

# Prologue

THE EARLY MORNING sun glinted on the river and sparkled in the droplets falling from the oars of the boat. The rower, a young man dressed in a dinner jacket, was showering his two passengers with water, making them squeal in pretend outrage. They had been to a college ball and now, at seven-thirty in the morning, were still enjoying themselves.

‘Simon, leave off!’ Penny grumbled. ‘If you ruin my dress, I’ll never speak to you again.’ The garment was made of creamy satin and clung to an enviable figure.

‘Please, Simon, do stop,’ Barbara added. ‘I don’t fancy a swim.’ She had large greeny-blue eyes beneath winged brows, a straight nose and a well-defined mouth, which was obviously more used to laughter than sorrow. Her dress was of cerise-and-cream-striped taffeta with an off-the-shoulder neckline, huge puffed sleeves and a bias-cut skirt.

‘For you, sweetheart, anything.’ He resumed rowing.

It was at Newnham Barbara had met Penny and they had hit it off straight away. Penny had unusual red-gold hair and a flawless complexion. She had been sent to college by her wealthy parents to channel her energies away from the idea of being an actress into something they considered more suitable for a young lady. Barbara didn't think it had worked. Penny only just managed to do the work required of her, being more interested in amateur dramatics and going to the theatre. This year she had taken her finals, while Barbara still had a year to go, but they had sworn to keep in touch.

It was through Penny that Barbara had met Lieutenant Simon Barcliffe. 'He needs taking out of himself,' her friend had told her. 'He's become withdrawn, not the laughing brother I waved away four years ago. You will be good for him.' His hair was slightly fairer, less red, than Penny's and his eyes were cornflower blue, but the family likeness was there in the shape of their faces, the slightly square jaw and firm mouth.

When the subject of the ball had come up, Penny had suggested Simon should partner Barbara and both had been happy with the arrangement. Everyone had been determined to enjoy themselves and try to forget the horror which most of those who had stayed behind could only half imagine. They had danced to the music of two orchestras who took it turn and turn about to keep it going until dawn. No one wanted the night to end, but

when the electrically lit night gave way to a pink dawn, Simon had suggested taking a boat down the river to a pub he knew would be open and serving breakfast.

Simon was fun, didn't seem to be able to take anything seriously, but Barbara guessed that was only a facade. He had come back from the hell of the trenches without a scratch, but sometimes when Barbara looked at him, she noticed a shadow pass across his face and his eyes had a faraway look, as if a ghost had nudged him. It was gone in an instant and he was his usual light-hearted self, making jokes and teasing. She had seen that haunted look on other faces, men in her hometown, who had come back from the front line, changed for ever by what they had endured. But they were the lucky ones: so many had found their last resting place in the mud of Flanders, leaving grieving wives, mothers, sweethearts.

A mile further up the river, they tied up at the landing stage of a riverside pub and sat at one of the outside tables. 'I'm going to have the lot,' Simon said, as a waiter hovered over them. 'How about you, Penny?'

'Coffee will do for me,' she answered. 'Supper at two o'clock in the morning plays havoc with my digestion. What about you, Barbara?'

'Just coffee,' she said. 'I'm going home to Melsham today. Dad's expecting me. We are going to plan a holiday in Scotland, though we can't go until the harvest is in.'

‘Going on holiday with your father,’ Simon mocked. ‘Doesn’t he have lady friends?’

‘He’s not like that!’ Barbara said hotly. ‘Dad’s never looked at another woman. He wouldn’t.’

‘Celibate for six years, how the poor man must be suffering!’

‘Simon!’ his sister exclaimed. ‘You’re not in the army now.’

‘Sorry,’ he said contritely. ‘Tongue ran away with me.’

Penny suddenly noticed the big man standing on the towpath beside his bicycle, wearing a paint-stained check shirt and corduroy trousers. She nudged Barbara. ‘Who’s he?’ she whispered, nodding towards him. ‘He’s been standing there watching us for ages. Giving me the creeps.’

All three turned to look and George, who had heard all he wanted to hear, decided it was time to make himself scarce.

# Chapter One

BARBARA SPENT THE day wandering about the farm with the dog at her heels, exercised her mare, Jinny, across the common near her home and came back in time to have a leisurely soak in the bath, the bathroom having been converted from a small bedroom. It was a life she loved, just as she loved the rambling old farmhouse with its mellow brick and flint exterior and the yellow climbing rose that reached her bedroom window. Her mother had planted that on the day Barbara was christened. ‘I wanted to watch it grow, as you grew,’ she had told her. ‘My golden girl and my golden rose together.’

The whole house was full of treasured memories like that. Barbara didn’t believe in ghosts, but the spirit of her mother was everywhere. It was in the bricks themselves, in the decorations and furnishings, in the garden. It was beside her when she cooked. It stood over her when she painted, a silent but accurate critic. Until

her mother died she had not known a minute's anxiety, beyond having to confess to her teacher she had skimped her homework or when the cat's unwanted kittens had to be disposed of. She always cried buckets over those. Safe and loved, she never expected the blow, and when it fell, she had no one to lean on, no shoulder to cry on but her father's, and he had been grieving himself. Together they had weathered it, made a life without the loved one, and now she could look back with a smile at the pleasant memories and reminisce with her father. 'Do you remember when...'

Leaving him to go to college had caused her some soul-searching. As the daughter of a well-to-do farmer she could stay at home and paint pictures to her heart's content and wait for the plaudits if they came, but she wanted to be independent, and though her father never grumbled, she knew the farm was nothing like as prosperous as it had been in her grandfather's time and she did not want to be an added burden. She planned to teach art at a local school, where she could live at home, painting in her spare time. When she explained this, he had smiled and said if she wanted to go to college, then of course he would find the wherewithal to send her.

She pulled the plug on the cooling bathwater, wrapped herself in a towel and went to her room. Her dress was the same one she had worn at the college ball but that did not matter since there would be no one at tonight's

affair who had been there. Sweeping her blonde hair into a chignon and fastening it with combs and pins, she took a last look in the wardrobe mirror and went down to join her father.

He was waiting for her in the drawing room, standing by the hearth with one foot on the fender. At forty-four, he was a good-looking man whose thick, dark hair had the merest suggestion of grey at the temples and whose figure was supple enough to belong to a much younger man. He moved forward and took her hands to hold her at arm's length. 'I suppose it was worth the wait. I shall be the envy of every young blood there.'

Before the war the Harvest Supper, which was grander than a supper, more a dinner followed by a ball, had been held in Melsham each year at the end of the first week in September, but this was the first since the war. Barbara recalled, as a child, watching enviously as her parents went off without her, her mother looking radiant in a flowing ball gown, her father in evening dress, so much in love it hurt her to remember. Now she was going with him, but Simon's remarks preyed on her mind. 'Are you sure you want to partner me?' she asked.

'What's brought this on?' he asked with a smile. 'Are you having doubts about my staying power?'

'No, of course not.' She couldn't tell him what was in her mind, couldn't bring herself to say it aloud, as if

voicing the notion that he might prefer to take a lady friend would put the idea into his head. 'I thought you might be bored.'

'Let me tell you, my girl, I can dance the night away as well as anyone, and just because I have a grown-up daughter, doesn't make me decrepit.'

Relieved, she slipped her arm through his, smiling up at him. 'Let's go, then.'

Dinner was over and the dancing had begun when he made his way over to Barbara's table and stood before her. He was a few years older than she was, a very tall man with broad shoulders. He had dark-brown hair cut short and parted in the middle, matching dark eyes and a serious expression. Everything about him seemed serious, almost sombre, even down to his tailcoat, black cummerbund and his shining patent shoes, though they were really no different from what all the men were wearing. But there was something about him that made him different and she didn't think it was only his size.

'Miss Bosgrove, would you care to dance?'

She glanced at her father, sitting beside her. 'Go on, my dear, don't mind me.'

She rose to face him. A hand, a very big hand, went about her waist and the other took hers in a firm, dry grip. She laid her other hand on his shoulder and they whirled away in a Viennese waltz.

‘How did you know my name?’ She tilted her head to look up at him, wondering where she had seen him before.

‘It wasn’t difficult to find out. Your father is well known in Melsham, isn’t he?’

‘I suppose he is. The family has been farming in the area for generations. Do you always find out the names of people before you ask them to dance?’

‘Only if I intend to ask them out.’

She laughed. ‘That’s a new angle, I must say.’

‘It’s the truth.’ The sombre look had disappeared and he was smiling, making her realise he was handsome in a rugged kind of way. ‘I would like to see you again.’

‘But I don’t know you from Adam!’

‘It’s not Adam, but George. George Kennett.’

‘I’m Barbara.’

‘I know.’

‘What else do you know?’

‘That you live with your father at Beechcroft Farm, that you are studying at Cambridge and you have friends called Penny and Simon.’

Cambridge! The man with the bicycle, the man in the checked shirt and the paint-stained trousers, who had stared so long and so hard. ‘What were you doing in Cambridge?’

‘You noticed me?’ He had certainly noticed her. The redhead was the more glamorous of the two girls, but

it was Barbara who had caught his eye. Somewhere, sometime, he had known he had seen her before and that had been borne out when she mentioned Melsham, his own home town.

‘That’s what you intended, wasn’t it?’

‘Not at all. I was hardly dressed to impress, was I?’

‘Everyone has to work,’ she said, though her mind went back to Simon. He seemed to get along quite happily without it but, according to Penny, their father was putting pressure on him to join the family stockbroking firm. ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m a builder. I was in Cambridge converting an old house into student accommodation. It was easier and cheaper to live in lodgings and cycle back and forth than travel forty miles home every day.’ An influx of undergraduates coming back to complete their studies after serving in the armed forces needed accommodation. George had won the contract for the painting because he had put in a bid that was ridiculously low. He was single, lived at home with his mother and had no overheads. Until he had bought a van he had pushed his paint, brushes, tools and dustsheets from job to job in a handcart. He could not afford to stable and feed a horse, and besides, he was convinced the horse had had its day.

But painting and decorating were only the beginning: he had plans. One day, he would have a thriving business,

a grand house and a motor car, and not a second-hand van which had cost him thirty hard-earned pounds only the month before. Half the time he could not afford to put petrol in the tank, which was why he carried his bicycle in the back of it.

‘The work in Cambridge is finished now and I’ve just won a contract to convert a couple of old houses in Melsham town centre into flats,’ he told her. He would need help for those but he could take on casual labour and there was plenty of that about: soldiers who had survived the bloodshed had come home to find jobs hard to come by and were grateful for whatever work came their way. Lloyd George had promised homes for heroes and the government was encouraging builders by giving them grants to build them. George meant to have a slice of that, but to do that, he had to have a viable business. A strong pair of shoulders, a few brushes and a handcart hardly qualified, which was one of the reasons he had invested in the van and found a yard which he could call business premises. You couldn’t run a business from a small terrace house with no front garden and only a narrow back entry.

‘Do you live locally?’ she asked.

‘Yes, Melsham born and bred. Doesn’t my accent give me away?’

‘I didn’t notice your accent particularly.’

He was pleased to hear that: he had made a great

effort to eradicate the Norfolk accent he had grown up with; it didn't help when trying to impress the people he had to do business with.

The music ended and he took her arm to escort her back to her table. There was no sign of her father. 'I meant it, you know,' he said, sitting beside her.

'Meant what?'

'That I want to see you again.'

She laughed, unnerved by his intense gaze. 'You've got a nerve...'

'If you don't ask, you don't get,' he said. 'I've nothing to lose.' He paused and looked closely at her again. 'Have you? Anything to lose, I mean.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'Would you like me to fetch you a glass of wine?'

'Yes please.'

She watched him go. It was difficult to tell his age but she surmised he must be in his late twenties. He had lost the slimness of youth, if he had ever had it, and was well developed and self-assured. A big man in every sense. He paid for the wine and came back, carefully carrying two glasses through the throng of people who crowded at the edge of the floor, waiting for the band to begin playing the next dance.

She thanked him and began to sip the bubbly wine. 'Don't you have a partner?' she asked as he resumed his seat.

He smiled. 'Now, would I have brought a girl with me when I intended to ask another out?'

'You came with that intention?'

'Of course. I thought I'd made that clear.'

She laughed in an embarrassed way. 'I don't know what to make of you.'

'I saw you in Cambridge and heard you talking about Melsham and decided I'd like to get to know you. It was no good mooning about because I hadn't the gumption to do anything about it, was it? I go for what I want. Always. Do you blame me for that?'

He didn't seem the sort of person to moon anywhere. He was a pushy, overconfident young man who fancied his chances. 'No, I suppose not.'

'Then have dinner with me on Saturday evening.'

'I don't know...'

'Dinner, nothing more, just a meal. At The Crown. I'll book a table, shall I?'

'So long as you understand I'm not making any kind of commitment.'

'Of course not. I wouldn't expect you to.' He rose to go. 'I'll pick you up at seven.'

She didn't tell him her address: he was bound to know it.

The Crown, once a coaching inn, now a busy hotel, occupied a prominent position on Melsham marketplace.

The town had once been the agricultural centre of the region and had a larger-than-average market, more triangular than square. At the apex stood St Andrew's church. On one long side there was a row of shops in differing styles of architecture, none of which was outstanding. On the other stood the town hall and beside that a terrace of handsome Georgian houses, one of which was a doctor's surgery, another a solicitor's, and the remaining two George was going to convert into flats. The base of the triangle consisted of the railings and gates of a small park, in front of which stood a stone cross on a plinth to commemorate those who had fallen in the war, and nearby was a pool where the old village pump had once dispensed water to the inhabitants. Barbara hardly spared it a glance as George ushered her into the hotel.

That first dinner was spent learning more about each other. She told him about her mother and how miserable she had been when she died. 'It was her heart,' she said. 'I never guessed...'

'I am sorry,' he said, putting his huge hand over hers.

'It was six years ago and Dad and I have come to terms with it now.'

He told her he lived with his widowed mother in a terraced house in Victoria Street in the old centre of Melsham and leased a builder's yard from which he

ran his business. But he had plans, had mapped out his progress through life as if planning the route for a long trek, step by step, including, it seemed, when he should marry. Thirty or thereabouts was the right time, he told her, when he'd had time to make something of himself, a little money behind him to offer a wife, to know what he wanted.

‘And what do you want?’

‘A thriving business, a motor car, a nice house, and a wife and family.’

She laughed. ‘In that order?’

‘It is the most sensible order.’ He seemed relaxed, but he was twirling the stem of his empty wine glass in his fingers and she realised he was nervous. It made him suddenly more human.

‘Are you always sensible?’

‘I try to be. It’s the way I’ve been brought up, I suppose. Having no father, I’ve been the man in the house since I was knee-high to a grasshopper. My mother made great sacrifices to give me a good start in life and I can’t let her down.’

‘I’m sure you won’t,’ she murmured, wondering how long it would be before the stem of the glass broke in his hands.

‘I served my apprenticeship with Gosport’s before the war. Even then old Gosport was a dodderly old fellow, too slow by half.’

‘You didn’t go into the army yourself?’

‘Yes, I served nearly two years.’ He had been twenty-three when war broke out, fit and healthy, just the sort of man the army were looking for, but his mother had persuaded him she needed him more than his country did: he was her only support and without him she could never manage and so he had resisted the blandishments of the posters telling him his country needed him. That did not mean he was a coward but, as his mother pointed out, not everyone was a fighter and someone had to keep the country running. He could also see advantages: with so many men away, the war might provide opportunities for advancement if he kept his wits about him. In 1916, short on volunteers and with more and more casualties decimating the numbers of men in uniform, the government had introduced conscription and he had been called up.

To his mother’s enormous relief, he had not been drafted overseas immediately but set to work with a paintbrush on some barracks being built for the new intake, and later for the Americans who came over in their thousands. He had kept his head down and got on with his work but the time had come when he was put on a draft to go to France. The week before he was due to go, the war ended.

‘You didn’t go back to Mr Gosport afterwards?’ she asked.

‘No. I decided the time had come to set up on my own account.’

‘And stole his customers.’ She didn’t know why she made such a bald statement, except perhaps to pull him out of his complacency, but if that was the case it didn’t work.

‘It’s a competitive world out there, Barbara. Gosport understands that. I only took the small stuff he didn’t want. I’m not big enough to compete for anything else. But one day I will be. The profit I make from the flats will be ploughed back into the business, into getting more and bigger contracts. Then I’ll take on more men; I’m going to be somebody in this town, Barbara.’

‘Do you always get what you want?’

‘Not always right away, but I persevere until I do.’

He was insufferably confident and she didn’t know why she agreed to see him again but she did, and over the long vacation, except for the fortnight she and her father were walking in Scotland, they spent almost every evening and Sunday afternoon together. He treated her with courtesy, bought her chocolates and flowers and made her aware of her own sexuality, though he had done no more than kiss her. And that he did well, making her want more, but afraid of where it might lead. He must have known how she felt, because he always drew back from the edge, leaving her aching and breathless, but at the same time relieved. She didn’t

think she would have the courage to say no if it came to the crunch. Was she falling in love with him?

When the new term started they would not be able to see each other so often. If she learnt to forget him while she was away, involved herself with student activities, she might find the chemistry was not as strong as he supposed. The trouble was that he had no intention of allowing her to cool off. There was an enormous bouquet waiting for her in her room when she returned to college. 'I miss you already,' it said on the card.

And then there were letters, a barrage of them. He didn't seem to mind that her answers were brief and impersonal. He loved her, he said, and one day she would acknowledge that she loved him. She was young and he wasn't asking her to name the day or anything like that. He needed a few more contracts before he was in a position to ask her to become his wife. She wondered if he had confided in his mother or whether she was being left to guess, just as her own father was.

He knew she had been seeing George during the holiday and had called him 'that brooding Byron' but he didn't know the extent of their relationship. She didn't really know it herself. Dad might have been able to advise her, but she couldn't talk to him about it, couldn't help feeling disloyal, as if she planned to desert him. They had not talked about what would happen if

and when she married. She was only nineteen; there was plenty of time to cross that bridge when they came to it. Then the bridge loomed up long before she expected it, and it was not her doing, but her father's.

She came home for the Christmas holidays a day early, intending to surprise him, buying the ingredients for dinner on the way. She loved to cook for him, and they would sit over the fire and talk about college and farming and what had been happening in her absence, and make plans for Christmas, just the two of them.

She took a cab from the station and let herself in the front door. The house was quiet, but then she heard the sound of running water in the bathroom. She put the food on the kitchen table and carried her case upstairs, meaning to call out to him, but as she reached it the bathroom door opened and a young woman came out wearing nothing but a towel. She had a superb figure, with long, shapely legs, and though Barbara could not see her hair which was also wrapped in a towel, her face, even without make-up, was stunningly beautiful. Barbara, glued to the spot, was aware that her mouth had fallen open, but she couldn't find anything to say.

It seemed an eternity before the girl laughed. 'You must be Barbara.'

'Yes.' Her voice was a croak. 'Who are you?'

'Virginia Conway.'

'What are you doing here?'

‘Oh dear, I can see by the scowl on your face this is going to be difficult.’

‘I’m not scowling, simply asking a perfectly straightforward question.’ She turned her head as her father came out of his bedroom in a dressing gown. A dressing gown in the middle of the afternoon! She couldn’t believe it of him. Tears sprang to her eyes and she blinked hard.

‘Barbara, we weren’t expecting you.’

‘That much is obvious. How could you, Dad? How could you? And in Mum’s bed too.’ That was what shocked and hurt most, the fact that he could forget his dead wife so far as to take another woman into the bed he had shared with her all the years of their marriage, the bed in which Barbara had been born. Unable to face them, she ran into her room and slammed the door.

‘Barbara!’ her father called. ‘Come out, love, and let me explain...’

Leaning her back against the closed door, she heard Virginia’s voice. ‘I told you to tell her, didn’t I? You should have done so ages ago. Now, we’ve got off on the wrong foot.’

Barbara couldn’t believe her ears, didn’t want to believe them. Her father and... Who was she? How and when had they met? She stood leaning on the door, staring at the portrait of her mother hanging on the opposite wall. She had painted it from a snapshot, the

year after her mother died. Painting was her escape, her release for emotions she didn't know how to handle. She had shut herself away for hours, concentrating on colour and form, forgetting everything, even the time, and some very weird creations resulted, things she destroyed almost immediately, their therapeutic work done. But the portrait, painted a little later when her emotions had calmed, was kept. Everyone who saw it said she had managed to catch the essence of her subject, the laughing eyes, the smiling mouth, the person Margaret Bosgrove had been.

The memory of her dying mother sent the tears rolling down her cheeks. She and her father had sat by her bed for hours, while the clock ticked her life away, and afterwards, numb with grief, they had clung to each other. Had he forgotten that? Had he forgotten how sweet and wonderful his wife had been, how she had soothed him when he had had a bad day, laughed with him, cried with him, scolded him sometimes? How could he take another woman into that same bed and not be reminded?

'Barbara!' The sudden knock on the door made her jump. 'Come out, please. We must talk about this. I know you're upset...'

'Has she gone?'

'She's going.' She heard him speak to Virginia and the woman's angry response and then a door banging.

‘She’s gone to get dressed, then she’ll leave.’

Barbara waited until she heard footsteps going down the stairs and the front door slam, then slowly eased open the door. Her father was sitting on the top step of the stairs. He stood up slowly and came to her, putting his arm about her shoulders. ‘My poor pet. What a way to find out. I meant to tell you, I really did.’

‘When?’ She allowed him to lead her downstairs and into the kitchen, where she sat at the table and watched while he put the kettle on. It was a big room, the hub of the farm, with a black-leaded cooking range, a large dresser on which plates were arranged and cups hung on hooks. There were cupboards on the other walls and shelves for pans and above their heads a washing line that could be lowered and raised by a pulley. It was the domain of Mrs Endersby, who came in each morning to cook and clean, but she had gone home and the kitchen was empty.

‘When what?’

‘When were you going to tell me? When did it start? How long...?’

‘In the summer, while you were at college.’ He spooned tea into the pot, keeping his back to her. ‘She called, said she’d heard I had some stabling I wasn’t using, wanted to know if she could keep her horse here. I said yes. After that she came every day and somehow we seemed always to be bumping into each other.’

Barbara had seen the horse in the stables when she had been home in the summer, but her father often let people keep their mounts there and she had thought nothing of it. 'But you didn't have to bring her into the house. You didn't have to take her upstairs, did you? Oh, Dad, how could you? Whatever would Mum say?'

He turned to face her. 'I think, my love, she would be pleased that I had found someone who made me happy.' He sat down opposite her and reached for her hands. 'Virginia does make me happy, you know. I want to marry her...'

'Marry her!' She pulled herself out of his grasp. 'But she's—'

'Young. Yes, I know. She's thirty. But that's no barrier to falling in love.' He rose as the kettle whistled shrilly and poured boiling water on the tea leaves.

'But you loved Mum.'

'Of course I did. There will never be anyone like her, but, darling, I am still young enough to want the love of a woman. One day you will want to marry yourself and then—'

She gave a cracked laugh. 'And I felt guilty, as if I were betraying you, just because George wants to marry me.'

'He does?' He sounded surprised.

'Yes. I told him I couldn't leave you.'

'Leaving me is not the point. I accept that it will

happen one day, but you are young and still at college. There is no hurry.'

'But you are in a hurry, aren't you? You couldn't even wait to put the ring on her finger.'

He chuckled. 'Did I raise a prude? You are the young one, Barbara, part of the modern generation. I thought you would take it in your stride.'

'Would you take it in your stride if you found me... you know...?'

'That's different.' He paused and pushed a cup of tea towards her. 'Oh, this is so difficult and I didn't want it to be. I want you and Virginia to be friends. This is your home, it always will be, but I want it to be hers too.'

She looked up, startled. 'It's all been arranged, hasn't it? Cut and dried. That's why she was angry when you asked her to leave.'

'I'll go and talk to her later. I'm sure she'll understand.'

'Understand what?'

'That you were taken by surprise and once you get used to the idea...' His voice tailed off. What could he say? That she would welcome a new mother, that they might become friends? That whatever she said, he would not change his mind? He had found love a second time and that was not something granted to every man and he was not going to let it slip through his fingers, not even for his outraged daughter, whom he loved too.

It was all too much to absorb in one go. She scraped back her chair, grabbed her coat and left the house, churning everything over in her head, but the shock was too raw to think rationally. She told herself it was the secrecy she hated, not the fact that he had fallen in love. If Virginia had been his own age, if she had not been so beautiful, most of all, if they hadn't used her mother's bed, she might have understood. How she got to the middle of Melsham, she could not afterwards remember. She must have walked, though it was three miles.

George was driving home along the road beside the market when he spotted her sitting on the low wall surrounding the fountain, staring into the far-from-clean water. He stopped the van and walked over to her. 'Barbara, what are you doing here?'

She turned a tear-streaked face towards him. 'Oh, George.'

He sat down beside her and put his arm about her shoulders. 'What's the matter?'

She didn't answer but put her head on his chest and, try as she might, she could not stop the tears from spilling. 'Don't cry, love. Tell me what's wrong and I'll see if I can put it right...'

'You can't.'

He took a large handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her. 'Try me.'

She sniffed and mopped up her tears. 'It's Dad. He's got another woman.'

'Good for him!'

'How can you say that? You haven't seen her. She's been in my mother's bed with him.'

He hugged her to him, smiling over the top of her head. 'I can understand how you feel. I'd feel the same if my mother...' He paused, thinking of his mother; he would hate it if she married again, but pigs would fly before that happened, she had told him more than once. 'But, darling, your father is still a young man, still in his prime, it's only natural he'd want some company. You were at college and he was lonely.' He waited for her to argue, but she didn't. 'How has it hurt you? He doesn't love you any the less...'

'He loved my mother. What they had was special...'

'I'm sure he doesn't love her any the less either.' He put his finger under her chin and lifted it so that she was forced to look at him. 'I bet she's not a bit like your mother, is she?'

'She's young and pretty, not that Mum wasn't, but... Oh, I don't know. You think I'm being unreasonable, don't you?'

'No, I think you've had a shock, that's all. Now, cheer up, sweetheart. Think of it as a stroke of good fortune for your father. One day you will marry me and then he'll need someone.'

She smiled suddenly. 'You never miss a trick, do you?'

'But it's true.' He raised her to her feet. 'Come on, you'll freeze to death sitting here. I'll take you home.'

She walked with him back to his van. 'He says he's going to marry her. She's going to come and live at the farm. I don't know how I'm going to cope with watching her handle Mum's things, seeing the way he looks at her...'

'Then we will have to do something about it, won't we? Marry me now, instead of waiting. It means a slight change of plan, but nothing I can't handle.'

'Do you always try to turn everything to your advantage?'

'I was thinking of you. If something has made you unhappy, then I want to put it right. I love you, Barbara, you know that, it's no secret...'

'And you always get what you want.' She spoke flatly, but it was comforting to know he cared.

He opened the passenger door of the van, wishing it were a car. But he needed a van for his work and at the moment he couldn't afford both. He brushed the seat with his gloved hand and waited for her to settle herself, then shut the door and walked round to the driver's seat and started the engine. It was decidedly noisy and not conducive to conversation. He waited until they stopped outside her house before he spoke again. 'I've got tickets

for the New Year's Eve Ball at the town hall. You will come with me, won't you?

'I don't know...'

'Oh, come on, Barbara, the world hasn't come to an end, you know.'

'I know it hasn't. I'm not a fool.'

'Then you will?'

'Yes, I'd love to. And thank you for being so understanding.'

'That's what love is all about, isn't it? Mine, yours, your father's.'

'Yes. I'm being very naive, aren't I?'

'It's one of the things I like most about you.' He leant over and kissed her cheek before getting out and opening the door for her. She was so confused she didn't question that naivety was a strange attribute to find endearing.

She let herself in the house, determined to talk to her father, to try and understand how he felt, to put herself in his shoes and tell him she was happy for him. She would be bright and cheerful and ask him about the wedding, be grown-up and sensible. But he was not at home; he must have dashed off after Virginia the minute she left.

She wandered round the house, looking at everything, the comfortable old furniture, the pictures and photographs, the porcelain ornaments her mother had collected over many years. She picked up a little

shepherdess, standing with a crook in one hand and a lamb cradled in the other arm. She stood admiring its delicacy, the pale colours of the girl's features contrasting with the blue of the dress and the green of the grass on which she was standing, remembering the day the tiny tip of the crook had broken when her mother was dusting it. All three of them had dropped on hands and knees to search for it in the pile of the carpet. Barbara's sharp young eyes had spotted it first and picked it up with a cry of triumph. Dad had glued it back in place, commenting that the repair would take pounds off its value. 'It doesn't matter,' her mother had said. 'It's like its owner, a little worn.' Barbara had laughed and so had Dad, and she had not realised the significance of the remark.

She replaced it carefully, then cooked the dinner she had planned to surprise him with, but he did not come for it. When it was past keeping warm any longer she scraped it into the bin and went to bed, where she lay sleepless for hours. Surely he knew they needed to talk? She wanted reassurance, to explain how she had felt on seeing Virginia in the house, to tell him she was sorry for her outburst, that all she wanted was for him to be happy. Instead he had stayed with his new love and shut her out. She dozed off at last, only to wake when she heard him come in and creep up the stairs and past her room. She looked at the clock on her bedside table.

It was five o'clock and the light was strengthening. She turned over and buried her head in the pillow. She was no longer his little girl to be cuddled and pampered: she was a grown woman. But she felt so alone.