The Linden Walk

Elizabeth Elgin

Published by HCP – Harper Collins

Extract

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 1

ONE

September, 1948

'Well, that's the christening over and everyone gone but me.' Lyndis Carmichael got to her feet. 'Care to walk me home, Drew?'

'I seem to remember,' he said softly, 'you asking me that once before.'

'Yes. Before . . .'

'Before Kitty,' Drew Sutton supplied, gravely.

'Mm. I asked this sailor to see me back to Wrens' Quarters. We'd never dated before – not him and me alone, exactly. Usually his sister was there, too.'

'But that night?' he prompted.

'That night, Wren Carmichael made a complete fool of herself. She asked that sailor if he would kiss her goodnight – as in properly, and not the usual brotherly peck on the cheek. And when he did, that stupid Wren offered her virginity on a plate; told the sailor she was in love with him. Best forgotten, wouldn't you say?'

'But I just remembered it!'

'Well, so now I'm remembering you once told me about this Linden Walk and the seat on it and the

scent of linden blossom. I asked if I would ever get to smell the blossom and you said if I was a good little Wren, I might. But good little Wrens didn't have a lot of fun, did they? Still, I've got to see your Linden Walk at last, though I can't smell anything.'

'You're too late. The trees flower in summer.'

'Ha! The story of my life! Not only do I miss the blossom, but when I eventually get to sit with you beneath your trees, all I get for my pains is a frozen behind. That seat is hard *and* cold!'

'I'm sorry. So which way shall we go – the long way round or the short cut through the wood?'

'Whichever,' Lyn shrugged, hugging herself tightly because not only was she cold but she was shaking inside. And that was because if something didn't happen tonight to clear the air, she was packing up and going to Kenya. Too damn right she was!

'What is it, Lyn?' He took her arm, guiding her towards the stile at the near end of Brattocks Wood. 'I watched you in church today. You looked so sad. Want to tell me about it?'

She remained silent for all that, because they were passing Keeper's Cottage. She had stayed there often with Daisy, her friend, fellow-Wren, and Drew's half-sister, but in another life, it seemed.

'What's wrong? We're old friends – we get on fine, you and I.'

'Oh sure, Drew. And every time I come to stay with Daisy and Keth, you and I meet and chat like old friends and you kiss me goodnight as friends do – a brotherly peck, like always. Friends! That's all you and I will ever be!'

She walked ahead, shoulders stiff, and because the moss at the side of the path was damp with dew, she slipped and would have lost her footing had not Drew grasped her elbow, and steadied her.

'Careful.' He was still holding her. 'I'm sorry the way you feel about you and me. Can't you tell me?'

'About why I looked sad in church? Hadn't thought it showed but yes, I *was* sad – or maybe it was self-pity. That baby is so beautiful I wanted one of my own. I envied Daisy and Keth; wanted to conceive a child, you see, with a man I loved. I wanted all the morning sickness and the pain of heaving and shoving that baby into the world! And every time Daisy puts Mary to her breast I go cold, I'm so jealous! That's what I've become. An untouched, unloved woman who aches for a child!'

Unspeaking, he let go of her arm and there was such a silence between them that she could hear the thudding of her heart and the harshness of her breathing. Above them, a cloud shut out the last of the sun and a flock of birds wheeled overhead, cawing loudly as they settled to roost.

'Rooks!' she murmured. 'Daisy tells them things, doesn't she, and her mother, too. Rooks keep secrets, I believe, so how if I tell them one? Want to hear it, Drew Sutton?'

She walked towards the elm trees, heels slamming, not caring about the slippery path. Then she stood feet apart, hands on hips, looking up into the green darkness.

'Hey, you lot! You listen to things, don't you? Then get an earful of this and hear it good, because I'll not

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 4

be passing this way again! I'm leaving. Off to Kenya to Auntie Blod because I can't take any more!' She sucked in a deep breath, holding it, letting it go noisily, but it did nothing to calm her.

'There's this man I fell for – a real hook, line, and sinker job – first time we met. I thought he might have had feelings for me, as well, so what d'you know, rooks? I offered it with no strings attached – except that perhaps he might have said he loved me, too. But he didn't say it because he knew I wasn't his grand passion. He met her not long after, his cousin from Kentucky and you can't blame him for the way he fell for her. He'd loved her all his life, only he hadn't realized it!'

She stopped, shaking with anger and despair, and her words swirled around her and spiralled up to where the rooks roosted. And she covered her face with her hands and leaned against the trunk of the tallest tree, because all at once she felt weary and drained. The tears came then; straight from the deeps of her heart and they caught in her throat and turned into sobs that shook her body.

'Don't cry, Lyn. Please don't cry.'

He reached for her and because she did not turn from his touch he took her in his arms, cupping her head with his hand so her cheek rested on his chest. 'Ssh. It's all right. Let it come . . .'

'Drew, I'm s-sorry. That was bloody awful of me.'

'It wasn't. But if it was, I deserved it.'

'No you didn't. Can I borrow your hankie please,' she whispered.

'Be my guest.' He pushed her a little way from

him, dabbing her eyes, then giving her the handkerchief, telling her to blow her nose.

'Good job it's getting dark,' she said sniffily. 'I must look a mess.'

'Yes, you must. Your mascara, I shouldn't wonder, is all over your cheeks – and my shirt front, too – as well as your lipstick.'

'It isn't funny, Drew. I meant it. I did love you. It's why I'm going away.'

'But you *can't* go away. What about Daisy? What about your house?'

'I'd pack in my job for a couple of months – see if I liked it. Then if I did I'd come back and sell up.'

'But you didn't like Kenya, you said so; never wanted to go back, you once told me.' He said it softly, coaxingly, as if reasoning with a child.

'I didn't – don't. I'd stay here if just once you'd say you love me, even though you didn't mean it. And if sometimes you would kiss me properly like that night outside Wrens' Quarters, when Daisy wasn't there . . .'

They began to walk, then, climbing the boundary fence to stand at the crossroads beside the signpost. Away from the trees, it was lighter.

'You look just fine – your mascara, I mean,' Drew said.

'That's okay, then. Daisy won't be asking questions, will she, when I get back to Foxgloves.'

They walked slowly, reluctantly, as if both knew there were things to say before they got to Daisy's house, though neither knew where those words would lead.

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 6

'I'm sorry, Lyn, that you were hurt so much. Those brotherly pecks we've been having lately – I thought it was what you wanted. I didn't realize that – well, that after Kitty you'd gone on carrying a torch for me, sort of. And that morning I rang Daisy to tell her I'd got engaged, you spoke to me, too, and sounded glad for me. You said you hoped we'd both be happy.'

'Yes, and then I sat on the bottom stair and cried my eyes out. The entire Wrennery must have heard me. You thought I was a good-time girl, Drew? It was the impression I liked to give, till I met you.'

'It would still have been Kitty,' he said gently. 'She knocked me sideways.'

'I know. And I wasn't glad about what happened to her. When she died, all I could think was that it could have been Daisy or me, in the Liverpool Blitz. It was damn awful luck. I tried not to think about you and how terrible it would be when you got to know.

'But I *was* sad about Kitty. I had to bottle everything up because Daisy was in such a state, kept weeping and wanting Keth, but there was only my shoulder for her to cry on.'

'There's a seat a bit further down – I think we've got to talk, Lyn.' He took her hand and they walked to the new wooden memorial bench. 'When I came back from Australia and got my demob, I didn't go straight home to Rowangarth.'

'I know you didn't. We ran into each other, in Liverpool. Remember? It was blowing, and raining icicles. You seemed lost, as if you were looking for something.'

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 7

'I was. Or maybe I was convincing myself that Kitty really wasn't there and never would be again. So I stayed the night, then caught the first train out next morning. But she wasn't at Rowangarth either, nor in the conservatory nor the wild garden. All I could find of her was a wooden grave-marker with her name on it. It was like a last goodbye.'

'It must have torn you apart, Drew. Are you ever going to forget her?'

'No. She happened and I can't begin to pretend she didn't. But at least I've accepted the way it is. Mother told me she wasted too many years raging against the world after her husband Andrew died. She begged me to try not to do the same.

'When finally she went to France to his grave, she had to accept he was dead, she told me. So I was luckier than she was. At least I was spared the bitterness. All I have to contend with now is the loneliness.'

'And I've just made a right mess of it, haven't I?' Lyn whispered. 'My performance in the wood must have shocked you. Sorry if I embarrassed you.'

'You shocked me, yes, because I'd never really realized how you felt. Even after the war was over and you started visiting Daisy and Keth and we met up again and –'

'And walked, and talked!'

'And walked,' he laughed, 'and talked like old friends.'

'All very nice and chummy, till I put the cat among the pigeons.'

'Among the *rooks*! But are you really thinking of going to Kenya?'

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 8

'Thinking, yes, but I won't go. And Drew – before the soul-searching stops, this is your chance to cut and run; give me a wide berth next time I come to Foxgloves. Because I won't change.'

'You must have loved me a lot,' he said softly.

'I did. I do. I always will. And if you can still bear to have me around after tonight – well, you don't have to marry me. If sometimes we could be *closer*, sort of. It's just that I'm sick to the back teeth of being a virgin, still.'

'Lyndis Carmichael.' He laid an arm across her shoulders and pulled her closer. 'What on earth am I to do with you?'

'Like I said, you don't have to marry me . . .'

'Oh, but I do! You *can* love twice, Mother said, but differently. So shall we give it a try, you and me? Knowing that Kitty will always be there and that sometimes people will talk about her just because she was Kitty and a part of how it used to be, at Rowangarth?

'Knowing that every time you and I walk through the churchyard or down Holdenby main street, we shall see her there? And can you accept that every June, Catchpole will take white orchids to her grave and that she was my first love? Knowing all that, will you be my last love, Lyn?'

For a moment she said nothing, because all at once there were tears again, ready to spill over, and she wouldn't weep; she *wouldn't*!

'That really was the most peculiar proposal I ever had.' She blew her nose, noisily. 'Come to think of it, it's the *only* proposal I ever had! It – er – *was* a proposal?'

'It was, but I think I'd better start again. I want you with me always, Lyn. Will you marry me?'

He still hadn't said he loved her, she thought wonderingly, as a star began to shine low in the sky, and bright. But he *would* say it. She could wait, because now tomorrows were fashionable, and people could say the word without crossing their fingers.

Their lips touched; gently at first and then more urgently, and as she pulled away to catch her breath she looked over his shoulder at the star; first star – wishing star. So she closed her eyes, searching with her lips for his, wishing with all her heart for a child with clinging fingers that was little and warm and smelled of baby soap. Two children. Maybe three.

'I think,' she said shakily, 'that if you were to kiss me again as in properly and passionately, I'd say, "Thanks, Drew. I will."'

It seemed right, somehow, and very comforting that as they kissed again, a pale crescent moon should slip from behind a cloud to hang over Rowangarth's old, enduring roof as new moons always had, and that from the top of the tallest oak in Brattocks Wood, a blackbird began to sing Sunset.

As it always would.

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 10

TWO

At the house called Foxgloves where Keth and Daisy lived off the Creesby road, all was quiet. Bemused, Lyndis gazed into the fire. It had really happened, Drew asking her to marry him and she saying yes. A very calm yes, considering she had been dry-mouthed and shaking all over. She still couldn't quite believe it. The wayward little pulse behind her nose still did a pitty-pat whenever she thought about it and to bring herself down to earth, she would close her eyes and cross her fingers and pray with all her heart that nothing would happen to prevent it. Because it had happened before, though lightning didn't strike twice in the same place – well, *did* it? Fate couldn't do it again to Drew. Not when Kitty had been killed by a lousy flying bomb when everyone thought the war – in Europe at least – was all but over.

Kitty had been one of the Clan. Special, that Clan. Still was. Before, when they'd met up twice a year, it was as if they had never been apart. Bas and Kitty, the cousins from Kentucky, were Pendenys Suttons,

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 11

really, though drawn always to Rowangarth and Drew and Daisy and Keth. And Tatty, of course. Half Pendenys Sutton, half Russian, she had been the awkward one, the defiant one. Kitty, the naughty one, had been beautiful and headstrong and a show-off. No wonder Drew had been completely besotted by her. Poor Drew. Thousands of miles away with the Pacific Fleet when it happened, and not even able to say one last goodbye at her graveside.

But that war was over, now. Six damn-awful years it had lasted and she and Drew two of the lucky ones. Kitty had not been, though she would never be dead. Not completely.

'Right!' The door flew open. 'That's the baby fed and in bed so give, Carmichael. Tell *all*!'

'Daisy – surely not at this hour? You've had a big day. You must be asleep on your feet.'

'Blow the hour! Mary is asleep, Keth is marking homework in his cubbyhole upstairs so he'll hear if she cries. No excuses. This is Wren Purvis-from-the-bottom-bunk. Remember our heart-to-hearts, Lyn?'

She dropped to her knees to stir the fire and lay another log on it.

'Mm. Good ones and bad ones . . .'

'Yes, and I put up with all your bad ones which makes me entitled to hear the best bit of all, so let's be having it. From the beginning.'

'But you know about it. Drew and I are going to be married. You were right. "*Do* something," you said. "Go in at the deep end and if it comes to nothing, then at least you tried." And the deep end it was – feet first.

I can hardly bear to think of it. Hands on hips in Brattocks Wood, yelling my head off at those rooks!'

'Lyn – will you never learn? You don't yell at the rooks. You don't even *talk* to them. You put your hands on the tree trunk – connect yourself to it, sort of – then you send them your thoughts.'

'Thoughts? It was for Drew's benefit, don't forget. He isn't a mind-reader. Poor love. I yelled like a fishwife.'

'He needed a shove. My brother has always been a tad too placid.'

'Well, he got the message in the end.' She clucked impatiently then went to sit at Daisy's side on the sofa opposite because it would help, she all at once realized, if she didn't have to look her in the eye when she told all.

And tell all she did; was glad to. Told every word, gesture and sniff. What she had said; what Drew had said.

'And Drew so serious and kind about it. Yes, *kind*, actually. Me offering it on a plate – *again*! Telling him I was sick of being a virgin, still; that he didn't have to marry me. I must've sounded desperate. But it worked. I got what I wanted, what I've always wanted since the day I met him.'

'What we all wanted, love. I wanted it, Mam wanted it and Aunt Julia wanted it, too. She most of all. So what did she and Nathan say when you arrived at Rowangarth with the news?'

'Drew's mother let out one yell then hugged me and hugged Drew, and Nathan beamed all over and raised his eyes to the ceiling and said, "Thank God

for that!" And Drew's mother said she would go to the bank first thing in the morning and get the jewels out so I could choose a ring, but I had to tell her I was going back to Llangollen in the morning.

'And Drew said, "She'll be back on Friday. Get them out for then. And no, Mother! No champagne! We've got to go and tell Lady and Tom – and Keth and Daisy. Save the champagne till I've got the ring on her finger!"'

'You'd think there was still a war on. I mean, you can't get anything half decent at the jeweller's. Best you have a family ring, Lyn.'

'Your mother said that, Daisy. "You'll be having one of Grandmother Whitecliffe's rings I shouldn't wonder. She left all her jewellery to Julia, you know." Your folks were pleased, when we told them.'

'Well, of course they would be. Mam especially. She's been wanting Drew down the aisle for years.'

'I still can't help thinking I did it a bit sneakily, Daisy. I practically put the words into his mouth. And for all that, he never said he loved me. Just that he wanted me with him always. He'll probably have changed his mind in the morning.'

'Not Drew. And the I-love-you bit will come. It did happen rather quickly, after all. Maybe he *thought* he said it. Who cares? You're engaged. So when is it going to be?'

'Haven't a clue. We didn't talk dates. Like I said, it all –'

'I know. Happened so quickly. It'll be here at Rowangarth, of course. You'll be having a white wedding? What are you going to do about a dress?'

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 14

'Lord knows. Clothes are still rationed. I haven't seen wedding dresses in the shops, yet. Mind, I haven't been seriously looking.'

'Then you'd better start, Carmichael. Of course,' she said obliquely, 'you could use mine. Mam would be tickled pink if you did. And she'd alter it around a bit.'

'No! I mean, no I wouldn't want it altered, but yes I'd love to wear it. It's the most beautiful wedding dress I've ever seen. D'you remember when your mum had got it almost finished? You and I were on a crafty weekend after a week of nights and you stood on the kitchen table so she could see to the hem. So cosy. I sat on the brass stool beside the fire and watched, and envied you like mad. Long time ago, that was. Before, I mean, when I was head over heels in love with Drew, and . . .'

'You're talking about Kitty coming over to join ENSA? Before he realized she was the one. Is that what you're trying to say?'

'Suppose I am. I was going to be your bridesmaid, then I chickened out.'

'Because by the time Keth and I finally got ourselves down the aisle, Drew and Kitty were engaged and you couldn't bear, you said, to see them together.'

'A bit childish of me, wasn't it?'

'Yes, but understandable, in the circumstances. Anna Sutton – *Pryce* – gave Mam two ball gowns; a rose one and a pale blue one. Mam made them look a bit more bridesmaidy and saved no end of clothing coupons.'

'I should have worn the blue one, but Kitty stood

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 15

in for me. They looked lovely on your wedding photos, she and Tatty.'

'Well, there are still two bridesmaids' dresses in store at Rowangarth. Mam went to a lot of bother over them. She'd love to see them on show again. A June wedding, might it be . . . ?'

'I don't know, Daisy – I honestly don't. I still can't believe any of it has happened. Suppose I'll feel a bit more engaged when I get a ring on my finger.'

'Ooh, Lyndis Carmichael!' Daisy jumped to her feet. 'For someone who has just said yes to the man she's been in love with for years, you are being very nonchalant about it, if I may say so! Anyway, I'm going to make a milky drink – want one?'

'Please. And Daisy – nonchalant isn't the word. I'm stunned. I can't seem to take it in. Keep thinking I'll wake up soon, and find I've dreamed it.'

'Well you haven't, old love. There's going to be another Sutton wedding and Mam and Aunt Julia are going to have the time of their lives. You *will* be married from Rowangarth, Lyn? It's such a lovely place for a wedding.'

'I'd like nothing better, and will you be my matron of honour, Daisy, wear one of the dresses?'

'You know I'd love to – and could you nip upstairs and ask Keth if he wants a drink, too?'

When Lyn had tiptoed downstairs, she knew that her, 'Yes, please, and a biscuit if there's one going,' wasn't necessary. Already the milk pan was on the stove and three mugs and a plate of scones set on a tray.

'See, Lyn. Cherry scones from this afternoon. Tilda

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 16

always makes cherry scones for special occasions. She gave me some leftovers. You'll have to get used to Rowangarth's little habits and cherry scone days, and suchlike. You'll have to get used to being lady of the house. You and Drew will have it all to yourselves, once the Reverend and Aunt Julia have moved into the Bothy. She hopes to be in there by Christmas. It's going to be just wonderful, isn't it? So much to look forward to. Tatty and Bill having a Christmas wedding. And then there'll be yours and Drew's and by then Gracie will have had sprog number two and she said she wants it christened at All Souls, by Nathan. I shouldn't wonder if Bas and Gracie don't come over in the summer, once you've set a date, Lyn. The Kentucky Suttons used to come over twice a year, regular as clockwork at Christmas and for a month in the summer. That's when the Clan were all together and *oh, no*!' She ran to the stove as the milk began to froth and boil, removing the pan. 'Now look what you almost made me do! All this wedding talk!'

They laughed, and Daisy spooned Ovaltine into the pan and whisked it, pouring it frothily into the mugs.

'Take ours through will you, Lyn, and I'll take Keth's up to him and have a peep at the baby. And by the way,' she said when they were settled once more beside the sitting-room fire. 'I'm not going to be your matron of honour. If Bas and Gracie are over at the time of the wedding, I think Gracie should be asked. After all, she *is* family and she'll be decorating the church for you. She's smashing with flowers. Served her time as a gardener-cum-land girl at

Rowangarth. In Catchpole's time, that was. Have a scone. They're delicious.'

'Okay. So I ask Gracie, but who'll wear the other dress?'

'You should ask Tatty. She'd love to do it. Mind, she might be pregnant, by then. Told me they're going to be very careless about things 'cos they want a family right away. Still, if push comes to shove, I wouldn't see the other frock go to waste. And had you thought, Lyn? You and me almost next door to each other. Just like it was when we were Wrens. Doesn't seem like five minutes since I arrived at Hellas House running a temperature, and you looking after me. We've come a long way, since then. We'll be sisters-in-law.'

'*Half*-sisters-in-law, if you want to be nit-picky. And Daisy – would you mind if I took my drink upstairs? I've got to be up early tomorrow – get the first train out. I'm doing afternoons at the hotel and if I miss that train I'm going to be late for work. Sorry, old love . . .'

'And would that be so very awful, considering you'll be giving notice anyway? Why don't you pack in working and stay with me till the wedding?'

'Nothing I'd like more, Daisy, but right now I'm high as a kite. This isn't the time for decision making. I'll think about it, though. It'll all depend on Drew. Can't wait to see him in the morning – ask him if he really, *really* wants to marry me.'

'Idiot,' Daisy grinned. 'A Sutton doesn't go back on his word. Now get yourself off. I'll follow you when I've seen to everything down here. Getting a

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 18

bit tired myself. But hasn't it been one heck of a day, Leading-Wren Carmichael?'

'One absolute corker of a day, Wren Purvis-from-the-bottom-bunk. And I'm glad we're going to be sisters. I truly am.'

Lyn lay in bed, looking through the uncurtained window at the moon, high in the sky and shining gold now; the same paler moon that was witness to what happened tonight. Because it *had* happened. Drew *had* asked her to marry him and she had said yes. Disbelievingly almost, she said, 'Thanks, Drew, I will.' Said it nonchalantly, as if she had proposals of marriage every day of the week, and had got rather blasé about them.

She was always doing that; hiding her feelings for fear of being hurt. Because she *had* been hurt. If worlds could end, then hers would have ended the morning Drew phoned Daisy to tell her he and Kitty were engaged; had met up on a Liverpool dockside and *wham*! The two of them had spent the night at Kitty's theatrical digs and the next morning Lyndis Carmichael smiled brilliantly into the phone, wished them both all the very best, then wept as if her heart would never be whole again – nor had it been, until tonight.

So why was she wide awake and tossing and turning? Why could she not believe that what she had longed for since the first time she and Drew met had happened? Why had she said – albeit jokingly – that she couldn't wait to see him in the morning, ask him if he really wanted to marry her?

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 19

'You're a fool, Lyn,' she whispered to the moon. Of course he wanted to marry her. A Sutton didn't go back on his word, Daisy said. Yet she was afraid, still, and she knew it was because she would always be second best; second choice. Drew would never forget Kitty. He'd said so. Kitty would always be there because she had been one of the Clan – that *bloody* precious Clan she'd always envied because she could never be a part of it.

Mind, Gracie had never been part of the Clan and it had worried her not one jot. Pretty, happily married Grace Sutton who expected her second child at Christmas. Lyn liked Sebastian Sutton's wife, just as she liked Tatty. Born to a Russian countess, Tatiana Sutton was as English as London Bridge. No one would know she was half-Russian, spoke correct Russian fluently, and conversed with the sombre Karl in his native Georgian, too. Tatty had taught Kitty to swear in Russian and in return Kitty taught Tatty to spit like a stable lad. Maybe Gracie's baby would be born on Tatty and Bill's wedding day. A cosy, family wedding in the little Lady Chapel it was to be and no white dress nor virginal veil Tatty stressed because she and Tim – her first passionate love – had been lovers from the start. Like Drew and Kitty, she supposed, because air-gunner Tim had been killed, too.

So why wasn't Tatiana making a big production of her wedding to Bill and why did Bill Benson seem to happily accept the way things were – that the woman he would marry at Christmas had loved before; just as Drew had loved before – Drew's mother, too.

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 20

'Oh, *dammit*!' She flicked on the bedside light, padded across the room to draw the curtains, checked that the alarm at her bedside was set for five in the morning, then whispered, 'Goodnight, Drew. And it *will* be all right, my darling, I promise it will.'

She loved him – enough for both of them – and one day he would tell her he loved her too.

She closed her eyes and began to count each solemn second as it ticked away on the clock beside her, but it did nothing to help her fall asleep.

They waited on the platform at Holdenby Halt. Drew looked at his watch then said, 'Any time now you'll hear the train. The driver always gives a hoot just before the bend – a little past Brattocks. Then soon it'll arrive, and you know what, Lyn? This station hasn't changed one iota since ever I can remember.'

'You don't have to come to York with me. I'm quite capable of getting myself onto the Manchester train.'

'Of course you are, but mightn't it just occur to you that maybe I want to. For one thing, it'll give us an extra hour together and for another, I want us to talk – plans, dates and all that. There's always an empty compartment on this early train, so we can natter all the way to York. Have you had any thoughts on the matter, Lyn?'

'Nope. All I could think about last night was had it really happened and when the heck I was going to get to sleep!'

'You, too? Mind, it did happen quite suddenly. Takes a bit of getting used to. No second thoughts?'

'No, Drew.' *Oh, liar Lyndis Carmichael!* 'Had you?'

'Plenty, but no doubts. Wondered why we hadn't got around to it before, as a matter of fact, and then I thought you might have decided that you didn't want to be Lady Sutton, after all.'

'Oh, my Lor', Drew, *Lady* Sutton. I hadn't thought . . .'

'Comes with the job, I'm afraid. You'll get used to it.'

'Y-yes . . .' The little train – the Holdenby Flyer, may God bless it, Lyn thought fervently – saved her the embarrassment of a reply. 'It's coming,' she said. 'Right on time.'

'Usually is,' Drew smiled, picking up her case, scanning the carriages as they slipped slowly past, pleased at the number of empty compartments. 'The front of the train.' He took her hand. 'Plenty of room there.'

He helped her aboard then slammed the door firmly shut, pulling up the window.

'There now, let me check. All present and correct. One case, one grip and one fiancée.' Satisfied, he sat beside her, pulling her arm through his, smiling down at her.

'That was nice, Drew.' Lyn's cheeks pinked. 'You calling me your fiancée, I mean.'

'Well, you are, aren't you?' he grinned. 'Unless of course you've changed your mind.'

'I am, and I haven't. So let's talk plans,' she smiled tremulously as the whistle blew and the train jerked to a start. 'Whatever you want is fine with me.'

'Right! We'll have the banns read starting next

Sunday, then we'll get married about the middle of October – that suit you?'

'Just fine. But it wouldn't suit Daisy nor her mother and it certainly wouldn't suit *your* mother! White weddings take a lot of planning, don't forget. Besides, I'll have to give my parents in Kenya fair warning and plenty of time to get themselves organized and over here. And Daisy is insisting on a summer wedding. Bas and Gracie should be over by then and wanting their new baby christened. Your sister has got it all worked out. We had quite a long session last night.'

'And?' Drew quirked an eyebrow.

'Well, I'm to ask Gracie to be one of the bridesmaids and if Tatty isn't pregnant, she says, I ought to ask her – to wear the other dress, I mean. And I shall wear Daisy's wedding dress. She offered and I couldn't say no – it's so beautiful. That was as far as we got, I'm afraid.'

'Might Tatty be pregnant?'

'No, of course not. But they do want a family so there'd be no point in waiting I was given to understand.'

'And what else did Daiz come up with? Did she – er – mention how many children you and I will have?'

'She didn't get around to it, actually. Nor did I.'

'But you want children, Lyn? I mean – everything seemed to happen so suddenly. You said you did after the christening but . . .'

'Don't worry, Drew Sutton. I want children, too. As many as the Good Lord thinks fit to send us. You and I were only-children. I'd like it if we had a couple, at least. Three would be nice.'

'Be happy to oblige,' he laughed, then all at once

serious he cupped her face in his hands, saying softly, 'You *are* sure, Lyn?'

'I'm sure, Drew, but had you realized that not since you called for me at Foxgloves have I had so much as a kiss. Almost half an hour ago, that was!'

'Again – happy to oblige.'

He tilted her chin and kissed her. Not with passion but with tenderness, Lyn thought; a reassuring, comforting, it'll-be-all-right kiss and for the time being the niggling doubts left her.

'I'll call at Denniston when I get back – tell them about us. Bas and Gracie are leaving for Rochdale tomorrow to stay with Gracie's folks for a week before they go back. They're sailing, by the way. Better than flying, I suppose, all things considered. Mind, Mother will have been on the phone, spreading the news – nothing so certain. First she'll be on to Daisy's mother at Keeper's and by the time she has finished ringing around, the entire Riding will know. There'll be no need to put it in the *Yorkshire Post*.'

'The announcement – it won't go in just yet, will it?'

'No. Not until you and I have talked about it and what we want putting in; we haven't got a date yet, have we? But it's like Nathan said last night. He doesn't know what gets into normally well-balanced women when the words wedding or new baby are mentioned. He said it'll be murder, the to-ing and fro-ing between Rowangarth and Keeper's Cottage. Is it going to be a surprise to your folks, too? And before we can really announce it, I suppose I should ask your father's permission, Lyn?'

506htxt 23/9/04 2:40 pm Page 24

'Drew! Don't be so stuffy.' She gave his arm a little punch. 'This is the middle of the twentieth century. Our generation has just fought a war, earned a bit of independence. It'll be fine by them. Dad will be relieved that I'm off the shelf at last and Blod – *Mother* – will say, "Ooh, our Lyndis. There's lovely . . ." I can just hear her. I'll write to them, airmail, tonight.'

'And you'll tell them you're very happy?'

'I'll tell them.' Because she was. Crazily, ecstatically, *unbelievably* happy. So happy, in fact, that if the Fates got wind of it they'd be jealous, and that would never do. 'And here's York and we haven't settled anything.'

'We have, sweetheart. We've talked wedding dresses and bridesmaids and decided – almost – on a summer wedding. And three children.'

'And that we're both happy about us?'

'Happy. A bit bewildered still, but happy, Lyn. *Very* happy. Don't ever forget it, will you?'