes . . .

The encounter had lasted only thirty seconds, but it had been enough.

'Yassaf's wife and son,' said Frederik as they left, his voice cutting through Julia's thoughts.

'The boy has perfect features,' she said. Frederik was looking at her and for a moment she felt a glimmer of sympathy for him, even of complicity, as if she could now understand part of why a man would go to such lengths to secure some innocent in a brothel, dressed like a bride. But the feeling passed. The link was too tenuous; if the Prince were to summon her she would go willingly with no desire for payment. Nor would she wink over his shoulder at an observer, as the child bride had done. But still she understood just a little more about Count Frederik and his odd desires.

'He is completely sheltered,' he was saying. 'For security reasons. He is never allowed out.'

'A prisoner,' said Julia.

'Not quite. But you can imagine the consequences if anything happened to him, if he was kidnapped.' He paused as if considering the possibility, then turned sharply back to Max who had remained silent through all this. 'I am sorry, Mr Rowlands. I am sorry but it would not be in the best interests of Kubran if I were to recommend your transaction.'

Max opened his mouth to speak but Frederik had closed the file and dropped it on his desk. The telephone rang. Frederik picked it up and listened. 'Yes, Your Highness.' He turned away, looking out of the window, then spun round again to stare at Julia. She knew then that she had been right, her intuition, her instincts had been correct.

Frederik was looking at her with one eyebrow raised inquiringly. She nodded an affirmative at him, knowing now that he could not refuse. He was committed to recommending her. He owed her for the bruises she had collected in the streets of North Kensington; this, then, was the pay-off.

She picked up a few phrases: 'The soul of discretion . . . impeccable background . . . no need for concern . . . quite, quite . . . as you wish, Your Highness.'

He replaced the receiver and looked at her. 'You seem to

have made quite an impression on the young Prince.'

'You did say he was never allowed out,' she said.

'He would like you to join him in his suite.' The words came out flat, as if she was being invited to tea, but he was picking up the Jetec file once more and she realised full well the implications. Whether Max realised was another matter.

'It would be an honour,' she said.

Frederik turned away from her to Max. 'Leave this with me, will you,' he said, tapping the file.

Max frowned, wondering what was going on. 'You know I leave for Bahrain tomorrow,' he said.

'One way or another you will know later this evening.'

Julia stood up, walked across to the desk, reached inside her bag and produced a pen. She unscrewed it, smiling into Frederik's eyes, and gently placed it on the desk. On the way out she thought of giving him a huge lecherous wink, but she decided against it.

Max could not understand why he was not being invited to see the Prince. He stood on the landing looking petulant as Julia waved him farewell, blowing a kiss at him as she followed Frederik's aide down the corridor. What was it Max had said? she thought to herself, 'flirt a little'. That was it. Poor Max.

As she moved deeper into the building she felt the adrenalin begin to flow again; idly she compared the two stimuli, the sexual urge and the fear of attack, both producing a similar effect, the heightening of sensations, the thumping of the heart, a feeling as though one was walking on tip-toe, conscious, it seemed, over every hair on one's head, ready for anything. If a feather landed in front of her she was sure it would sound like a steam-hammer.

She cleared the ideas from her mind, trying to calm herself so that she would be ready for whatever lay in store for her. She felt a responsibility towards the beautiful, protected child; she knew that she was to be his first and she wanted him always to remember it just as she remembered the man thirteen years ago in Greece who had taken her, gently at first and then aggressively until she had fainted . . . to be awakened later in his room with red roses strewn across the floor, just as it should be, as it was always meant to be, as others only fantasised it

should be. She wanted it to be the same for this gentle prince so that in future years he would look back upon that morning in London when he first began to learn about his body.

They reached a door and Julia was ushered inside. It was dark, the light banished by heavy drape curtains. There was a strong smell of incense, heavy and oppressive. Julia looked round the room trying to accustom her eyes to the darkness. There were six women seated in groups of twos round the walls, cross-legged on cushions, all of them robed in black, three wearing veils, the others masked. As she moved through the room following the aide she heard the women mutter and hiss and she shivered involuntarily, wondering what they were thinking; was it disapproval? Why did they sit there in the dark? She felt as though she had stepped back through the centuries. This was no longer London, a hundred yards from the park, this was foreign soil and a foreign time scale. She felt a mixture of excitement and revulsion and for the first time she wondered if she was doing the right thing.

Another door led to a bathroom. Again it was dark, the walls painted a deep blue, a black carpet, heavy blue curtains, the sunken black-tiled bath the only furnishing. She looked around her, breathing in a scent of musk. The aide had left her and at first she thought she was alone but a movement by the bath startled her and she saw two women move towards her. They too were veiled in black, only the eyes showing and against the walls they had been almost invisible.

Soundlessly they moved towards her, their eyes expressionless. They began to take Julia's clothes off, quickly and precisely with deft movements, unbuttoning her jacket and blouse, unzipping her skirt. She stepped out of her clothes and allowed them to unhook her bra. It was all done clinically and gently as if by nurses. She wondered what they thought of the blue silk panties, but there was no reaction. They were simply doing a job.

When she was naked they guided her towards the bath, one at each elbow and waited until she had climbed down into the water and lay immersed, her body hidden from them by the foam. She closed her eyes feeling the oils swirl around her and into her. She relaxed.

While one of the women dabbed her face with cream and removed her make-up, the other soaped her body, gently massaging her limbs under the water. Neither of them made a sound, scarcely breathing, neither talking nor gesturing to one another.

For fifteen minutes they worked on her, kneading and stroking every inch of her flesh until her body glowed and each nerve-end seemed to rise to the surface of her skin. She thought of Gunnar and Rex and wondered how they would compare themselves to these two silent handmaidens, and she began to think of Pamela, hoping she had enjoyed the experience, suddenly feeling protective towards her. She thought that one day she might call her up, just to see how she was and check on the results of her handiwork.

They were finished and stood back, waiting for her to stand up. They wrapped a robe round her and led her out into the middle of the floor, making no attempt to dry her, letting the excess water and oil soak into the robe. Again they were at her elbow leading her to one of the walls. One of them pressed a hidden button and the wall opened inwards on a hinge to reveal a closet filled with silk caftans. They indicated that she should choose one and she took her time, fingering the material and gazing at the colours. Finally she picked a creation of purples and reds and stood back as the robe was taken from her and the caftan slipped over her head. It was delight to the skin and Julia felt her nipples harden as the silk brushed against them.

The preparation was almost complete. While one woman brushed her hair, the other dabbed a heavy scent behind her ears and between her breasts. They gave her no make-up, nor did they allow her a mirror.

And then they were gone. For a moment Julia was alone, standing in the middle of the room, convinced that she glowed visually, a cloak of sensuous heat around her, fuelled from within, her body pumping out a scented incandescence and already the moisture was rising between her thighs so that she knew she had only to squeeze her knees together and . . . *udlösning*, a fluid liquid *udlösning* . . .

The aide returned and beckoned her to follow him through

yet another door; she was vaguely disappointed that she was not going back through the darkened room where the six women sat. She would have enjoyed gliding past them like a queen. They would not dare to hiss at her now.

But they went out a different way through a door into a tiny room, a small cavern, only eight feet by ten, lit by candles, the walls red and brown hung with tapestries. There was no furniture save for a collection of enormous patterned cushions in the centre of the floor, and deep-piled rugs. The aide pointed towards the cushions and she eased herself into them, her knees tucked under her. Her breasts felt tight under the silk, her body moist from the oils. She glanced up but this time the aide did not look at her, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor. He clapped his hands and four women entered the room in a single file, placing a table before her and covering it with plates of meat, rice, spices and exotic fruits.

They arranged the feast around her and departed, none of them looking at her, walking backwards out of the room. Again the aide bowed and left. She was alone again. She gazed at the food and selected a fig, closing her eyes in delight at the taste. When she opened them, Ahmed was standing in front of her.

He too was now dressed in a caftan, purple with a crest on the shoulder, the contours of his body visible through the silk as he knelt before her, then relaxed into a comfortable position, leaning on one elbow staring directly into her eyes.

Julia sifted through the couscous, letting the rice run through her fingers, staining them with saffron. She selected a morsel of meat and handed it to him. He leant forward and took it in his mouth. She licked her fingers and took a piece for herself, gently chewing it, letting her tongue work round the corners of her mouth. They ate in silence, the Prince's eyes never leaving her face. When the meats and the spices were finished, Julia reached for an apricot and again she fed him. He ate slowly, the juice of the fruit running freely down his chin. Quickly, Julia leant forward and licked it away, cleansing him with her tongue, licking his lips and smiling as she saw his eyes widen.

She felt her body run damp as she undressed him and she wondered briefly if she would ever get out of this room without

melting completely away. He lifted his arms to help her remove the caftan and sat naked looking at her. The body was perfect, she thought, not yet developed, the muscles lithe and tight under the olive skin and nowhere even the suggestion of puppy fat. He was slim but solid. She could have struck matches on any part of him.

She took his hand and raised it to her cheek, kissed each finger and dropped it to her breast, letting him feel her nipple through the silk, gently rubbing the palm in a circular movement around the flesh, bringing his fingers inside and seeing the shock on his face as if he had been struck by lightning. He bit his lips and closed his eyes and she could see he was ready. She bent forward and took him in her mouth gently drawing the force from him and when he began to writhe and moan she realised that his voice had not yet broken properly and somehow this excited her so that she moved her head back and forward whipping her hair across his thighs and his belly until he was still. Then she sat back, slipped off her caftan and lay on top of him, covering him with the full length of her body and whispering in his ear, softly soothing him until he began to move and she knew he was ready to begin again; she had been gentle with him but now he was prepared to begin again, and this time in earnest.

Chapter Thirteen

It was almost, Liz Smythe thought, like a normal marriage; with Donald sitting opposite her drinking his tea, the early morning sun striking his face through the kitchen window. Normally she had her breakfast alone, after her ride, Donald having sipped his orange juice before dashing for the office. But today he was going abroad and they were eating together. She had given up her exercise just this once to be with him. She looked across the table, almost with affection, like an elder sister gazing at a helpless little brother and hoping that he would not come to any harm out in the big world.

She crunched a piece of toast and chewed rhythmically, watching him as he studied his paper, a slight frown creasing his podgy face, his teacup tilted precariously towards the floor. Just let him spill it, she thought. That would teach him. Quite without warning he laughed, a high-pitched giggle which startled her.

‘What’s so amusing?’ she asked, knowing that he would not

think of telling her unless she pressed him. He would never offer information. She always had to ask.

'Just something in the paper,' he said, not lifting his eyes. There was a pause. God, how irritating, she thought. 'Just something in the paper.' Now she would have to ask him what it was that was in the paper and he would say, 'Oh just something amusing,' and she would have to ask, 'What?' until she eventually had to say, 'Well, are you going to tell me?' before he would deign to look up and say, 'What are you getting into a state about?'

God, what an irritating man. She once read in a magazine that the little irritations were the first things that people missed when their partners died or went away. But she did not believe it. Not for a moment.

'Oh just something rather amusing.'

'What?'

'Heavy buying of Jetec last night.'

Goodness, she thought, he is being positively forthcoming.

'What's amusing about that?' she asked.

He was sniggering again like a small boy who had just got the rest of the class into trouble. 'That's the point. It's not funny at all. Someone is going to catch quite a cold.'

Liz gazed wearily at him, at the pettiness of a man who rejoiced in other people's misfortunes. He absent-mindedly stroked the top of his head and Liz was reminded of the other evening when he had come home looking five years older and at first she had not realised what made the difference. When she finally figured it out and asked him what he had done with his toupee, he had said that he'd lost it. How on earth do you lose a toupee? It was ridiculous, like a cripple losing his wheelchair. Crazy. God knows what he had been doing to lose his wig . . .

'Do finish your breakfast, dear,' she said, looking at the clock and using that schoolma'am tone of voice which she knew annoyed him. 'We have only two hours.'

'There's plenty of time,' he snorted.

It was exactly like a normal marriage, she decided.

'You won't need your sandwiches today.'

'No. British Airways. Concorde,' he said pompously.

'Don't forget to keep the plastic spoons.'

'No, dear.' He looked up at her. 'Did you enjoy your ride this morning?'

'I didn't go, did I? Now please eat up.'

'There's plenty time.'

'But the car will be here at any moment.'

He sighed and crushed his paper in his fist. 'Anyone would think you wanted to get rid of me.'

'Don't be silly, dear,' she smiled sweetly at him, perversely enjoying the mindless verbal scuffle.

'How are you going to get back?'

'Simple. I'll get a taxi.'

'Are you sure? You don't need to see me off, you know.'

'Of course I do. Now come along.'

The click of the letter box interrupted them and Smythe sauntered out to collect the mail. He returned with a handful of letters and flipped one across to his wife. She opened it with her knife, wondering what it was, trying to guess from the postmark who it might be, but she could not; a surprise letter, pale yellow paper, expensive embossed typescript; just one line: THIS IS THE DAY YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE. And signed: JULIA.

Her husband was saying something but she was not sure what. She looked up, swallowing, turning her head to one side like a bird, asking him to repeat himself.

'You've turned quite pale,' he said. 'Are you all right?'

'Mmm. It's nothing important.' She stuffed the letter back into its envelope and stood up, snapping at him that it was time to go and for God's sake, to hurry up.

Smythe had enjoyed talking to the reporters in the VIP lounge; or, rather, *not* talking to them. He enjoyed watching their irritation build up as he shook his head at their questions. It was fun to see that they had some kind of hunch that something was up, that there was a story somewhere and only Donald Smythe could tell them, but of course he would not even give a hint. It was nice to parry their questions and he got a kick out of holding up his hands at the end and announc-

ing: 'Gentlemen, I must take my leave of you.' It made him feel ministerial, even presidential. Briefly he had wondered why Bernard Hawkins had not showed up, after all the pestering he had done on the telephone. It only went to show how unreliable these chaps were.

'It's purely a routine visit,' he was saying at last, 'I can be no more specific than that.' None of them seemed to have made the connection between the Jetec buying and the trip. Probably their City men might have guessed but it was early in the morning and by the time they had liaised with their news desks and the reporters had been tipped off, he would be well on his way; at least, that was the way he figured it.

'Can't you at least tell us who you are seeing?' A last despairing question.

'I thought I had made myself perfectly clear,' he said looking down from his six feet one at the little reporter. 'A statement will be issued by the Foreign Office in the normal way when I return.'

With that he dismissed them, turned away as if they did not exist and bent towards his wife who had been waiting by his side.

'Good-bye, dear. You will look after yourself, won't you?'

'Donald, I wish you were not going.' She looked quite distraught, which added to his feeling of importance although he was mildly surprised that she was so emotional.

'I'll be perfectly all right,' he said, kissing her on the cheek and not hearing her reply in the bustle: 'It's not you I'm worried about.'

He patted her on the head as if she were a puppy, turned and strode off, giving a small curt wave over his shoulder, thinking of the assignment trusted to him.

As he waited for the flight to be called, he was hardly aware of the tall stranger at his elbow and at first he assumed it was another of those damned reporters.

'Look, I have nothing more to say to the press,' as the man tapped his shoulder.

'I'm not a reporter, Mr Smythe, merely a fellow traveller, Max Rowlands.'

Smythe looked puzzled for a moment and frowned, 'Row-

lands, ah yes,' he beamed. 'Jetec isn't it?'

Max nodded.

'Well Rowlands, surely a wasted journey on your part.' He tilted his head, looking at him along the length of his nose, like a schoolmaster. 'If I were you I would cancel my ticket and get my money back.'

Max shook his head, reached into his briefcase and pulled out a large brown envelope. 'This is for you,' he said softly. Smythe looked down at it and up at Max. 'Please open it, Mr Smythe.'

He shrugged. Why not, he thought, he had time to kill. If this would humour the man.

He flicked the flap open and drew out the photographs. At first he thought that Max was trying to sell him something; just for a moment he thought that this man was some kind of ludicrous pervert who had chosen an odd place to peddle his wares . . . and then he recognised her; he recognised the girl before he recognised himself, her dress open to the waist and his hands inside.

Smythe closed his eyes, convinced he was about to faint. He did not need nor want to see the other snaps but as he swayed on his feet he realised to his amazement that he was getting an erection; the doomed man spurting on the gallows. And then his knees buckled and he was being helped by his executioner towards a chair.

Liz Smythe had watched her husband go, wanting him to turn as he went through Customs and wave to her, blow her a kiss perhaps, anything. But he strode away from her, leaving her alone, a couple of reporters hovering behind her. When one of them came up to her and asked if he could have a quick word, she brushed past him, almost pushing him in her haste to get away. He followed her for a few yards and was joined by the others until she turned and told them she had nothing to add to her husband's statement. Her voice was trembling slightly and she could see their looks of confusion, wondering what was up, if there was some sort of story somewhere. It was still only ten o'clock but she felt like a brandy to steady

her nerves. She would have liked to throw one down just to calm the shivers in her stomach but it was too early; the bars were not yet open and besides, the reporters would surely follow her.

She took the escalator down to ground level and looked around the concourse for the taxi sign. She moved quickly out into the sun. It was a beautiful day, the heat already rising, bouncing off the walls. A line of taxis waited twenty yards away across the road in front of the terminal. She made for the head of the queue forgetting to look where she was going so that she did not see the car which was coming too fast from her left, possibly a late arrival, the passenger dashing for a plane, it was moving well above the airport regulation speed and it was only the blast of the horn which frightened her enough to make her scramble clear, diving across the road, stumbling to her knees and grabbing a railing, her breath gone in the panic.

'Are you O.K., miss?' A young man's voice, his hand on her arm.

'Don't touch me!' If she had not been out of breath, the words would have come out as a snarl. As it was she squealed at him hoarsely and the young man backed off, muttering that he was only trying to help.

'Don't want your help,' she spat the words out, turned from him and rushed towards the taxi rank.

At first the driver wanted to know if she would not mind sharing but she shook her head: 'Hampstead, quickly,' she said. It would be cheaper for her, he argued, if she could find someone going her way; but no, she would pay the full fare. Just let's go, she said and so the driver shrugged so-what at her and trundled the cab away from the kerb.

She lay back resting her head against the back of the seat, closed her eyes and took deep breaths, counting to ten and breathing out, clearing her lungs and her mind. That poor young man; what must he have thought? But soon she would be home with the doors locked and that brandy she had promised herself. She opened her eyes and noticed that the driver was glancing back at her through his mirror and she nervously tugged at her skirt, pulling it forward to cover her

knees, thinking that it was a bad day when they put the rear-view mirrors back into the taxis.

'Traffic's heavy today, miss.'

'Seems to be.'

She had not looked at him when she jumped into the back seat. After all, who notices taxi drivers? But now she could see that he was a big man, a heavily muscled neck and shoulders with dark spiky hair. His eyes were small and bright and his nose had been broken and set badly.

He was talking again; an irrepressible cockney, one of those who believed in their own publicity and thought themselves to be sharp and witty; great talkers, salt of the earth; boring. Give them half a chance, she thought, and they'll go on about the blitz or the Queen or Bobby Moore or some such thing.

'Dropped off a friend, have you?'

'My husband. He's gone away on business . . . ' She stopped, biting back the words, feeling foolish. For a few moments he was silent as he turned the taxi into the tunnel under the sign saying 'Welcome to Britain' and out towards the motorway.

In her mind she saw the yellow paper again and the words: TODAY IS THE DAY YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE.

'So you're on your own then?'

'Only a couple of days.' She shook her head; why did she not say she was staying with her sister? Or something? Or anything?

'And when the cat's away . . . ' He grinned at her in the mirror, the little eyes almost closing.

'What did you say?' Her voice had gone again, only the squeak remained.

'I was saying that an attractive woman such as yourself could enjoy . . . '

'Stop!' she shouted, reaching for the door handle. 'I want to get out.'

He turned and looked over his shoulder, frowning. 'You can't get out here, love. It's the motorway.' He turned back again swerving slightly and Liz groped in her bag, found her money clip, peeled off a five-pound note and held it up to the glass partition.

'Here,' she said, 'here's your money. Go on, take it.'

'All right, lady. If you insist.' He pulled over on to the hard shoulder, reached back and opened her door, took the money and stared at her for a moment before driving off. Liz stood by the side of the road for a full minute before striding off eastwards, past the big blue sign: LONDON 15.

It was one thirty by the time she reached the tube station at Chiswick, her legs and feet aching, her throat dry from the sun and from the stink of the traffic as it sped past her. But she had made it. She was back in the secure anonymity of the city. She thought of going into one of the pubs for a drink but she decided against it. She would hold on to her thirst as a kind of penance until she was safely home.

She sank into a seat on the tube feeling the cramp in her legs travel down to her toes. She realised that she must look a peculiar sight; the Gucci shoes scuffed, the Jaeger jacket soiled and dusty, her face specked with soot. She was not surprised that some of the people in the compartment stared at her for a moment before dropping their gaze. But one man continued to stare at her, a thin middle-aged man wearing a shabby rain-coat and dirty shoes. He did not have much hair and he blinked a lot. She tried to stare him down but he smiled at her, a strange smile of condescension. But she was not worried. There were others around.

At Hammersmith she levered herself painfully from the seat and waited on the platform for her connection, half asleep thinking of home until she realised that the horrible little man had followed her. He was standing behind her, not three feet away and smiling at her.

Please no, she murmured to herself. Please, please no. Please don't follow me. Please.

A train drew up bound for Upminster and the little man brushed past her, still smiling as he pushed his way into the compartment. She watched him sit down and adjust his coat and through the window she saw the dog collar for the first time. She smiled; the relief was almost physical, a shudder passing through her to her fingers and toes, so that she laughed aloud and involuntarily. When her train arrived she bounded aboard smiling and chuckling to herself all the way home. She

bought a paper at Hampstead station and thought of the brandy waiting for her.

She had half a mile to walk and she moved quickly. Nothing ever happens in a place like this, she thought happily, not in broad daylight on a warm afternoon with all these nice mothers around with their prams and all these nice old men taking the sun.

She was only a hundred yards from home when she heard the footsteps. She had turned into a wide avenue beside the Heath and now there was no one to be seen; not one nice young mum or sweet old man; just the silence, except for the click of the shoes behind her. Again she told herself not to be so silly. No one is followed by anyone in a street like this on an afternoon like this. As soon as she began to move faster, she thought, the sound of the footsteps would fade away and whoever it was would merely assume that she was hurrying home; they would think that she had forgotten something or that she was late for lunch. But as she quickened her pace she could hear the footsteps closing on her, catching her up. She was being followed. There was now no doubt about it.

Half sobbing she began to run, afraid to glance round, hobbling, almost losing a shoe, heedless of the stabbing pains in her feet. As she turned the last corner she tried to grasp a glimpse of her pursuer but she could not see for a large privet hedge and she ran faster, gulping air into her lungs, staring fixedly at her gate, watching it grow larger with every step. She was safe. She knew she was safe. As she turned into her drive and ran up the gravel path she scrambled in her bag for her key. Oh my God, why had she not searched for it earlier, on the tube? Where was it? She thought of running past the door and down the side of the house and into Mrs Young's garden, through the fence and calling for help. But her fingers finally touched her key ring and she jerked at it, reaching the porch and fumbling for the latch, the key sticking in the lock and bending.

'Excuse me.' The voice at her shoulder was out of breath.

Liz stifled a scream and turned round fast, her back pressed against her door, ready to fight and bite and scratch. It could not happen here. Not right on her doorstep with the neigh-

bours only yards away . . . he was young, tough-looking with a scar over one eye. He held a glove in one hand.

'I'm sorry if I frightened you,' he was saying. 'But I believe you dropped this.'

Liz shut her eyes, counted to five and opened them. The young man looked alarmed and confused, the delicate glove dangling from his calloused fingers. She apologised and took it from him. She thought of inviting him in for a cup of tea but that would be ridiculous. She apologised and thanked him, turned and opened the door. He was still standing there. She smiled at him over her shoulder and he turned and walked away.

Once inside she closed the door, leant against it and began to laugh, a hysterical hoarse chuckle of relief. She laughed until the tears began to rise, then threw off her jacket and walked into the kitchen, perched on a stool and groaned as she prised off her shoes. She stretched backwards and raised her legs, gazing down at her swollen feet. Gently she stood up again walking on her heels to the cooker. She filled a kettle, singing lightly to herself and, unbuttoning her shirt, she hobbled upstairs to the bathroom.

At the landing she bent to rub her calves and the blast of music hit her like a hammer blow, an explosion of music, a crescendo, stunning her, straightening her spine and sending her staggering backwards, her hands held to her ears. She came to a stop against the bedroom wall and began to make her way towards the sound, moving forward as if mesmerised, not stopping to think, the terror back again clawing at her stomach but no longer did she think of running. She had run enough and now she moved slowly towards the sound and pushed open the door of her bedroom. The music lost its force, became softer and more bearable. She took her hands from her ears and stepped into the room staring blankly at the man on her bed.

At first she was angry, her fear turning to rage. She stepped forward and stared at him; a big man, curly-headed, stubble on his chin, wearing corduroy trousers and a denim shirt open half-way down his chest. He was barefoot and leaned on his elbow returning her gaze.

He beckoned her to come to him and her anger left her as quickly as it had risen and she stood trembling, closing her eyes briefly in the hope that he would disappear then turning fast to make a leap for the door but it had shut behind her and a second man closed his arms around her, twisting her body back round so that she faced the bed.

The big man had risen on to all fours and was crawling towards her, pulling off his shirt. She opened her mouth to scream but a hand was clamped over her mouth from behind. She could smell the sweat of the man behind her and feel the hard body holding her closely, the one hand over her mouth, the other round her waist, palm flat over her stomach, his voice in her ear, whispering words to her that she could not understand, harsh street-corner obscenities.

The big man was only a yard away, looking her up and down and smiling. It was happening. She tried to bite the hand over her mouth but she could not move her jaw and she closed her eyes as the big man reached for her shirt and ripped it open, all the way down the front, the remaining buttons popping and falling on to the carpet. Briefly she was annoyed that she would have to tidy them up, then she leant her buttocks back and tried to lash out with her feet but he easily caught hold of her legs, spread them apart and stepped inside so that her thighs straddled his waist. Still staring at her he took hold of her panties and ripped them away like so much damp tissue.

As he reached for his zip the other man dropped his hand so that the big man could lunge forward and kiss her brutally on the mouth, forcing her head back and muffling her screams, working on her lips with his teeth while the man behind crushed her breasts with his hands.

But now her hands were free and she could fight, pull at her attacker's ears, tear at them trying to push his head back but she was held by the hair, her face forced forward so that her mouth was still welded into that brutal embrace, teeth clashing against his and tongues squirming in each other's mouths. She was pushed forward so that they tumbled, the three of them, on to the rug and she found herself clawing at his hair, grabbing at the muscles of his shoulders, biting his

lips and groaning in her throat. She was above him now as he entered her, looking down at him as he thrust at her from beneath, dragging her face free of his so that she could turn to assault the man behind her, attack him with her mouth, plunging her tongue between his teeth as his nails raked her back and his hands spread the cheeks of her buttocks . . . and when at last she screamed it was a long howl of relief from the depths of her soul and out of her dreams, a cry of acceptance as the two men entered her together, tearing at her body in a crush of limbs, thrashing on the floor, a primitive, primeval battle but by now they were all on the same side.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning Lucy was up even earlier than usual, working through her routine with almost demented energy, whistling to herself as she tore off the telex messages and made her list of messages and appointments. She was an intelligent young woman with an instinctive grasp of basic psychology and she realised that she was indulging in a mild form of occupational therapy. The germ of disapproval had risen again in her mind; normally it was buried away safely in her subconscious, submerged by the power of her respect and admiration for her employer, but occasionally it came to the surface and she had to work hard to ignore it.

She'd had a Welsh grandmother; that was the problem, an old harridan whose idea of pleasure was castigating the men on their way for a Sunday pint. She had put the fear of God in Lucy's mind at an early age and her preaching had left its mark.

It was the Arab boy. He was the cause, she was sure of it.

Lucy hoped she wasn't being racist or anything like that; no, it was simply his age, so young for Julia, surely too young.

Had anyone criticised Julia then Lucy would have gone for his throat. As far as the outside world was concerned, Miss Hemmingway was beyond criticism. No one dare say a word against her, but occasionally, just very occasionally, she allowed herself that indulgence. She hoped the Arab boy would be a short-term affair.

'Good morning, Lucy.'

'Miss Hemmingway.'

'Change of routine this morning, Lucy,' Julia was bright today, bouncing with health and vitality. 'I want you to come with me this morning. I'm going out. We shall go over the calls on the way.'

Lucy frowned.

'What's the matter, sweetie? Has it been so long since you've been outside the flat?'

'It's cold out there,' she said. 'In the world.'

'Never mind,' Julia put an arm round the girl's shoulder. 'I'll take care of you.'

The buzzer rasped at them and Lucy moved to the wall and picked up the answerphone, listened for a moment and said to wait. She looked round at Julia. 'The prince of Kubran is in the hall.'

She nodded. 'Right, get your pad and your lists and let's go ... and don't look so miserable.'

In the hallway one of Ahmed's detectives was waiting for them. He led them to the door and showed them to the Rolls standing by the kerb, a flag fluttering at the bonnet.

Ahmed moved over to let them inside and bowed to Lucy as he was introduced. Lucy, in turn, was annoyed to discover that she was blushing.

'I have some work to do on the way,' Julia was saying. 'You don't mind?'

'Not at all.'

As the Rolls eased its way towards Mayfair Julia signed papers and read through the memos which Lucy had prepared, issuing instructions and making appointments. They turned into Berkeley Square and she looked up. 'Where are we going?'

'Bond Street,' said Ahmed. 'A small gift.'

The driver stayed with the car and they walked into the shop in a single file, one of the detectives in the lead, Julia behind Ahmed, wondering if this was an accident, this order of procession, or if she was always to be expected to walk one step behind. For the moment, she was amused by it.

Behind her came one of the detectives and Lucy brought up the rear. They swept regally under a canopy and into the shop.

Ahmed seemed to know exactly where he was going. He walked quickly across the floor, not hesitating to browse, making straight for a table at the back. He stopped, gazed around him for a moment and silently pointed to a necklace which stood on its own in a glass case. The assistant bowed slightly as he unlocked the case and brought the necklace out, spreading it on his palm, holding the jewels against his sleeve.

Ahmed gestured to the window and he held it to the light. He peered at it for a moment, took it from the man's grasp and lifted it to Julia's shoulders, then nimbly moved around her to clasp it at the back of her neck, gently turning her so that she could see her reflection in the mirror.

The gasp came from Lucy who had never seen such a thing before, the diamonds and rubies blinding her. She could not even begin to guess what they cost. But Julia only smiled. 'I'll take it,' she said, as if she had just ordered a pair of shoes.

They left as quickly as they had come, one of the detectives lingering to sign insurance forms and leave the address where the necklace should be sent.

Lucy stood nervously on the pavement, shivering slightly in the breeze. She felt odd being out and about and had the crazy desire to grab Julia's hand as if she were a little girl. And she jumped at the squeal of a car horn and the sound of a woman's voice shouting a hello.

She turned to see a tall, beautifully dressed woman sitting in an open sports car with a young man, perhaps ten years her junior, at the wheel. Julia was moving across to talk to her.

'Pamela, nice to see you.'

'You like the new image?' said Pamela, pirouetting and holding out her hand to the driver who smiled adoringly at her.

'It suits you,' said Julia.

'And of course you know Gunnar?'

Julia curtseyed, a small smile on her face and Gunnar bowed low over the steering wheel.

'Is he looking after you?'

'Devotedly.'

'And Max, does he approve of your taste?'

'I haven't seen him in three days but as long as I am happy he appears to be delighted.'

'And you? You appear to be happy?'

'Deliriously. I have my cake and I eat it. Goodness knows why I locked myself away for so long.'

'All you needed was the key.'

They were interrupted by the blaring of a taxi and Gunnar shrugged his shoulders. 'Must go,' said Pamela. 'We're causing a jam.'

Julia leant over and kissed her on the cheek. 'I'm having a small party tomorrow before I go on holiday. Can you come?'

'Love to, Julia, but I'm going to Paris for a few days.'

'With Gunnar?'

Pamela shook her head and smiled mysteriously. 'No. Yet another cake,' she said.

'Careful you don't get indigestion,' said Julia and waved as Gunnar hit the accelerator and roared off.

Lucy touched Julia's arm as she returned to the Rolls. 'That reminds me,' she said apologetically. 'Mick called this morning. I hadn't time to put the message on the list.'

'How did he sound?'

'Exhausted. But he said that everything went as planned. Better than planned in fact.'

'Good. In that case, put Liz Smythe on the party list. She still has my riding clothes.'

'Right,' said Lucy.

Back in the flat after lunch Lucy busied herself with the files while Julia relaxed in the bath. The girl was still upset. She knew now that it was the Arab boy who irritated her, so young and sweet yet so powerful, and somehow it was the way he took his power for granted . . . she shook her head and tutted round the office, dusting where there was no dust and grumb-

ling to herself. She had a brother the same age as Ahmed and he still did not know if the world was round. And here was Ahmed, Prince Ahmed if you please, wandering around Bond Street as if he owned it, buying things without a thought, not even thinking about money; just a signature, that was enough; and Julia following him about like a slave; that was what irked her most.

She gathered together a sheaf of papers and stabbed angrily at the intercom.

'Yes?' Julia sang back at her. In the background Lucy could hear the gurgle of the bathwater running down the drain.

'I'm sorry to disturb you, but I need confirmation on some contracts.'

'Come in then.'

She tapped lightly on the bathroom door before pushing it open. Julia was standing by her mirror dressed in a white towelling-robe, posing. The glass was clouded with steam but Lucy could see her pouting and primping outrageously and winking at her. Julia laughed and sat down, took up a brush and began to run it through her hair.

'I'm not sure about the commission agreement on this,' Lucy spoke sharply, business-like, holding a contract in the air.

'Twelve and a half per cent. They're fine. Send them off.'

'Right.' She stared for a moment into the mirror. Julia was humming to herself.

'You seem very pleased with yourself.' There was an edge to her voice and she wondered if the disapproval showed.

'Why shouldn't I be? After the party I'm off on holiday.'

'When?' Lucy blinked, the word coming out as a gasp.

'Tomorrow.'

'Where to?'

'Somewhere exotic with no telephone.'

'For how long?' She was spitting out the questions.

'Until I get bored.'

'When will that be?'

'Depends who I meet.'

A pause.

'Don't go, Julia. Please.'

Julia looked up sharply into the mirror, surprised at the tone of Lucy's voice, wondering if she had heard properly. At first she thought that perhaps Lucy was afraid of being left on her own but it was only a quick, instinctive guess and as soon as she saw the expression on the girl's face, she knew she was wrong. Lucy had moved close to her shoulder now, staring at the back of Julia's head, her hands clasped in front of her, nervously clutching and twisting the papers she was holding. Her eyes were wide and staring and her bottom lip had begun to tremble.

Julia frowned, unsure of herself, not really wanting to believe the obvious. If this was what it seemed, then why had it taken her so long to notice?

She made a move to turn but as she twisted in her seat Lucy bent towards her clasping her arms around her, her face buried into Julia's hair, the sobs reaching out from deep inside her. Julia leant back and touched her face, gently whispering, 'What's wrong?' knowing exactly what was wrong as the small face pushed harder into her neck and she could feel the girl's tears on her skin. Again she tried to turn but Lucy held on, arms clasped tightly round her chest.

'Lucy, please,' Julia said, stroking her hair like a mother with a child, trying to stop the tears but the girl misunderstood and began to whimper; her mouth opened, the sharp little teeth nipping at Julia's neck and shoulders, her tongue darting out, tracing a pattern up her throat and along the base of her jaw until Julia gasped in reluctant excitement.

Now the girl's hands had forced their way inside the robe and were caressing her breasts, teasing the nipples into erection. Julia squealed at the pain as Lucy squeezed harder. She automatically turned her head away and clutched at the back of the girl's head, forcing her face tighter into her shoulder, her fingers digging into the scalp until, in turn, Lucy cried out, the tears running freely now down Julia's neck.

Briefly Julia sat motionless, trying to detach her mind from the sensations of her body, thinking back over the past few hours and the absurdity of the situation: first Wayne the man, then Ahmed the boy and now Lucy the girl. It was ridiculous, something to back away from, but again the little tongue had

begun to move, licking behind her ear, the voice whimpering whispers of love, and Julia felt a surge of affection for the girl. It would be Lucy's first time, like with Ahmed, an initiation. But if it was to be Lucy's first time, then, again, it needed to be something she would always remember. Without warning Lucy let go her grip and sat back on her knees. Julia turned and the robe slipped from her shoulders, exposing her breasts to the damp air. She looked down at the girl. Lucy was more composed now, sitting there blinking, her face flushed, her blouse which was normally creased in almost military precision crushed, the buttons open; her skirt had ridden up her legs, exposing the bare thighs. As Julia smiled at her she held out her arms.

Julia slid from the stool and kneeled opposite the girl and now it was her turn to reach out and take her face in her hands.

'I'm sorry, Lucy,' she said softly. 'I did not know. Forgive me.'

Even now there was time to back out but Julia discarded the idea. If this was what the girl wanted she should have it. She moved forward so that their lips touched in a chaste kiss, almost sisterly, just the merest contact, their eyes open until Lucy's tongue emerged and Julia parted her lips to receive it, closing her eyes now as their bodies met breast to breast, and she sucked at the flesh of the young girl's lips, taking her tongue deep into her mouth and they were both whimpering, the sounds mingling, every bit of reluctance gone. For a moment they kneeled before one another, motionless until Julia took Lucy by the shoulders and turned her over on to her back, moving over her and down on to her body and it was not until the girl had twisted on to one side and forced her leg between Julia's thighs, squirming her hip up as far as it would go, twisting and turning, that Julia realised this was no novice; she had done it before; there was a practised perfection to the movement and suddenly Julia was overcome with frenzy, tearing at the girl's clothes, forcing herself against the thrust of the hipbone, mouth to mouth, nipples bruising one another while the telephone rang, the ticker tape chattered and the telex murmured incessantly . . . and they paid them no heed.

Chapter Fifteen

For years it had been Luke's secret desire to play the role of a butler, one of those super-English butlers from the movies who were civil to Americans and gave out racing tips on the sly to people like David Niven and Wilfrid Hyde White; next to driving the Queen on a Royal Tour, it was his favourite fantasy. He could not quite remember when he had mentioned it to Miss Hemmingway; six months ago perhaps on that long drive up the motorway when she had got him talking. He had told her reluctantly, almost as a joke and she had said: 'Well, one day you shall,' and he had forgotten all about it.

And now he was standing preening himself in a set of tails and a black bow tie. She had just that day invited him into her room and shown the clothes to him. 'Tonight,' she had said, 'you shall buttle at my party.' That was the great thing about Miss Hemmingway; you never knew what she was going to come up with next. He was all set to enjoy himself. His job was to announce the guests as they came in and supervise the

girl who had been hired to organise the food and the champagne. He was also to be on hand if there was any trouble or if there was a little bit of diplomacy needed, not that there was ever any problem at any of Miss Hemmingway's parties. They all went smoothly and became just as rowdy and uninhibited as she permitted.

The first guests arrived in an explosion of gold curls, brown thighs and extravagant bosoms. He did not need to ask their names. He knew them well enough, but he did so all the same, just to maintain the proprieties. And then he took them through the hall to the drawing-room, threw back the door, cleared his throat and boomed, 'Miss Erika Brown and Miss Samantha Jones!'

Julia threw up her hands, snapped her fingers and waltzed across the floor to meet them. 'Cherubs,' she said. 'How gorgeous you look.'

'And you, Julia,' said Samantha. 'Where did you get that amazing creation?'

'A present from Georges Mendel,' she pirouetted, showing off a full length green evening dress, high necked and cut low at the back, almost to the swell of her buttocks. 'Like it?'

Erika whistled. 'I think I'll just go home. Right now.'

A bar had been set up by the window and she led them to it, placing glasses of champagne in their hands and gesturing to the canapes.

Samantha wanted to know the reason for the party.

'Just a surprise. Business has gone well these last few days and I'm going on holiday. Anyway, since when did we need reasons?'

Erika sipped champagne and bit into a prawn. 'Who's coming?' she asked. 'Anyone we know?'

'I think you are acquainted with a Mr Rowlands. Max Rowlands.'

Samantha chuckled deep in her throat. 'But do we know him tonight?'

Julia frowned in mock rebuke. 'You are perfectly well versed in the rules of the house, Sam. You don't acknowledge him unless and until he introduces himself to you.'

Erika saluted. 'And Mrs Rowlands?'

Julia shook her head. 'No. A prior engagement.'

'And where's Lucy?' asked Samantha.

'Gone, I'm afraid.'

'You mean, for the evening?'

Julia shook her head. 'It all became too much in the end.'

From the door came another cough and roar from Luke.

'Mister John Ritchie.'

Julia moved forward again welcoming the tall gentleman in his City suit, drawing him towards Samantha and Erika, saying that she was delighted he could make it.

'Your information has proved invaluable,' he whispered,

'I'm glad.'

'And Bernard Hawkins? Was I right about him?' He seemed eager to repay the debt as if the three thousand in five-pound notes had not been enough.

'He has been paid off,' said Julia enigmatically.

Ritchie raised his eyebrows. 'He's not wearing - uhm - concrete slippers, I hope.' Julia laughed and told him that he had been watching far too much television.

Cathy arrived with Gunnar and Rex, followed almost immediately by a petite brunette with a snub nose.

'Evettel' Julia exclaimed. 'Come in. How's the movie business?'

The champagne was served again and the girls became giggly. Gunnar and Rex told a succession of amusing stories and John Ritchie gave out share tips. Everything was going smoothly.

'Mrs Elizabeth Smythe.'

Liz had lost some of her ruddy, country-fresh good looks. There was a slightly raddled air about her. She wore a high-necked dress with a scarf which might have been hiding something. But she was smiling. The bouncy nervous energy that Julia had come across that morning on the Heath had been replaced by a lethargic, relaxed tranquillity. Under her arm she carried a small bundle.

'Your riding gear, Julia,' she said.

Julia led her to the bedroom. 'Your jeans and shirt are in here. But you did not bring your husband?'

'No. He is still in the Middle East.'

Liz threw the bag on the floor and sat on the bed, rubbing her legs.

'Tired?' asked Julia.

'I've had a hectic time.'

'But not unpleasant, I hope.'

'By no means.'

'We must have lunch some time.'

Liz nodded.

'There are things we can talk about,' said Julia. 'In my business it is important to know what is going on in the world.' She paused to let the meaning sink in.

'And you prefer it from the horse's mouth so to speak,' said Liz.

'So to speak.'

Liz frowned and Julia sat beside her. 'Nothing, of course, that would come under the heading of national security. I do have my rules.'

'I see.' But she sounded doubtful.

Julia stood up. 'Let's pencil in a lunch date then.'

'All right. And you can tell me what I get out of it.'

'Nothing,' said Julia, smiling. 'Nothing at all. At least, not when you are expecting it.'

Liz began to laugh and together they left the room, arm in arm.

'Liz, there's someone I want you to meet,' said Julia, stopping by the bar. 'Say hello to Evette.' She made the introductions. 'I am sure you two have something in common.'

'Count Frederik Kroste.'

The Count said that he could not stay too long but he would be delighted to have a glass or two of champagne. He was the very epitome of elegance, in his velvet tuxedo and his perfectly composed manner. Julia had to admit that it would require quite an effort of imagination to picture this elegant creature kneeling in unrestrained passion before a child prostitute in a wedding dress. She could see why he had been so sure of himself at the embassy.

He tipped his glass towards her. 'To your continued success, Julia.'

'To ours,' she said, and he smiled.

'When will you feel that you have achieved enough, do you think?'

'I have barely started,' she said.

He looked around him, making mental assessments of the worth of the paintings and the furniture, glancing at each of the guests in turn. 'You are an extraordinary woman,' he murmured.

'No. It's my friends who are extraordinary.'

'Do you have any real friends?'

A good question, she thought. He's not just a pretty tuxedo and a sexual odd-ball. A flippant answer formed in her mind but she decided to be honest with him. 'Where I grew up,' she said, 'you learn to trust no one.'

'I take your point,' he said.

She waited for him to ask further questions, about her background and her career but he said nothing; he seemed to be satisfied. She decided that she was going to get on well with Count Frederik Krosté. He would be no trouble.

'All it leaves me to say is to wish you *bon voyage*,' he said. 'And I look forward to seeing you on your return.'

'Of course, now let me introduce you around . . .'

Julia was happy. She moved among her guests, flitting in and out of conversations, unobtrusively making sure that they were all enjoying themselves, letting the champagne do the job of breaking down the barriers of inhibition.

Liz was dancing with Gunnar and talking animatedly, with Rex and Cathy looking on.

The Count and Evette were standing by the window looking out over the park and as Julia moved past she caught a few words, something about a gym slip.

On a settee John Ritchie was crushed between Samantha and Erika, looking mildly embarrassed but making no move to leave. 'I hear you're something of a gambler . . . ' Samantha was saying.

Quite suddenly Julia felt tired. The past few days had been hectic and her body was crying out for some rest. She looked at her watch, called Luke over, whispered to him and clapped her hands. The others stopped what they were doing and looked towards her.

'Ladies and gentlemen. The party is being relocated.' They looked at one another, puzzled. 'As you know, I have to leave soon and so I have booked a table at Swift's in my name. I trust you will all enjoy yourselves. Cabs are waiting at the door and the bill is taken care of. Have fun, children.'

They left in a babble of noise and kisses, everyone demanding that everyone else enjoy themselves.

'You're not coming to the club?' asked Ritchie, his face slightly flushed.

'No. I am leaving on the midnight flight,' she said.

'Ah. The red-eye,' he said, beaming.

'That's correct John. You're catching on.'

And then they were gone and the flat was silent except for the clink of glasses and ashtrays as Luke and the caterer cleared up. She yawned, moved into the bathroom, slipped out of her dress and stepped under the shower, playing the six jets around her body, touching the control button and spraying cold water on her legs, hot on her back, then trying a different combination, alternately shivering with cold and gasping in the heat. She had settled for a warm face, hot shoulders and legs and a cool stomach when she saw a face at the door. She frowned and pulled the shower curtain back an inch.

'Sorry to trouble you, Miss Hemmingway, but there's a Mr Rowlands to see you,' Luke was still wearing his butler's voice.

'All right Luke. Show him into the lounge and give him a glass of champagne.'

'Very good, madam.'

She stabbed again at the button, the water dried up and she was swept up in six jets of warm air. She shut her eyes, thinking of Max. Poor Max. He would be annoyed that he was too late for the party, especially a party with Samantha and Erika. Poor old Max.

She pulled on her robe and opened the door.

'Julia!' His voice was loud and impatient. He bounded towards her, spilling champagne on the way and crushed her in a rough embrace, kissing both her cheeks and bruising her arms so that she had to push him away. 'My goodness, Max,' she said breathlessly, 'take it easy.'

'I've rushed here straight from the airport,' he said as if that statement explained everything.

'Did you bring the honourable Donald back with you?'

He laughed. 'No. I left him out there. The last time I saw him, he had his hands round a bottle.'

'Let me freshen your glass,' she said moving away from him but he followed her like a dog, panting at her heels. 'Let me tell you . . . he was beautiful out there. He said nothing at the meeting, not even a squeak, just a nod of the head when he was asked to confirm what I was saying.' Max took his glass and drained it in one gulp. 'They're committed now. The Foreign Office can't go back on it. All the contracts are signed and on their way to the company by special messenger.' The words came out fast, like ticker tape, without punctuation. He smiled and seemed to relax. 'I did it, Julia.'

'With a little help.'

'Of course.' He looked sweetly at her, the headmaster expression back on his face. 'For the usual commission of two per cent.'

'That's not very generous,' she said.

'Of two million . . . ' he paused ' . . . two million pounds.' His smile widened, then he shrugged. 'After repaying the capital I borrowed, plus interest.'

Julia frowned and said she did not understand.

There was a sly look about him now. 'Don't you? I thought you were clever. As chairman of the company I have control. I can manipulate.' He flickered his hands in front of his face as if he were playing with puppets. 'I will set up an offshoot company and skim profits off the top. It's all in the game. It's easy. I've done it before.' There was a faraway look in his eyes. He was looking at Julia but she knew that he did not see her; he was looking far beyond, into the black depths of his bank account.

'Universal Investment Trust,' she said and he blinked and came back to earth. 'You did it before with Universal Investment Trust?'

'That was on a smaller scale,' he said.

'And the company folded.'

'Yep. After I got out. Julia, I have only begun. The Arabs

are richer than Croesus. They have oil oozing out of the ground at a million dollars a day.'

'But it's still fraud.'

'Fraud,' he said spraying champagne across the room. 'Look, I got away with it once and I'll do it again. People rob banks and spend ten years in Parkhurst. I do it respectably and become admired for it.' The faraway look was back in his eyes as he happily indulged in self-righteous vindication of himself. 'It's the new world of finance in property, equities, commodities, whatever you like. If you're in control, you can add or subtract a few noughts here and there.'

'And move a decimal point?'

'Even that. I did not spend fifteen years of my life as an accountant for nothing. I was building for this day. The big hit.' He flung his arms in the air and began dancing round the room shrieking: 'Eureka, Eldorado.'

'Max, I have to tell you something,' Julia said quietly.

'Alone,' he said moving towards her, leering at her and she hoped it was all a big joke, but they were interrupted by Luke knocking at the door. 'Telephone, Madam,' he said.

'Thanks, Luke. I'll take it in the bedroom.'

She hoped Max would not follow her but he was still at her heels as she moved past the bed and picked up the receiver.

'Yes this is Julia Hemmingway . . . ' she listened and smiled. 'Is that so. How charming. No of course not . . . yes, I'm afraid I must deny it . . . no, just say what you wish. I know you will anyway.'

She dropped the receiver and sat on the bed.

'Trouble?' asked Max.

She shook her head. 'Some newspaper has been snooping round hotel corridors dropping fivers.' She looked up at Max. 'They seem to think I'm going to be the next Mrs Wayne Bentley.'

'My God.'

'I'm on the front page tomorrow it seems.'

'Jesus.'

'Sweet, isn't it?'

But Max had lost interest already. He was perspiring and on his face that recognisable blinkered expression. 'Julia, not him,

not Wayne Bentley. You and I are too much alike to be apart. We should form a partnership.'

'Is this a proposal?'

'I can easily ditch Pam.' He was nodding to himself and again he had hold of her by the shoulders.

'Max . . . ' said Julia sharply, a warning sound, as if she were telling a dog to get its feet off the chair.

'I want you . . . ' he breathed, climbing all over her.

'I can feel that,' she said from under him.

'Now,' he said.

'Look, Max, I don't want to cause you an injury, but you should know . . . '

And again she was being kissed; again there were hands inside the robe. She sighed. 'Max, we have to talk about Jetec.'

'Not now. You don't know how much I've wanted you . . . '

She tried a switch. 'I assumed you were adequately supplied with women.'

'Women yes, but no one like you.' His voice was muffled, his mouth lost somewhere in her hair. Julia sat up. 'Doctors say that the male of the species under extreme sexual excitement is liable to lose all sense of hearing.'

'Pardon,' he said. But it was no good. He would not be joked out of it. She wriggled away from him and stood up but he was quickly in pursuit grabbing at her from behind, his arms clasped around her waist.

'Max, please listen to me.'

'I love you.'

There was nothing else for it. She bent at the knees, turned her left shoulder, pulled sharply down with her right hand on his left wrist, twisted hard and watched as he lazily flipped through the air, landing heavily on his back, his breath and his erection gone.

'Max. I control Jetec.'

'Uh.'

'I told you your hearing wasn't too good.'

'Uh,' he repeated.

'Chairman of the company.'

He pointed to himself, but Julia shook her head. 'You were not aware of this, but the only stipulation made by the Arabs

is that I become chairman and have full control.'

Max closed his eyes.

A knock on the door. 'Yes?' said Julia.

Luke appeared at the door, still dressed in his butler's tails,

'The Prince of Kubran.'

'Good. Ask him to wait two minutes will you?'

'Very good, madam.'

Julia slipped out of her robe and walked naked to the closet, pulled out a slip and a suit and began to dress. Max stared at her unable to move. 'One more thing,' she said. 'The news of this will be announced next week. I suggest you leak it to Bernard Hawkins. Give him an exclusive. It will do us no harm and he will be in our debt.' She winked. 'An enemy transformed into a grateful ally. The first law of the jungle.'

'Why don't you . . . ?' Max gasped.

Julia shook her head. 'No. Coming from the chairman it would not seem proper. Far better to hear it from an employee.' She picked up a small valise. 'Bye, Max.' She blew him a kiss.

She bowed to Ahmed and turned to Luke. 'You have the address to send on my luggage?'

'Yes, madam.'

'Good. Make yourself at home while I'm away. Good-bye, Luke.'

Julia waved over her shoulder as she left, with the Prince one step behind.

Luke found Max on the floor and helped him up, leading him from the bedroom into the drawing-room.

'Where is she?' he asked.

Luke took him to the window and pointed to the street below where the Rolls was pulling away from the kerb, the pennant fluttering, heading west towards Heathrow.

'There she goes,' said Luke.

'Riding into the sunset,' Max wheezed.

'Quite so, sir,' said Luke.

U.K. 75p

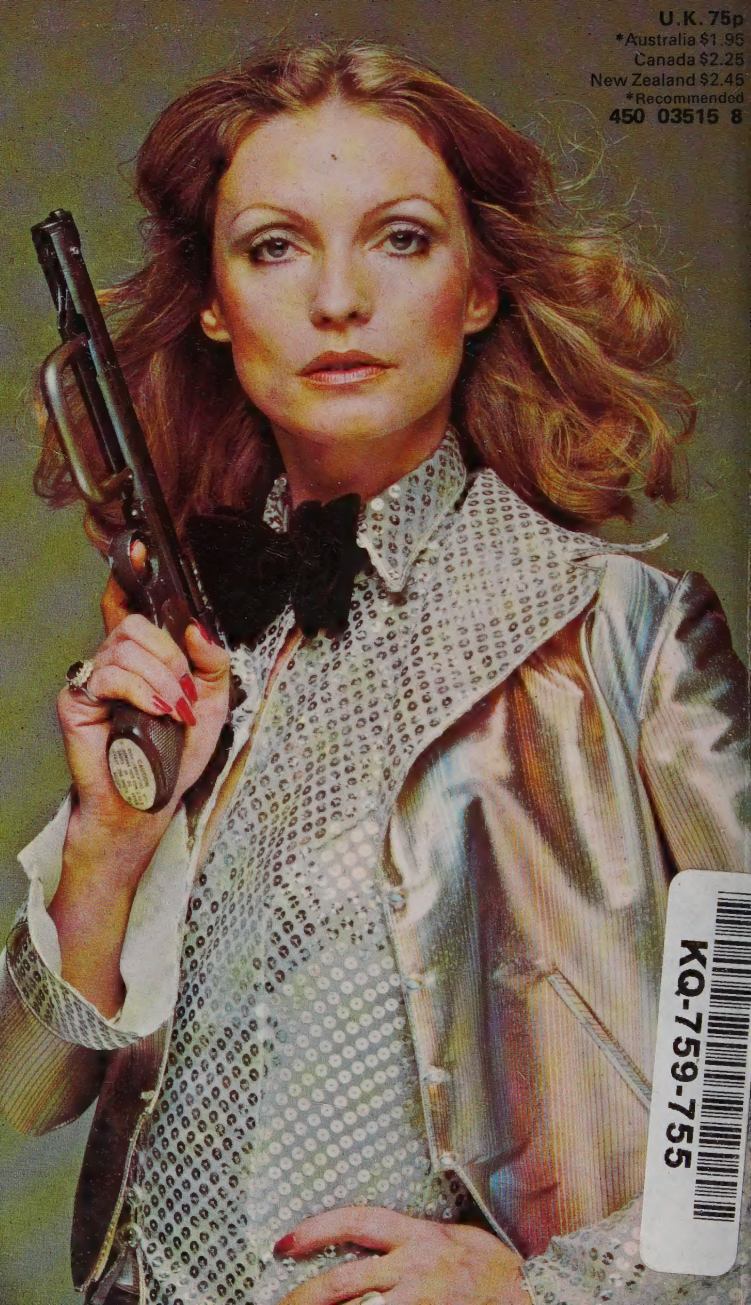
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