



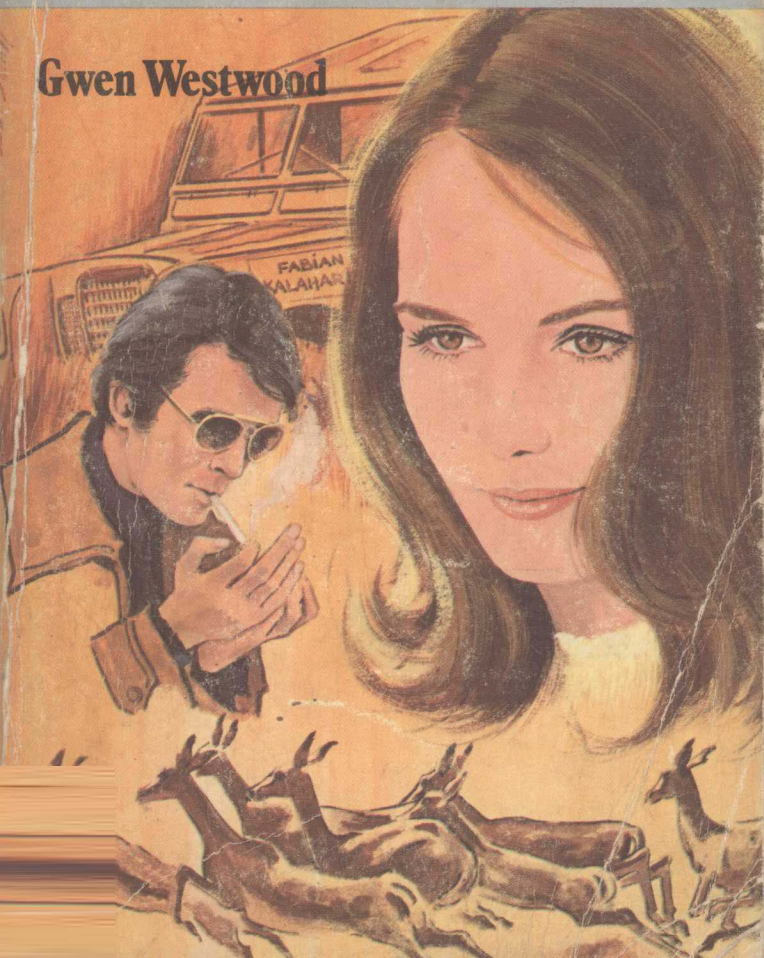
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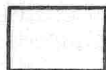
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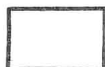
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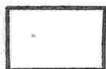
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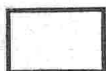
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SWEET ROOTS AND HONEY

by

GWEN WESTWOOD



HARLEQUIN BOOKS

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WINNIPEG**

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1843

CHAPTER ONE

'ARE you turning me out into that icy blast so soon?' Denis asked Perry.

During the short walk across the pavement from the car to the entrance of the block of flats, the cold Johannesburg winter wind had pierced through the clothes they had worn for the evening's dining and dancing, but here in the foyer the air was warm and scented with the clovelike smell of carnations from the big arrangement at the reception desk where the night porter nodded over his cowboy yarn.

'Sorry, Denis, it has been a long day and tomorrow will be worse. I still have to tie up some ends with Mike. He's catching the train tomorrow morning for that Kalahari expedition and I'm to be left in charge of the studio.'

'I suppose that means you'll have even less time for seeing me.'

'I expect I shall be busy,' Perry admitted. 'He's going to be away for at least six weeks.'

She turned her face at the last moment to avoid his kiss on her lips. With her this was an automatic gesture and, feeling rather ashamed of it, she gave him a swift soft kiss and started to walk towards the elevator.

He followed her and waited as she pressed the bell.

'I never knew anyone could look so alluring and be so sisterly. Are you never tempted to forget that cool career girl reputation?'

Perry smiled and left the question unanswered as she stepped in. As the door closed, she thought she heard Denis saying something about phoning next week.

There was a mirror in the elevator that was taking her swiftly upwards to the small penthouse on the twentieth floor of this luxury block above the city. It showed a woman, young but no longer a girl, taller than usual with a strong slender figure. Tawny eyes gazed gravely from the oval face with its creamy skin and level mouth, but the startling feature in the mirror was the long beautiful hair that hung in a fall of shining chestnut giving off sparks of bright fire even in this dim light.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she unlocked the door of her apartment. The large room with its gold and cream furnishings seemed to welcome her and thankfully she changed into a warm dark green velvet house-gown and strolled into the small neat kitchen to make herself some hot chocolate.

She felt restless and somehow dissatisfied tonight. She thought briefly of the past evening. It had been pleasant enough. Denis was her current escort on the Johannesburg scene, agreeable, well-dressed and an amusing companion and like most young men in Johannesburg obsessed with making money. He seemed to Perry to be one of a long succession of men who had shown interest in her since she had made a success of her career in photography. Over and over again she met the same kind of person from the advertising world.

But why did she seem to attract men who seemed to require someone stronger-minded than themselves? She supposed it was because she was an independent type herself and invariably made it clear that she was not interested in romance or marriage, so therefore she attracted young men who wanted to steer clear of entanglements but were grateful to find a woman who looked well to take about and who ran a small car and did not expect expensive presents and was always willing to pay her share but liked to go to glamorous places

for dining out.

Inside the flat the air was warm and still faintly fragrant with the scent she had used before going out, an expensive one that was co-ordinated with her bath essence, talc and cologne. It was made in Paris and had a flowerlike yet sophisticated quality.

Sipping the hot chocolate, she sat curled up on the deep cushions of the tweedy cream settee that was placed so that she could look out upon the wonderful view seen through the plate-glass window. The thousand lights of the city of gold sparkled and twinkled in the bright cold air. The room was warmed by the air-conditioner that gave her coolness in summer, but tonight she regretted even the mock log heater that she had discarded when she had been able to afford this more sophisticated method of heating. She could not remember when she had last sat in front of a real fire. Doubtless Mike would be getting plenty of experience of that kind of thing when he set out on his expedition tomorrow.

'Men have all the luck,' she had grumbled. 'I'd give anything to go on an expedition like that, deep into the heart of the desert to photograph game and Bushmen.'

'As a matter of fact,' Mike had said, 'there is a woman coming. My wife wasn't too pleased when she heard about it, but I assured her I wasn't interested in spoiled young rich girls.'

'I didn't know that Fabian Sinclair ever took women on these expeditions. I'd imagined it was an all-man affair.'

'They usually are. But this time he's been persuaded to take Paul Curtis along - you know, the well-known television personality, and his daughter, Samantha. My guess is that they're paying a large sum for the privilege

of joining Fabian. And he needs the money to finance the expedition. He's certainly not keen to take women on this kind of jaunt. Anyhow, Perry love, I need you to hold the fort while I'm gone and to keep an eye on Faith as well. You know she's expecting a baby and hasn't been awfully well. But I'll only be away for six weeks.'

Perry envied Mike his opportunity and yet she thought to herself she could not have joined this particular expedition. She had not told Mike, for he was so full of admiration for its leader, Fabian Sinclair, but although he did not know it and in fact she had never met him, it was he, this well-known wild life personality, who was the cause of her feeling of dissatisfaction almost amounting to despondency that she was experiencing in her life in Johannesburg.

She was aroused from these thoughts by a sudden sharp knock on the door. Whoever could this be? In Johannesburg one did not open one's door after dark and it was almost midnight. There was a heavy chain upon it, but first Perry applied her eye to the small round peephole let into the wood. Eerie and disembodied, the face of Mike swam into her vision and she quickly undid the chain.

'Mike, what are you doing here at this hour? Whatever's wrong?'

'It's Faith. I've had to take her to hospital with a threatened miscarriage. I can't leave her like this. Perry, you'll have to take my place.'

'Me? But, Mike, you must be crazy! How can I?'

Mike sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands. 'I couldn't get you on the phone. I'm just about all in. I've been at the hospital for three hours. She was ill and all alone when I got home and I had to get the doctor and then rush her in. Poor Faith, one moment

she was telling me I must go and then she would implore me to stay. She's so fragile, Perry. I was mad to think I could leave her for six weeks. The logical solution is that you should go. You know you've always said you would love it.'

'Yes, but Mike . . .'

'I've thought about it. It's no use trying to get anyone else at this late hour. You're the only one who understands the complicated foreign camera we use. If you're thinking you haven't the right clothes, you won't need much, and when you join Fabian in Mafeking you'll be able to take his advice and get anything you need before flying on in the chartered plane.'

Fabian Sinclair. For the moment she had forgotten this complication.

'Mike, I'm dreadfully sorry. You know I'd do anything to help, anything within my power. But this is impossible. I can't do it.'

Mike's eyes were shadowed. He looked ten years older since she had seen him this afternoon.

'But, Perry, I don't understand. I thought you would jump at the chance, even if it is at the last minute. I thought I could rely on you.'

Perry walked towards the window. What was she to do?

'I can't go with Fabian Sinclair. Please don't ask me.'

'But I don't get this. What have you against Fabian? I didn't know you'd ever met him.'

'I haven't.'

'Then why? Oh, for heaven's sake, Perry! His reputation as a Casanova has been exaggerated. He isn't so interested in women, especially when he's on an expedition. It's only when he's relaxing in civilization that he, shall we say, enjoys women's company. On a trip of

this nature he wouldn't care if you were a robot, so long as you were a robot who could take photographs superbly . . . and you can.'

'It isn't that at all. At least, it's just that long ago, about eight years, in fact, he did something that affected my life very badly, or so I thought.'

'Good God, Perry, this isn't like you, to hold a grudge against a man you've never met for some imagined slight. Well, I can tell you he doesn't have any feeling of this nature against you. He welcomed the suggestion that you should substitute for me quite agreeably if not with wild enthusiasm.'

'What? You told him I would come?'

'I was desperate. I phoned to suggest you should come. The line was bad, but he assured me that I mustn't leave Faith and that he was quite prepared that you should join his expedition if I could vouch for your skill in photography.'

Perry walked backwards and forwards like a restless lioness, shaking the mane of her bright hair.

'Mike, I just don't know what to say. I'd do anything for you but this . . .'

Mike wore a puzzled frown.

'I'm sorry if I've upset you. You were the least of my worries. You've always seemed like a tower of strength to me. That's why, when I was going, I didn't mind the idea of leaving Faith. I knew you'd keep an eye on her. God knows what I'm to do. I should phone the hospital now. Do you mind?'

'No, of course not. Go ahead.'

Perry paced across to the window as Mike dialled the number. What a dilemma! But perhaps Mike was exaggerating Faith's illness. She thought briefly but without bitterness how Mike was the only man who had interested her since her ill-fated love affair when she