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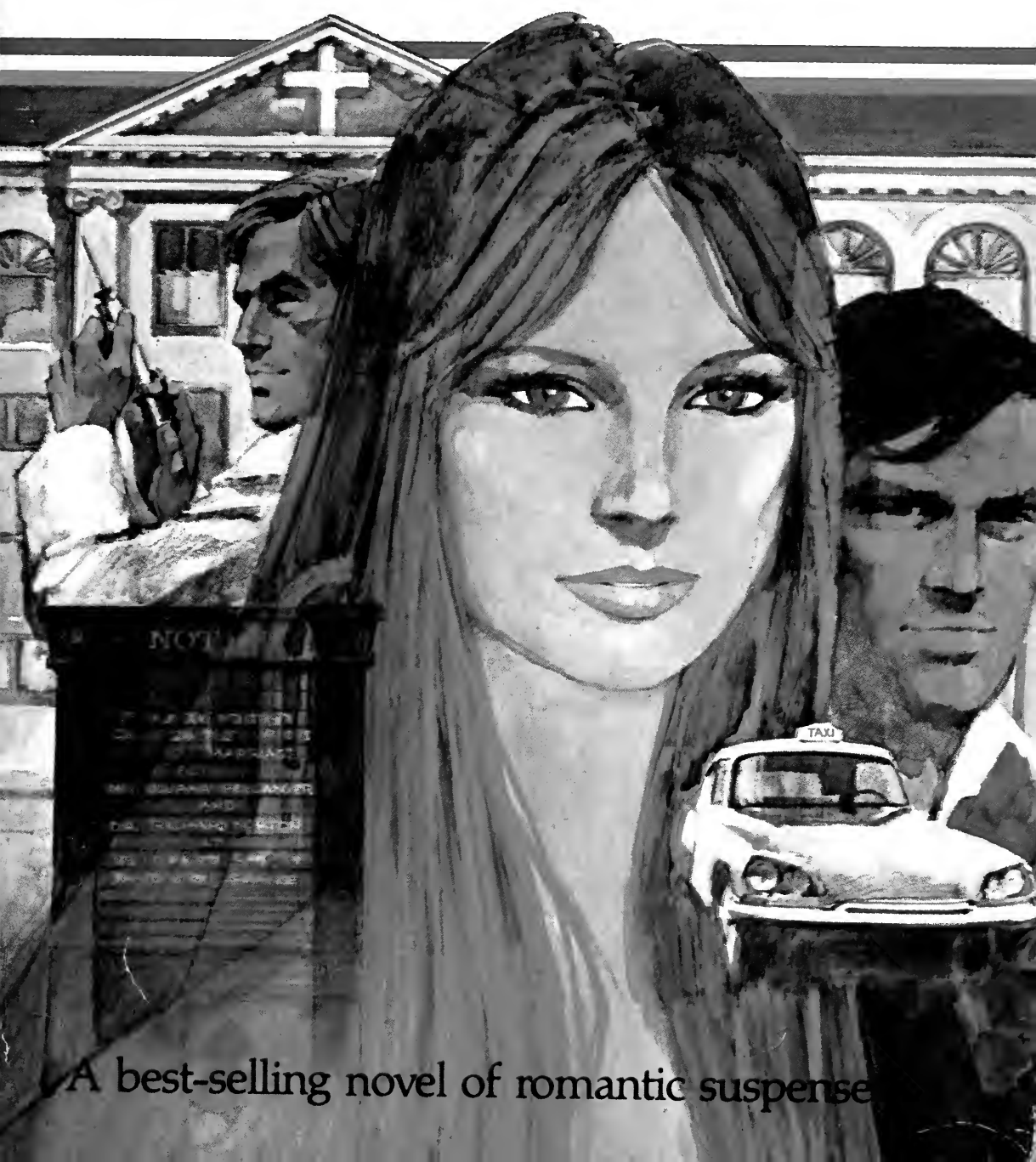
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# Guilty of Love

MICHELLE  
CAMBARDS

A plunge into fear and evil!



A best-selling novel of romantic suspense



**"Oh, what a tangled  
web we weave..."**

Catherine would never have guessed the disastrous results of her tiny white lie. She'd wanted only to buy some precious time with the devastating Martin Bellec.

But now her lie had blossomed into a whole network of deceit, all of her own foolish making. There seemed no way out of the tangled web she had created—no way out but the truth.

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# Guilty of Love

by MICHELLE CAMBARDS

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**MYSTIQUE BOOKS**

TORONTO • LONDON • NEW YORK

**GUILTY OF LOVE / first published September 1979**

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**ISBN 0-373-73048-9**

**PRINTED IN U.S.A**

# Chapter 1

I couldn't open my eyes. It was morning, but like every morning for the past month, I couldn't bear to face the world. I simply lay in bed, repeating over and over in my mind the now familiar refrain: Mark had made a fool of me and I had to forget him. In fact I planned to avoid any future entanglements and was just plotting with bitter satisfaction how I was going to avenge myself on men in general when the telephone rang.

Groaning, I swung out of bed and stumbled into the living room, Biscuit, my dog, at my heels. I picked up the receiver and grumbled hello.

"Is that you, Catherine? It's Louis Mercier."

I softened immediately. Louis Mercier was my father's friend as well as manager of the Joan of Arc Hotel. He definitely wasn't the seducer type. He'd known me since I was in pigtails and had never passed up a chance to do me a favor.

"Good morning, Louis," I said more warmly. "Do you have some work for me?"

"Yes," he answered. "A doctor, who's staying at the hotel, needs a cab for nine a.m. to take him somewhere between Dreux and Verneuil—you know the area—then a return to Paris in the afternoon."

"Thank you, Louis. I'll be there. You're sweet to have thought of me," I said sincerely. Even though I wasn't in any state to appreciate the headiness of spring, the idea of a day in the country cheered me a little. A run outside of Paris was always good for the pocketbook, anyway, and certainly easier on the nerves than facing city traffic. Besides, since it was a return in the afternoon, I knew I might have some free time after I had dropped the doctor off.

As always, Louis asked about my parents. I told him they were crazy about their little house on the Mediterranean coast. "Dad refuses to act as if he's retired. He's pretending he's a vineyardist and is proud as punch of his small vineyard. He can't wait for his first harvest and keeps telling anyone who will listen that his wine will be exceptional. He'll probably send you several bottles," I assured him before I hung up.

My watch said eight o'clock. I would have to hurry if I wanted to be there on time. I put Biscuit out in the front yard of my house—actually I occupied only the first floor—for his morning romp. While getting dressed it occurred to me that one of the good things about being a taxi driver was that the unexpected was always happening. I had chosen

the profession a year and a half earlier, when I was still living with my parents. And what a time I'd had convincing them to let me do it! Especially dad. His first reaction had been an unequivocal no.

"What?" he had stormed. "You, my daughter, drive a cab? That's not a profession for a young woman, I don't want to hear another word about it...."

I knew my father very well and had foreseen how he would react to the idea. Manager of the Ritz Hotel for many years, he had an excellent reputation in the hotel business. Patrons and owners alike appreciated his integrity, his tact and his discretion. The porters and other employees under his direction admired and respected him. No mistake nor sloppy service escaped his keen eye. He treated everyone fairly but wouldn't tolerate the least hint of dishonesty or shady dealing.

At home it was the same. I had been raised very strictly, but fortunately I was a well-balanced child, even tending toward the serious side, and restrictions didn't trouble me. I'd studied hard and had never given my parents anything to worry about. My decision to become a cab driver sprang from my restlessness and desire to get out on my own.

So, expecting dad's opposition, I had carefully prepared my case: "Nowadays most women work, no matter what their social standing. There are women doctors, engineers, lawyers, prison social workers, even an astronaut. Women drive tractors and threshing machines—"

"But I've never tried to prevent you from working.

Quite the opposite! Or from driving, for that matter. It was me who lent you the money for your car so you could drive to work!"

It had been while driving my Renault that the idea of becoming a cab driver had hit me. I persisted, "I love to drive. Why not earn my living doing it? A car is an instrument of work just like a typewriter, so why should you think there is something wrong about driving one for a living? And if it's dangers you're worried about, well, you've always said there are risks no matter what a person does, any time, anywhere and in any profession. You know very well you can trust me, dad. I'm twenty-three years old and I've never given you and mom any trouble. You should know me by now."

After an intense and lengthy discussion, my father had ended up by admitting that a young woman might be quite capable of driving a taxi if she really had to, but that I shouldn't be the one to do it. "How can you think of quitting a job like yours? You have an excellent position as a supervisor, thanks to all the strenuous work you've done. And your education: English, accounting . . . . You won't have any use for it driving a cab."

"But I'll use it again, dad. Later, maybe. Look, I'm suffocating in that office. I can't take it anymore. If I stay there, I think I'll go out of my mind. At least let me give this a try."

For the sake of peace, and perhaps somewhat worried about my mental health, my father finally agreed to an "experiment." So I struggled through the exams I needed to get my chauffeur's license, and then set out to establish myself.



—Little by little my parents grew used to the idea. Part of the agreement was that I drive only during the day, because nights could be dangerous. And since I recovered my high spirits, they seemed to be, on the surface anyway, reassured. Especially since nothing annoying, never mind remotely dangerous, ever happened to me.

The "experiment" lasted ten months. Then dad, who had decided to retire, bought back from me my little Renault, which he wanted to take with him to the south of France. To replace it he bought me a Citroën and my own cab license—a "plate," as we say in the trade.

In principle, therefore, I now had everything to make me happy. My parents even furnished my ground-floor apartment, one of three apartments in a house they owned in Paris. I had a large living room, a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen. The second floor was rented to an old woman whose irrepressible curiosity was matched only by her wagging tongue, and the third to a pair of reclusive new-weds. Biscuit, my part-terrier, part who-knows-what, was my constant companion, and my job gave me a lot of satisfaction.

I must add that I'd been especially favored in my professional contacts. In most of the good Paris hotels the managers, porters and bellhops were ready and willing to help me, because they were either friends of my father or else young men who had apprenticed under him. Thanks to them, I'd frequently been offered rather interesting jobs, such as the one I had gotten from Louis Mercier this morning.

But it was not this "hotel network," as I'd come to call it, that had furnished Mark. He was a customer who had hailed me on Passy Avenue, where, because I was so delighted with my new car, I had let myself, just for once, cruise a little. I didn't usually become familiar with the people I picked up. Of course, I never refused to answer their questions or even discuss the most widely diverse subjects with them, but I knew enough to keep to myself most of the time.

With Mark, everything had been different. He had swept into the car like a typical harried Parisian, demanding "Orly Airport, and hurry. I have to be there by noon."

I don't know if it was my new cab, the fare all the way to the airport, or his presence that had bowled me over. Anyway I'd turned and bestowed on him my most ravishing smile, as I assured him I'd get him to his plane.

If only he had taken a jet to the other end of the world, what pain would have been spared me! As it was, he hadn't intended on catching a flight at all. He was simply carrying some papers to a business colleague and, because his car was being repaired, had taken a cab.

During the whole trip we had chatted avidly. I'll never understand how he managed to coax me, against all my principles, to dine with him in one of the airport restaurants. One thing had been undeniable: I had fallen in love with my passenger. And falling in love isn't something easily explained.

Realizing I had to hurry if I wanted to get to the

Joan of Arc Hotel on time, I snapped out of my reverie and got moving. I gulped a cup of warmed-up coffee, called Biscuit so that I could put his collar on him, and left the house. I eased my taxi out of the garage and, with Biscuit sitting obediently beside me, I drove toward Paris.

The weather was beautiful. The sky was blue and cloudless and the chestnut trees were blooming—a perfect spring day, a day for lovers. . . . My heart almost contracted. My fate, I reminded myself, was to be alone, although for the past six months I had known another kind of oneness, the marvelous kind that exists when you are one-half of a couple. And a few bitter words had been enough to break up the whole . . . and to break my heart.

"I'm sorry, Catherine, there can't be any question of our getting married. My parents are set in their ways. They'd never accept a young woman of a lower class than theirs into the family. You see, there's the plant. If I marry without their consent, they'll disinherit me. I wouldn't only lose my job, I'd also lose my share in the business. Imagine! They'd arrange for my brother to become the major shareholder and I'd be left without a penny. On the other hand, if I did manage to persuade them to let us get married, they'd never really forgive you. They'd always treat you like a second-class citizen and never fully accept you." He paused a moment, then went on, "You're a liberated, intelligent woman. We have other possibilities besides marriage. We could arrange to be happy together anyway. . . ."

I had let him state his case, reducing to a sordid

adventure my dream of our life together. We had been having dinner at an intimate restaurant. The perfect calm with which I had put my knife and fork down on the table belied my disgust. Anger and hurt had gripped my throat and I'd felt like crying, but I wouldn't have shown him my disappointment and grief for anything in the world. During the months I had known him I had given him the best of myself without a thought. I didn't give a damn about his parents' archaic ideas on "class," or their money, and had counted only on our love. Without naively idealizing Mark, I had believed in him. I had been convinced he possessed qualities of warmth, of courage and of loyalty, and instead I found he was only a puppet, terrified at the thought of losing his inheritance and his career in his father's business.

"Yes, my dear Mark, I am liberated and intelligent," I had said sarcastically. "Liberated enough to work things out my own way and intelligent enough to turn down certain proposals. I have parents of my own to consider. They aren't from your class, of course. They may be simple working people, but they have their own principles. They happen to be owners of a house in Paris, as well as a small farmhouse and a vineyard in the south of France. If I decided to conduct myself in the manner you suggest, I'm sure they would disinherit me, also. Your interests and mine, therefore, seem to be diametrically opposed. In fact, I don't believe I ever want to see you again!" And before he could recover from his surprise, I had gotten up from the table and left.

A couple of blocks from the restaurant he had

caught up to me. "Catherine! You can't be serious. If you love me, you must understand. I'll go to Lille tomorrow and try to soften up my parents. It'll take a while, but I'm sure they'll come around to the idea in the end."

I wasn't duped. He was lying, and he hoped that time would play in his favor. At last I'd seen the truth. It was as plain as day in his shifting eyes.

"Leave your parents alone. They don't even have to know I exist. And get out of my life!" I retorted with an anger I could no longer hold in check.

His total failure to understand my feelings was revealed in his next words: "You women are all alike: running after rich husbands."

"And are all the sons of rich people like you looking for a nice young thing they can casually drop the day they marry someone who fits into their class and position?"

We had shot each other a last venomous look and had parted company.

This final bitter scene, which had taken place a month before, ran like a bad movie through my mind just as I arrived at Place des Pyramides. It was five to nine. I pulled up in front of the Joan of Arc Hotel, connected my meter and hopped out of the cab.

As soon as I entered the lobby, Louis Mercier picked up the house phone and asked for room 204. "The taxi's here, doctor," he announced.

The doctor must have said he'd be a few minutes, for Louis nodded his head and answered, "That's fine, I'll have the cab wait." Then he hung up and



smiled at me warmly. "Well, Catherine, you're as slim as ever and I swear you're becoming more beautiful all the time. You'd better watch out for customers with ideas in their heads."

"Oh, I take care of myself, and I do have Biscuit. Maybe he's not very ferocious, but the customers don't know that! Besides, you only call me for couples, single women or decrepit old men. I bet you pick them out for me."

"I let you take only the hotel's regular patrons, usually people I've known for a long time."

"I take it," I sighed resignedly, "that my fare this morning is an old, woman-hating doctor, who's going to be glancing disapprovingly at me the whole way."

"Dr. Richard Norton is only thirty," he informed me calmly.

"Well, then, he must be married and madly in love with his wife."

"Not at all. He's a bachelor, but I've known him for fifteen years. His father always stays here, and he used to bring his son to this hotel."

"Norton? Isn't that an English name?"

"His great-grandfather was English, but the rest of the family comes from Dijon. Dr. Norton has a clinic there. You'll see: he's a very nice, athletic-looking, cultured man. Usually he has his own car with him, but he broke his wrist four or five weeks ago. He had an accident while driving home from a weekend at Marnieres—that's the name of the estate you're taking him to. He's had the cast taken off, but his wrist still hurts him too much to drive."



Then Louis added, "You go almost every Sunday to Verneuil-sur-Avre, don't you? Haven't you ever heard anyone mention the Bellanger brothers? They're very well known around there."

I explained that I had never had much chance to mix with the local people of Verneuil or the surrounding area.

"I only asked you," replied Louis, "because Marnieres is the Bellanger estate. There's been quite a drama connected with the family. Pierre, the older Bellanger brother, was killed almost a year ago in an airplane crash in Peru. His wife had a bad breakdown after that. The other brother, Charles, consulted Dr. Norton, who's a well-known psychiatrist."

"A psychiatrist! I hope he doesn't try to psycho-analyze me."

"I don't think he will. The doctor seems far too worried about Mrs. Bellanger."

Louis broke off. A tall, blond young man had just left the elevator and was heading toward the desk.

"Your customer," Louis whispered to me. "You'd better go out to the cab."

"See you later, and thanks," I told him before slipping outside.

A minute later, Dr. Norton climbed into my cab and said briefly, "Take the highway to Dreux. I'll direct you from there."

Then, hardly seated, he exclaimed, "A woman driver! Damnation! Is Mercier crazy?"

I revved the engine violently and retorted, "Louis isn't crazy. You ordered a cab. What's it to you if it's

driven by a woman? It doesn't exactly take a lot of muscle, and I know the way by heart. Every Sunday I take a woman to Verneuil—her son is boarding at the Roches School—which is right near where you're going. If you're not satisfied I can drop you off and you can find an athlete of the male sex to drive you."

In the rearview mirror I caught his wry smile, and, still angry, I snapped, "Well, what have you decided?"

"Since you know the way, I'll stick with you," he answered calmly. "Actually, this is an amusing and instructive experience for me. Have you ever really thought about why you drive? Do you wish you were a man? Is your aggressiveness satisfied when you pass other cars?"

The man seemed to be trying to exasperate me. "I'm quite delighted to be a woman and I'm not repressed," I replied dryly. "Nor do I have any aggression complex. Naturally, when I'm attacked I defend myself. Ill-mannered imbeciles would be better off not provoking me, that's all."

"Please, miss, don't put me in that category yet. I'm a psychiatrist, and I tend to view people I meet with a professional eye."

"So the way you see it, there aren't any human beings, just case studies," I threw at him, not feeling in the least like being nice. "I'm a simple, normal woman. I enjoy excellent physical and mental health. Keep your professional views for those who need them."

Dr. Norton didn't answer me. He lit a cigarette.

and sat in silence until we were on the highway. Suddenly he asked, "Does the manager of the Joan of Arc Hotel often phone you when he has customers? He must know you pretty well, because I asked him for someone who was trustworthy."

"Yes, Louis is an old friend of my father's—my father used to be manager of the Ritz Hotel." My usual friendly self overcame my earlier annoyance and I became chatty. "I'm often called by different hotels in town. Usually I take Americans and Englishmen, because I speak English fluently and—" I raised my chin proudly "—I also have a reputation for being discreet and honest with customers."

My passenger leaned forward against the back of my seat. In this position his head was quite close to my shoulder. If I glanced to the right, I was just able to catch sight of his face. I had to look quickly out of the very corner of my eye and then back at the road. The effort was tiring and a bit of an ocular feat, but it let me discover that he had a very interesting, although sharp and somewhat hard, profile.

I suddenly had the strangest impression that there was something evil about this man. He was watching the road absently, but he wasn't seeing it, and his eyes seemed to flicker with an odd, unpleasant look.

I continued glancing at him from time to time. Then, just as I was wondering if my little game was at all noticeable, he turned his head toward me and said in a detached manner, "Doesn't anything, shall we say, awkward, ever happen with the men you drive all over the countryside? As beautiful as you are—"

"No," I answered sharply. "Of course, once in a while a client will, er, try something, but my dog knows how to handle them. He isn't big, but when he bites, it hurts."

Questions like the doctor's made me a little nervous, and the situation wasn't improved when the doctor put out a hand and stroked Biscuit's fluffy brown fur. Trusty bodyguard Biscuit returned the favor and licked his hand conscientiously.

I was relieved when Dr. Norton changed the subject. "We're going to a place called Marnieres," he said in a monotone. "It's a farm, an estate really, out in the country. I don't know precisely how long I'll spend there today or if we'll have an extra passenger for the return trip. Charles Bellanger, who lives there, called and asked me to come out to examine his sister-in-law, Juliana. I've been treating her for the depression she's been suffering from since her husband was killed in an airplane accident. It's possible that Mrs. Bellanger will be returning to Paris with me this evening, because if her condition is serious, I'll have to bring her in to the hospital. In that case, please don't be disturbed if she speaks or acts in any way incoherently. I might even talk to her in a way you think is bizarre. Sometimes it's necessary to humor patients who are in an unbalanced state."

In spite of myself I shuddered. The thought of an insane person sitting behind me in the cab hardly made me cheerful. What if this Juliana suddenly became violent or uncontrollable? Who would handle her? Not me, while I was driving, and certainly not Dr. Norton, who still had a bandaged and pre-

sumably painful wrist. As for Biscuit, he could possibly bite her, but I'd heard it said that the insane often are insensible to pain. Already I saw myself strangled, the cab smashed against a tree....

Dr. Norton must have read my fears from my expression. "Don't worry. Nothing so far indicates that Mrs. Bellanger will be in any sort of uncontrollable state. If she is, and if I think we have to bring her into the city, I'll give her an injection to calm her down."

"You should have ordered an ambulance," I groaned as I pressed the accelerator.

"You needn't worry. Everything will be okay," said the doctor decisively.

"I hope so," I answered. Still unconvinced, I had to hold back a peevish retort.

Seeing I was put off, my passenger sat back in his seat and started watching the passing landscape. At Houdan, a little village on the way, he asked me to stop in front of an inn. "What would you say to a cup of coffee?" he asked with an engaging smile.

I let myself be tempted. Biscuit joyfully accompanied us, and except for ourselves, the inn was deserted. We were served an excellent blend of coffee, over which we exchanged banalities.

Fifteen minutes later, as we were getting back into the taxi, Dr. Norton asked if I minded if he sat in the front seat. I was about to refuse, on the pretext that the front seat was reserved for Biscuit and that if anyone usurped him he would launch an attack on the unfortunate person. Before I had a chance to open my mouth, however, the man had gotten into



the front seat and the traitorous Biscuit, apparently delighted, had climbed onto his lap.

All at once the coffee I had just drunk churned a little in my stomach. I couldn't stand it when Biscuit got along with men I didn't like.

I started the car as Dr. Norton pulled a cigarette out of his pack. He tried at least twenty times to make his lighter work, and finally the constant clicking got to me. I almost snapped at him, "Open the glove compartment. You'll find some matches."

He obeyed, but his desire to smoke seemed to disappear when he found the leather-bound album that never left my car. "Well! What's this? Are you writing your memoirs? When I was little I used to keep a journal just like this one."

"That's my autograph book," I said offhandedly. "I've driven all kinds of more-or-less famous people, and I always ask them for their autographs."

"May I glance through it, if I'm not being too forward?"

"Go ahead. Take your time. I'm sure you'll find many amusing items."

I wasn't lying. My little book contained masterpieces of wit and spirit, collected from all sorts of personalities—customers I had picked up by chance or had obtained through my contacts in the hotels.

Finally the doctor decided to light a cigarette, whereupon he started leafing through my album. "Interesting," he said to me after several minutes, "how these signatures represent a wide range of character types."

"You'll have to write something as well," I sug-



gested. "I already have autographs from a surgeon and two well-known medical researchers, but I don't have a psychiatrist yet. As you can see, I'm not limited to people in show business. I have signatures of people in almost all professions."

"I must say, your book is full of surprises," replied my passenger almost sarcastically. "The entry of Lieutenant Clavier, who, for a policeman, is quite well known, seems to prove that you're on excellent terms with this man: 'To Catherine Sicard, in memory of a collaboration from which has been born a solid and durable friendship.' Obviously you're in the right job to talk to people and glean lots of information—"

Furious once again, I interrupted him. "I'm not sure just what you're implying, doctor, but I picked up Lieutenant Clavier completely by chance. One day he jumped into my cab and told me to follow a car. I was lucky; I managed to keep the car in sight for two hours. However, my work for the police force ended right there. It's true that since then I've become friends with Mr. Clavier, but he doesn't use me to help solve his cases. There are enough undercover cops around! As for getting information for him like you seem to be suggesting, he's never even hinted at it. Lieutenant Clavier understands human nature; he knows I'm no spy and...."

But Dr. Norton was no longer listening. His attention had been caught by another entry of a very different kind. Aloud he read, "To the ravishing Catherine Sicard, by whom I could be driven to the ends of the earth and even to seventh heaven. Alas!

she dropped me at Broken Heart Street and we aren't going any farther." It was signed by a famous author.

"This fellow's right," the psychiatrist commented with a chuckle. "You are ravishing. And I'd like you to take me with you to the ends of the earth and to seventh heaven, as well."

"We're well past Dreux now," I pointed out dryly, "and we can't be far from the Bellanger place. You'd better tell me which way to go."

## Chapter 2

After driving for about twenty minutes along a small country road, Dr. Norton had me turn left in the center of a small village. For several minutes we continued to drive through flat, open countryside. Then my passenger, indicating an old fortified farm built on the edge of a forest, said, "That's Marnieres. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Beautiful, maybe. But rather sinister-looking, especially in winter I bet," I replied.

Everything my passenger said rubbed me the wrong way—even the simplest observations. It seemed as if all I could do was disagree with him.

We drove across what appeared to once have been a drawbridge and crossed the yard to the main house. I acknowledged, to myself of course, that the house was indeed beautiful. Like many of the manor houses dating from the sixteenth century, it had

only two stories. The ground floor, however, had been raised above the level of the yard, and a stone stairway of at least a dozen steps led up to it.

As my cab pulled up to the house, Dr. Norton said briefly, "Wait for me a few moments. As soon as I see what's happening, I'll give you further instructions."

He climbed out of the car but didn't get much farther; two huge dogs, stationed on the stairs, made it very clear that he shouldn't move another step.

Naturally the watchdogs' barking set Biscuit off. My furry protector, realizing that the house belonged to fellow canines, wanted to make sure they understood that he was the owner of the taxi and knew how to defend it—behind closed windows, of course!

No doubt alerted by all the racket, a man appeared at the top of the stairs. With a word he quieted the dogs, then hurried toward Dr. Norton. "Richard, my old friend! Good to see you!" he cried, clasping the doctor's hand. Tall, tanned and very handsome, the man looked the perfect gentleman farmer. He was certainly dressed for the part: suede vest, flannel shirt, riding breeches and black boots.

"Good to see you, too, Charles," answered the doctor. "How's Juliana?"

"Well, let's say she's in a state—" He broke off as he caught sight of me in the car. Nodding briefly to me, he turned back to his friend with a questioning look.

"I came in a cab because my wrist is still bothering me too much to drive. I need a chauffeur, espe-

cially if I take Juliana to Paris. Miss Sicard is trustworthy; Louis Mercier hired her for me."

"Good old Louis! He knows how to join business with pleasure," replied Charles, smiling at me. "Quite lovely, your chauffeur."

"Come on, old chap. I have to examine your sister-in-law," the doctor said dryly.

He hurried up the stairs and Charles followed him with a sigh. "I really don't know what else to do. Juliana is becoming more and more helpless."

The two men disappeared into the house. To my great relief, the dogs followed them and Biscuit finally calmed down. I lit a cigarette and looked around. Except for three or four ducks waddling about and half a dozen chickens scratching in the farmyard, the place was deserted. The buildings seemed to be in excellent shape, and a large, almost brand-new piece of farm machinery was parked in a shed. In fact, the whole place had the air of a successful, well-run establishment.

If I hadn't been afraid that the monstrous dogs would reappear, I would have gotten out of the car and walked around the farm to see if there were any cows, sheep, horses or even people. But I didn't really want to be eaten alive, so I stayed quietly with Biscuit in the taxi.

I had been sitting there listening to the radio and half-dreaming for at least an hour when Dr. Norton emerged from the house and approached the driver's side of my car. When I opened the window, he apologized for keeping me waiting and said, "I've just examined Mrs. Bellanger. We'll definitely be

taking her to Paris this evening. She's exhausted and must rest before making the trip, so we'll leave here about five."

"Fine," I responded laconically.

"Another thing," he continued. "Mr. Bellanger phoned the village and ordered lunch for you at a restaurant. He's instructed the manager not to charge you a cent. Take your time, only you should be back here at quarter to five."

I thanked him and he strode off back into the house. I turned the car around and drove out of the farmyard, feeling in a much better frame of mind. This lunch, I knew, would fill me in on the Bellanger story and particularly on Juliana. The whole village would certainly know about her nervous breakdown. I admit I'm sometimes too curious for my own good, but for some reason this family particularly intrigued me. My instincts told me there was more to all this than what met the eye....

I had no trouble finding the only coffee shop-restaurant-grocery store. For once Biscuit agreed to walk obediently on his leash, and I was able to make a normal entrance into Tabardieu's, as the name above the entrance identified it.

The classic response to strangers in country restaurants—silence—greeted me. Eyed by half a dozen locals, I walked toward the cash register and said almost playfully, "Hello, everybody!"

A vague murmur answered me. To the short, plump, brown-haired woman standing behind the bar, I added, "I'm the person from Marnieres. I think you're expecting me."



"Oh, yes, Mr. Bellanger ordered lunch for you," she answered warmly.

A young man, detaching himself from the group of patrons at the bar, came over to me. "So you've come from Marnieres—and you drive a taxi, do you?" His forwardness made me bristle.

"Yes," I answered dryly. "You're perfectly informed."

A brief smile lit his face. As well as very white teeth, he had the healthy complexion of someone who lives in the country. His astonishingly blue eyes held an anxious glimmer that was quickly replaced by an expression too cordial for my liking. "I should be," he said easily. "My cousin, Charles Bellanger, was just phoning Mrs. Tabardieu when I arrived here. He ordered lunch for a young woman, a cab driver who had brought one of his friends to Marnieres." And turning toward the owner, he asked, "That's the truth, isn't it, Mimi?"

"That's right, Martin," the woman answered calmly.

"Oh! So you're Mr. Bellanger's cousin?" I exclaimed stupidly.

"First cousin, and my name is Martin Bellec."

Mechanically I introduced myself in turn, "Catherine Sicard."

Actually, I was starting to feel intrigued. This young man might turn out to be a gold mine of information about the Bellanger family, and so I agreed to have an aperitif with him.

I had just sat down on a stool in front of the bar when Biscuit, tired of being ignored, started pulling

vigorously on his leash. "Sit, Biscuit!" I ordered impatiently.

He adopted his wounded air, insulted that anyone would speak to him in such a way. Fortunately Mrs. Tabardieu gave me permission to set him loose. Freed at last, he proceeded to explore the place with his nose to the floor.

As soon as Mimi served our drinks, the other customers began to file out of the bar, each one bidding goodbye to Martin and to me as well.

I took a sip of Cinzano, and my companion, staring at me as if something about my face bothered him, said, "I think I might have seen you somewhere before. Do you ever go to Verneuil?"

"I do, in fact. Almost every Sunday I drive one of my customers there. Her son attends the Roches School."

"That's where it was, then," he murmured musingly.

As we sat there silently, it seemed to me that Martin was absorbed with a problem. Perhaps he was wondering about me just as I was wondering about him.

"Are you a farmer?" I asked him at last, worried that the silence would go on forever.

"No, I own a gas station about halfway between Verneuil and here. I also deal with farm machinery. And I distribute and repair foreign cars as well as combine-harvesters."

"I saw a fantastic-looking farm machine at Marnieres. Was it one of yours? Your cousin must bring in huge harvests."

Martin's face tightened a little. "Marnieres is quite a large farm, but Charles doesn't know anything about farming. It was Pierre, his older brother, who took care of everything. Charles isn't much more than a parasite—"

He broke off abruptly, probably thinking he'd said too much. Mimi Tabardieu took advantage of the pause to come over and say, "You can eat as soon as you're ready, miss. I can set a table for you here in the bar, if you like. That'll be more cheerful than sitting alone in the dining room. During the week customers are few and far between...."

I quickly agreed to her arrangement, and Martin added, "I'm eating here as well. Would you mind very much if I joined you? That'll make it easier for Mimi to serve us."

"Sure, why not? We've already had a drink together, and eating alone dulls my appetite. I'd like to do justice to Mrs. Tabardieu's cooking." Then to my horror I added almost coyly, "And I'll be able to continue enjoying your company...."

What was I saying! Only that morning I had resolved to avoid men, and here I was coming on like an unsophisticated schoolgirl. When he caught my eye his expression was almost sympathetic, and for some reason I felt annoyed. In moments we were sitting across from each other at the table Mimi Tabardieu had prepared.

While we were polishing off the delicious hors d'oeuvres, I tried to present a better impression of myself to my companion. I confided to him why I'd decided to become a taxi driver, and to my surprise

he approved of the idea wholeheartedly. "I know what you mean about being your own person," he said. "I'm a little like you, but I couldn't ever live in Paris."

He explained to me why he preferred the country and spoke about all his contacts with people. He seemed to know everyone and everyone knew him. "Even though I live alone, I'm never lonely," he added.

I grabbed the opportunity to steer the conversation toward the Bellangers. "And, of course, you have family here. That helps, too."

He sighed. "Yes, if only Pierre were still alive...."

"Pierre Bellanger? Was he the one who was killed in the airplane crash?"

"That's right. Ten months ago. He was a wonderful man, not at all like his brother."

"But Charles Bellanger doesn't seem so bad."

"Huh!" Martin laughed unpleasantly. "You know him then?"

"No, I scarcely saw him earlier today, but Dr. Norton seems to think well of him."

As I mentioned the doctor, Martin's expression suddenly changed. He wrinkled his forehead and asked, "You said Norton, didn't you? Was that whom you brought to Marnieres this morning?"

"Yes. Charles Bellanger wanted him to examine his sister-in-law. It seems she's suffering from a nervous breakdown or something."

"A nervous breakdown? That's impossible! Sure, for the past few months she's been tiring herself out working, but she loves her work. It's given her a new interest in life."

He went on almost violently, "I know Richard Norton well. He may be an eminent psychiatrist, but I don't believe any treatment he can give will help Juliana. What she's suffering from is grief. What can anyone do?"

"I only know that we're going to be bringing Mrs. Bellanger to Paris tonight. I suppose she's going into a rest home and—"

Martin exploded. "He's taking her to Paris tonight? But he can't! He doesn't have the right. A rest home... that's crazy!"

He glared at me as if I was responsible for everything that was happening.

"What do you mean, he can't? If she's sick, someone has to take care of her," I retorted.

"Care!" he sneered. Then, looking at me suspiciously, he demanded, "How did Norton get you as his chauffeur, anyway? He could have come in his own car. Why get you mixed up in all of this?"

I explained to him about the doctor's wrist and how I had been hired through Louis Mercier.

"So that's it!" retorted Martin almost disgustedly. "The manager of the Joan of Arc Hotel—a shady character, that one."

That remark really made me angry. "How can you talk about Louis like that? He's a perfectly honorable man."

"Are you sure?" questioned Martin with an ironic smile.

"Absolutely. I've known him for years. He worked with my father...."

And just as I launched into my defense of Louis, a



memory flooded into my mind. I could hear my father saying one evening to my mother as he came home from work, "I was able to straighten things out for Louis. At my request, the owner of the Joan of Arc agreed to hush it all up. After all, he has three kids and he needs a chance to redeem himself. It's given him quite a scare and I think after this he'll toe the line." At the time, these words hadn't meant anything to me, but now for some reason they troubled me.

Continuing my avid defense anyway, I was at the same time working things out in my head. Before he retired, hadn't dad given me a list of hotel managers and personnel I could trust? Louis was among them and dad had even specified: "Louis Mercier will take good care of you, and he'll always give you trustworthy customers. Also, the Joan of Arc is a very busy hotel."

Dad had been right. Louis's customers were always beyond reproach—as well as plentiful—and I wondered what Martin Bellec was trying to insinuate.

Out of breath, I stopped talking at last, gave a piece of food to Biscuit and waited for Martin to respond.

He sat there watching me with a perplexed look on his face. I bore his gaze by blushing lightly, realizing all at once that this man was unusually attractive. He exuded a particular charm, a charm that disturbed me.

My curiosity about the Bellanger family had been greatly reduced. It was Martin Bellec who interested



me now. I very much wanted to find out what he was all about, but I couldn't tell if my interest was purely in him or in finding out why he thought what he did about Dr. Norton, the Bellangers and myself.

Calmly he lit a cigarette and stated, "Either you're incredibly naive or else you're putting me on."

"I'm neither naive nor am I putting you on," I assured him. "You're going too far, that's all. Did you want to have lunch with me just so you could start jabbing at me? I haven't done anything to you. I just want to do my job, and I don't care a hoot for all your family troubles."

"That's possible, and we'll soon find out the truth. Did you meet Mrs. Bellanger earlier at Marnieres?"

"No. Her brother-in-law said she was sick and confined to bed."

He raised his eyebrows. "My God!" Once again his eyes scrutinized me. "Since Pierre's death, I've often visited Marnieres. Juliana is still a friend, a very close friend. . . ." His eyes suddenly took on an infinitely sad and tender expression. Was he in love with the young widow? That possibility would explain most of his reactions.

"The last time I saw her," he continued, "was last Tuesday, before I left for Rouen on a short business trip. She was completely herself, completely normal. I think she's one of the most courageous people I know, carrying on as she does. If anything, she works too hard."

At my astonished look, he explained, "Juliana is a chemical engineer. It was before she obtained her degree, while she was still at college, that she

became engaged to Pierre. He was a chemical engineer, too. They married and moved out here. Juliana financed the building of a chemicals factory at Dreux. Pierre did mainly research, and Juliana helped him but also took charge of the whole commercial end. They really worked as a team."

"I thought Pierre did the farming at Marnieres," I exclaimed. "Isn't that what you told me?"

"That's right. Juliana and Pierre managed their farm and their scientific work, as well. They didn't want to end up as ants in a laboratory, and the farm brought them in contact with nature. So would you explain to me how a woman such as Juliana, who is capable of solving the most complicated equations, who knows how to drive a tractor-combine, and is an accomplished athlete, too, was able between Tuesday morning and today to suddenly fall victim to a nervous breakdown?"

I thought about it. If Martin was telling the truth, and I was starting to believe he was, why would Charles have phoned Dr. Norton for a consultation? Something must have happened during the past three days.

"But, surely, if Dr. Norton wants to take her to a hospital tonight, it must be because she's really ill!" I objected.

I broke off suddenly, remembering that the psychiatrist had assured me Mrs. Bellanger had been ill since her husband's death—that is, for several months. "Are you sure she was all right Tuesday morning?" I insisted.

"I'd stake my life on it, and I'm not crazy!"

retorted Martin forcefully, "I saw her around ten a.m. She had just come in from horseback riding and had to go to the factory right after lunch."

"Then something must have happened while you were in Rouen."

"You're right, and I'm going to find out what," he declared. "Excuse me for leaving you to finish your lunch by yourself. I'm going to Marnieres and I'm going to raise the roof. I wasn't expected back from Rouen until early next week. Charles and Norton probably want to whisk Juliana away during my absence, but they're going to have to do some explaining first."

Then he took my hand and smiled at me. "I'm sorry that I have to leave you so abruptly. I think you've told me the truth, and I must confess I'm starting to like you. I hope we see each other again one of these days in Verneuil."

And, leaving me sitting in front of my excellent roast beef, he left the restaurant, calling to Mimi Tabardieu as he went out. "Goodbye, Mimi! I'll pay you tonight!"

The woman bustled into the room, but Martin had already gone.

"That man! Always rushing," she sighed with an indulgent smile.

"He's going to Marnieres."

"He should have finished his lunch first. Ah well," she sighed. "He probably has something he wants to tell Mrs. Bellanger before she leaves for the factory."

This remark made it clear to me that Mrs. Tabardieu was not aware of Juliana's illness. I decided to

tell her about it and to explain that I had brought a doctor to Marnieres to examine her.

"Mrs. Bellanger had a nervous breakdown?" she asked in surprise. "And Mr. Bellec didn't know anything about it till you told him...."

She became thoughtful and I asked her casually, "She's a customer here, I suppose?"

"Yes. I see her at least three times a week."

We were all alone in the bar and I took advantage of the fact to continue questioning her. "So she's been in recently. Didn't you notice anything strange or different about her?"

"Let's see," Mimi reflected. "Monday evening she had a drink here with the mayor. She was a little tired, but then she probably works too hard. Obviously, since her husband's death, she isn't really happy or outgoing like before, but she's always struck me as a very strong woman."

Then, as a customer entered the café, she ended the conversation with, "You know, sometimes these illnesses spring from nowhere." And she disappeared with the customer into the little grocery store.

As Biscuit polished off my roast beef—I had lost my appetite—I realized that nothing made any sense. If Mimi Tabardieu and Martin Bellec hadn't known about Juliana's nervous breakdown, then no one else in the area knew about it either. News travels quickly in villages; as soon as someone becomes ill, everyone knows about it.

Richard Norton must have lied, then, when he told me that Juliana had been severely depressed for

a long time. But was he in any way obligated to tell me the truth about a patient? Of course not, I thought. Perhaps Juliana had had a sudden crisis or a seizure that no one but Charles had noticed. Her condition had possibly taken an abrupt turn for the worse since Martin had left for Rouen. And the latter, blinded by his love, had fancied God knows what....

Tired of asking questions I didn't have answers for, I quickly ate an apple and decided to return immediately to Marnieres. Nothing was stopping me from parking in the yard until it was time to leave for Paris. I'd lost count of all the customers for whom I had waited whole afternoons.

I also wanted to find out the result of Martin's visit. If what he'd said about Juliana's health being good was true, then one of two things must have happened: either Juliana really had become ill in the past three days, or else she was pretending to be. But why?

I would find out at Marnieres, I told myself, and without wasting any more time, I got up to say goodbye to Mimi Tabardieu.

## Chapter 3

Arriving at Marnieres, I noticed with relief that the two ferocious beasts were shut up in a kennel near the gate. Barking without great conviction as the car passed, they stopped completely as I drove into the yard. I pulled up by a white Alfa Romeo with a black top, which, according to the license plates, was registered in this region. No doubt the vehicle belonged to Martin Bellec.

I left Biscuit in the cab and got out to look more closely at the Alfa Romeo. At the same time I kept my ears alerted to any sounds of voices. But, as it had been that morning, the place seemed deserted except for the chickens, the ducks and the two watchdogs.

Surely there was some staff on the farm—at least a general laborer and someone to cook and do the housework. The Bellangers were well off; at least,



according to Martin, Juliana was a woman of means. When one owns a factory, one doesn't usually spend time doing the dishes.

As I squeezed myself between the two cars, I wondered what Charles Bellanger did for a living—or was he just a parasite, as Martin had said. But I didn't have time to trouble my head about it, for the door of the house was flung open and I heard Martin say furiously, "You'll be hearing from me! It's a disgrace what you've done to her!"

Then the door slammed and he rushed down the stairs. Spotting me, he ran over and, after glancing behind his shoulder toward the house, said in a low voice, "No one heard you arrive. Charles and Richard are in the living room. They can't see us—the windows face the other way."

"So? What happened?" I questioned, eaten up with curiosity.

He ignored my query and the expression on his face became almost pleading. "I have a favor to ask you. You have to trust me and you mustn't refuse."

Although I was terribly confused, unsure of what to think, I felt moved by his voice. "What do you want me to do? If it's possible, I'll do it," I responded softly.

"I'm sorry I don't have time to explain everything to you now. I only want you to let me know where you drop Mrs. Bellanger off tonight."

"All right. But how will I get the address to you?"

"Will you be driving your customer to Verneuil the day after tomorrow?"

"Yes, I will."

"Do you have lunch with her and her son?"

"No. I leave them around noon at either the Clos restaurant or the Salmon Hotel; then I'm free for a while."

Martin slid behind the wheel of his car and started the engine. "I'll meet you around noon at the Old Towers Inn in Verneuil. Don't tell Norton or Bellanger that we met at Tabardieu's. You don't even know me, okay? It's very important. Can I count on you?"

"Yes."

"Thanks!" he answered, breathing a sigh of relief. "Sunday you'll understand it all better...."

While the Alfa Romeo pulled away, I mused to myself that Martin wasn't going to be a man with whom I'd have to avoid entanglement, for I was becoming more and more certain he was Juliana Bellanger's lover. And despite the fact that he was indisputably a man, he didn't arouse my desire for revenge on the male of the species—a desire that had preoccupied me so much of late.

Once again I felt horribly unhappy. I got back into the cab and stupidly started to cry. Several minutes passed before I was able to pull myself together and give myself a talking to. "It's you who needs to see a psychiatrist! And he would no doubt tell you you're in the process of transferring your feelings from one man to another. Instead of avenging yourself, you throw yourself at the first man you meet just because he has eyes that stir a thirst in you—a thirst that was awakened, then left unsatisfied, by Mark."

Whatever happened, I was going to see Martin the day after tomorrow. That pleased me, and at the

same time made me angry with myself. Like a fool, I had become involved in a drama that had nothing to do with me, but I had given my word and I had to keep it. If I had used some common sense and gone for a walk with Biscuit instead of rushing over to Marnieres, I wouldn't have seen Martin again and I wouldn't have arranged to meet him.

Minutes passed. I was starting to find the wait tedious when the door of the house finally opened. Charles Bellanger appeared at the top of the stairs, and his face registered surprise at seeing the car. Taking a huge cigar out of his mouth, he hurried down the stairs and came over to the cab. I rolled down the window, quieted Biscuit and flashed my most charming smile.

I must say the man was very well built. And his face looked kind and honest. The sort of man one could get attached to, I thought, as he greeted me with, "You're already here? Richard Norton told me that you wouldn't be back before quarter to five."

"I just arrived. I wanted to take a walk with Biscuit, but the woods are marked Private Property so I came back early. I'm used to waiting around for customers; it's part of my job."

He hesitated an instant, then invited me to come in.

"Oh, no, I don't want to bother you." I had no intention of refusing, but I didn't want to make it seem as though I was too eager either.

He insisted and I pretended to give in reluctantly.

Left alone in the taxi, Biscuit was clearly not pleased at being deserted. His ears were lowered and

his eyes full of reproach, and I felt a pang of guilt. But what could I do? Not everyone appreciates the presence of a dog in his home. Anyway, I knew Biscuit would punish me by sulking for a while when I returned, and I supposed that made us even.

As we entered the house Charles took me by the arm and steered me toward the first door on the left, apologizing for being obliged to receive me in the kitchen. "My sister-in-law is resting on the couch in the living room," he explained, "and Dr. Norton doesn't want her disturbed."

I looked around, a little disappointed. We had entered one of those huge communal rooms that are found only in country houses. Modern household appliances shared space with a traditional long wooden table, huge oak counters, rustic ornamental platters and a massive wood stove. A large number of copper pots shone from the walls where they were hung. Doubtless they were polished by the middle-aged, brown-haired woman with the gloomy face, who acknowledged our entrance with a brief nod of her head.

Charles seated me at the end of the table and asked if I would prefer coffee or a cool drink. I opted for the coffee. He spoke a few words in Spanish to the woman and sat down next to me, explaining, "Tita doesn't speak French. She's been here six months with her husband and daughter, and not one of them knows any more French than they did when they arrived from Barcelona. They don't like to go out, even on Sundays. I think they've been to Dreux only twice, to buy some clothes."

I was puzzled as to why the family had moved to France, and when I asked Charles he replied, "They've decided to work in this country till they save some money; then they'll go back to Spain and buy a little farm. The husband is working on the harvest here and the daughter, who's sixteen, helps her mother in the house. The three of them together save more than a thousand francs a month, so in four or five years they'll have quite a handsome sum."

Once again I was struck by the feeling that there was something odd about the situation, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Yet, what could be more banal than this story of a Spanish family coming to work in France? Paris was overflowing with not only Spaniards, but also Italians, Algerians and Portuguese. So what?

"The daughter doesn't speak French, either?" I asked in surprise. "At her age, one usually learns rather easily. I can understand, I suppose, her parents' not adapting, preferring to keep to themselves—after all, they're here temporarily. But the girl? She must want to get to know young people her own age, to go out with them to movies and dances."

Charles shrugged. "She's like most Spanish girls—completely under her parents' wing. I wouldn't be surprised if they have a husband—a Spaniard—all lined up for her. In that case they don't want her to fall in love with a Frenchman."

With a dour expression Tita served us each a cup of excellent coffee. Suddenly a thought flashed into



my head. "It's a good thing you speak Spanish. Your sister-in-law must, too, doesn't she? Otherwise it'd be quite a problem for the mistress of the house to communicate with the staff."

After an almost imperceptible hesitation he answered, "No, Juliana doesn't understand a single word."

He broke off. Richard Norton had just entered the kitchen. A glimmer of annoyance showed in the psychiatrist's eyes, then he smiled at me. "Back already, Miss Sicard!" And turning toward Bellanger, "Did you hear her arrive? I didn't."

"No. I just happened to look outside, and I found Miss Sicard quietly seated in her taxi."

The two men exchanged a silent question and the doctor continued with a lightness I was sure he didn't feel, "If this charming young lady was there when your cousin left us, he certainly wouldn't have missed the chance of having a word with her. He appreciates beautiful women."

It was plain to me that Dr. Norton was most anxious to know if Martin had spoken to me. What was he afraid of?

Faithful to the promise I'd made to Martin, I answered airily, "I passed an Alfa Romeo on my way in, but I didn't get a good look at the driver. He seemed to be in a hurry and didn't stop to whisper sweet nothings to me."

Even the most obtuse person couldn't have failed to notice that Dr. Norton and Charles both sighed in relief after my words. Assuming my most naive expression I added, "All I can say is that the man



shouldn't be allowed on the road. He drove like a maniac. It's a wonder he managed not to hit a chicken or a duck."

Charles shrugged. "He was angry because of Juliana—"

A quelling glance from the doctor shut him up instantly. Obviously he had put his foot in his mouth. I jumped at the chance. "Angry! But why be angry when someone is ill?" And since I was playing dumb, why not continue? "Oh, excuse me. It's none of my business and I shouldn't have said anything."

Was Dr. Norton fooled? I knew I must be acting rather dense, and possibly he would notice a change from the way I was in the morning. I hoped psychiatrists were not too adept at understanding normal people—a group to which I'd always assumed I belonged.

The doctor, however, seemed oblivious to my games. It was to Charles that he replied, "Your cousin is getting mixed up in something that's none of his business. You'd think he had rights where Juliana is concerned. Pierre's death has revived his crazy love for your sister-in-law, but after all this time he must know he doesn't stand a chance."

So I had been right: Martin did love Juliana. Yet instead of being satisfied that my instincts had been correct I felt vaguely depressed. One more dream was denied me. Decidedly the god of love didn't want me in his elusive circle. He was holding me at arms' length and refusing me all the joys and marvelous anguish he distributed so generously to others.

Preoccupied with condemning Eros, I had ceased

listening to the two men, but the psychiatrist brought me down to earth. "Actually, it's a good thing that you came back early," he told me after looking at his watch. "Mrs. Bellanger has woken up and I think we can leave earlier than we'd planned. It's best that she enter the rest home as quickly as possible, and she's in complete agreement. I'll go tell her we're leaving, and we'll join you in the car in about twenty minutes. Meanwhile, finish your coffee."

"All right, thank you, doctor," I answered readily. I was finally going to see the extraordinary Juliana, and I must say I was having a hard time hiding my impatience.

Charles stood up to accompany his friend, but the latter stopped him with a gesture. "No. Stay with Miss Sicard for the moment. Join us again in a few minutes. I'm going to give Juliana an injection. After that you can say goodbye to her."

He opened the door and then turned back once again to ask Charles,

"The papers, the suitcase.... Is all that ready?"

"Yes. I followed your instructions and got together everything you wanted."

"Good. See you in a minute."

When the door closed behind the other man, Charles's face seemed to sag. Martin had claimed that his cousin was a parasite; in fact, he gave me the impression of being an old, spoiled infant. What did he do with himself, I wondered. His elegant and impeccable clothes, his soft hands, proved that he probably didn't often work on the farm.

Nevertheless he had a gallant air. His distress touched me and I felt an urge to comfort him. "You know," I began, "these days nervous breakdowns are very common. Since your sister-in-law has decided to get some help, she'll pull out of it in no time, I'm sure. In three weeks or so, she'll be back here as good as new."

He sighed deeply. "Unfortunately, things aren't quite so simple. . . ." And clearly desiring to change the subject, he altered his tone and offered me a cognac.

"No, thanks. I never drink alcohol when I drive."

"Very wise. We'll save it for another time—and I do hope there'll be another time. Richard told me that almost every Sunday you take a woman to Verneuil. I suppose you leave her with her son in a nearby restaurant?"

"Yes. At the Clos or the Salmon," I answered cautiously.

But wouldn't you know it, he jumped at the opening. "Why don't you come for lunch the day after tomorrow? Or we could even go out somewhere. There are some charming inns in the area, and I'm going to feel lonely after Juliana leaves."

"Oh, dear." I attempted to arrange my features into an expression of disappointment. "I'm not sure I'll be coming this week. My customer said something about not visiting her son this Sunday and—"

"But there's a chance, isn't there?" he persisted. "When will you know?"

"The woman should telephone me tomorrow around noon. But I really don't think she's coming out this week."

My answer didn't seem to satisfy Charles. The sulky pout he'd assumed made him look at once ridiculous and touching. He was decidedly a spoiled child.

"But I want to see you again," he went on. "You're an unusual sort, you know. Women like you can't be found just anywhere—"

"Oh, but they can!" I tried feebly to make a joke. "I can be found almost anywhere; after all I spend all day driving from one place to another!"

Charles was very nice, perhaps, but he was starting to bore me. I was quickly discovering that he didn't really have much character; he was, in fact, rather spineless. Having made up my mind not to have anything to do with him, it seemed I wasn't going to be able to get out of making a date with him without doing pirouettes.

So, of course, he wasn't getting my message at all, and he continued along the same lines: "I'm serious. I've had enough of these forward women who hang around the clubs. You seem so different! And if you knew how bored I am here...."

"I would think that managing a farm like yours would take a lot of time and effort."

"Not these days. Except for some fowl for our own table and a couple of saddle horses, which Antonio, Tita's husband, takes care of, we don't have any animals. And we own the latest farm machinery, so one driver can take care of the cultivating and the harvesting. Unfortunately, our driver's been gone for six months, doing his stint in the army. Antonio's been carrying on all alone, but dur-

ing the winter there isn't much work to do in the fields and Juliana tells me what has to be done. Now I'm going to be in charge of all this and I have a horror of farming. I feel rather imprisoned in this house and I can't wait to leave."

I couldn't stop myself from exclaiming, "So why don't you pick another profession?"

"I'll tell you when we have lunch together. If you don't come to Verneuil on Sunday, when and where can I find you in Paris the following week?"

"I don't know. That'll depend on my work. Why don't you give me your telephone number? I'll call you tomorrow to let you know what my customer has decided."

Handing me his card he said quickly, "Hide it in your pocket. Don't let Richard Norton know about this. I don't want him knowing my private affairs." And when I had put the card away he added, "Give me your address and phone number in case you forget to phone me."

Just as I was kicking myself for being trapped in a corner I was spared. At that moment I noticed Dr. Norton in the doorway, and since Charles didn't want the psychiatrist to know about his plans concerning me, there was no question of carrying on our conversation.

"Well, are you going to say goodbye to Juliana?" the doctor asked dryly.

"Of course," responded Charles.

He stood up and I did, too. "I'll go out to the car. Thanks for the great coffee." I smiled at Tita, who wouldn't for anything drop her sad expression, and left the room, followed by the two men.



We'd hardly entered the vestibule when Dr. Norton waved me to the front door, saying, "We'll join you in five minutes." My presence was definitely unwanted. The only thing I could do was leave them an open field, but it struck me that they acted like a pair of conspirators.

Outside, I forced myself to look at the facts logically. There was an invalid in the house. The doctor had arrangements to discuss with Charles, and it certainly wasn't my business. His behavior was normal. I wasn't part of the family; I'd never even heard of the Bellangers before this morning! I was letting my imagination carry me away.

I slipped behind the wheel of the cab. Curled up on the seat, Biscuit was ignoring me. Deep in thought, I had forgotten to perform the ritual we always went through whenever I returned from abandoning him—the little caresses and the coaxing words, which served as my apology.

Soon my attention was drawn to the sound of voices coming from the top of the stairs. As I got out of the car, I finally caught sight of Juliana Bellanger.

She was beautiful! Her ash blond hair was cut short and her blue eyes had a slightly Oriental cast. Her nose was fine and short and her face admirably proportioned, giving an impression of intelligence and distinction. She was wearing navy blue pants, a red turtleneck and a blazer.

Supported by Dr. Norton, she descended the stairway with slow, but assured, steps. Charles followed carrying a suitcase.

"I'd better put this in the trunk," he said to me, while the doctor helped Juliana into the cab.



"Just open it. It isn't locked," I answered, getting behind the wheel again. I started the engine and turned around. "Are you settled? Should I close the windows completely or lower them more?"

To tell the truth, I was asking these questions in order to look at Mrs. Bellanger from a closer range.

"I'm fine myself, but what about you, Juliana?" asked the psychiatrist.

"For the moment, I'm fine, too. We'll see when we start moving," she answered wearily.

"Then we're ready to leave," he ordered. And to Charles, who was knocking on one of the windows, he added: "So long, I'll phone you tomorrow."

Juliana waved her hand and smiled wanly at her brother-in-law. I let out the clutch gently, as if I was transporting an infinitely fragile object....

## Chapter 4

As soon as we left, Juliana closed her eyes and appeared to drop off to sleep. I had adjusted my rearview mirror so that I could see her but not Dr. Norton. Thus I was able to glance at the young woman from time to time without the risk of catching the doctor's eye. It wasn't the first time I had used this technique, and as far as safety went, I didn't risk anything because I had another mirror on the left side of the car.

After about a quarter of an hour, I heard Dr. Norton light a cigarette, then Juliana say, "I would have loved to have seen Martin before we left."

"But look here, Juliana. He's going to be in Rouen for another few days. You know very well he was called there because of important business."

"All the same, you and Charles could have woken me up when he phoned. Why didn't he come to say

goodbye when he found out I was going into the hospital? It would have taken him only a couple of hours to get to Marnieres."

"I already told you: I persuaded him not to. I had enough trouble making him understand that his presence wouldn't do you any good. To compensate, I promised him he'd be able to visit you in the hospital. You know how Martin is. He would have swept in like a lunatic and started arguing. In your condition you know you don't need to be upset—you need a sleep cure. Martin means well, but he doesn't realize the state you're in."

A short glance in the mirror revealed the anguished, even hunted expression on the young woman's face. "But at least I should have been able to say a few words on the telephone," she murmured persistently. "You should have woken me up."

"Impossible, Juliana. You were under the effect of a tranquilizer."

I was astounded at these lies and had difficulty holding my tongue. Of course, the doctor didn't know I had had lunch with Martin and had even spoken with him in the driveway at Marnieres, but he was telling Juliana that Martin was in Rouen when he knew that I knew Martin had indeed visited the farm. Hadn't he talked about it in front of me in the kitchen half an hour earlier? I recalled the psychiatrist's warning me that he might say bizarre things and that I wasn't to let them disturb me. Evidently the young woman wasn't in a normal state, and the man must surely have his reasons for speaking as he did....

"Listen, Richard," said Mrs. Bellanger in a suddenly stronger voice. "I know I have to get some rest. I'm tired and depressed, and I suppose I'm still haunted by Pierre's memory; but I'm not crazy and I refuse to have you treat me as if I was by creating a . . . a vacuum around me. As soon as we get to the hospital, I intend to call Martin in Rouen. He always stays at the same hotel, so it'll be easy to reach him."

"It's a promise," assured her companion in a conciliatory voice. "I didn't know he was so important to you. What do you want to talk to him about so badly?"

"I only need to hear his voice. Contrary to what you think, Martin does me a lot of good. He helped me so much after Pierre's death! He's the one who made me start working at the plant again. Without him, I wouldn't ever have finished perfecting Pierre's formula for the lubricant."

"That may be so, but it's all this research that's exhausted you. Deep grief, too much work—that's what's caused your depression."

"Do you think so?" she said almost in a whisper. "In the lab, I forget my grief. I'm doing the work Pierre started and I enjoy it so. It's only after . . . yes, afterward. . . ."

She had fallen asleep. After a while I readjusted the mirror so I could see the road again. In doing so, I caught the doctor's slightly ironic smile. Had he noticed my little trick?

"Looks as if Mrs. Bellanger is going to sleep all the way to Paris," I said offhandedly. "And that's probably what she needs the most."

Until we reached the tunnel of the autoroute, Dr. Norton smoked cigarette after cigarette, only occasionally remarking on the weather, the traffic or the new buildings springing up in the suburbs. At the Saint Cloud bridge I inquired as to our destination so that I could decide whether to take the route by the Boulogne woods or the one by the river.

"The woods and then through Maillot," he replied. "The rest home is at 32 Berlioz Street."

"Oh, yes," I said. I was familiar with this private, tree-lined street. A quiet area, it was perfect for a hospital or rest home.

When at last I stopped the car, Biscuit, as was his habit, scrambled to his feet and stationed himself in a manner that allowed him to see the passengers in back. Curiosity made me turn around, too.

Juliana had not awakened; she was obviously drugged by the shot the psychiatrist had given her at Marnieres. For several seconds Dr. Norton stroked the young woman's forehead. "Come on, Juliana. Wake up, my dear. We're here," he repeated several times.

She groaned feebly, without opening her eyes. Then the doctor took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. She moaned again but that was all. Just as I was thinking that the doctor would have to carry Juliana into the hospital, he struck her sharply across the face. And before I could grab him, Biscuit snarled and bounded into the back seat. His sharp little teeth closed on the psychiatrist's hand... and, worst luck, not on the hand that had struck Juliana, but the one with the bandaged wrist!

"Filthy beast!" he cried.

With one leap, Biscuit was back at my side. I opened my mouth to blurt out an apology for my dog's behavior, but I didn't get a chance. The racket, combined with the blow she'd received, had awakened Juliana.

"What's going on?" she murmured. "Where am I? Ah! the clinic. . . ." She sat up feebly and added, "I want to phone Martin."

"Yes, yes," the doctor said, throwing Biscuit and me one last murderous look. "But first of all you have to get out of the car. Do you want me to find someone to help me carry you?"

"Why not just get a stretcher?" she bristled in a flash of revolt. "I'm not at that stage yet!"

"Can I help?" I offered, filled with sympathy and a certain admiration for this beautiful and certainly very intelligent young woman.

She smiled weakly and answered, "Thank you. You're kind but I must make an effort."

Dr. Norton had gone around and opened her door. She took the hand he held out to her. "It's the needle you gave me, Richard," she said as she collapsed against his chest. She managed, however, to hold herself upright.

"Going to make it?" he asked.

"Yes. The door isn't far . . ." she answered. "I can make it."

He turned his head toward me. "I'll send someone for the luggage. Wait for me here. I won't be long."

Juliana hadn't been wrong; head held high, she managed the short distance remarkably well. I saw the surprise and worry on the doctor's face and knew she had carried off a true performance.



The young woman didn't mean anything to me—I didn't even know her—but I felt my heart sink when the door of the hospital closed behind her.

One more time I tried to understand logically and objectively what was going on. First of all there was Juliana's true state of health. She must have been ill, because even she herself admitted it. Her husband's death and then too much work had very likely used up her reserves. Many people suffered from depression for similar reasons and often for less serious ones.

Supposing that to be the case, I was still puzzled by the behavior of the three men and their various roles in Juliana's life. Why were Richard Norton and Charles Bellanger going to so much trouble, using all kinds of fabrications and lies to keep her and Martin from seeing each other? What were they afraid of? *Marriage between the two*, I thought suddenly.

While still clinging to her husband's memory, Mrs. Bellanger perhaps felt the desire for a companion. Martin seemed to be very taken with her, and in her turn Juliana seemed equally taken with him. But why should that bother the other two men?

I was musing sadly and somewhat bitterly that a man like Martin was capable of making a woman infinitely happy when, by association of ideas, I caught sight of a possible explanation: what if Dr. Norton himself were in love with Juliana?

This hypothesis was worth mulling over, but I didn't have the time just then because the door of the rest home flew open. Dr. Norton stopped on the threshold to light a cigarette, then moved toward the car.

Without consulting me this time, he got in the front seat next to me, and Biscuit climbed onto his lap. I held back my annoyance. The man's nerve bothered me, but if I wanted to verify some of my suppositions, I had to exude charm and friendliness.

"You've made peace with my dog," I said with a smile. "He isn't bad, but he gets, er, overexcited when he sees anyone strike another person. I'm very sorry about the bite. Does it hurt?"

"You don't have to apologize. Biscuit barely nipped me," he assured me as he gently stroked his attacker's head. Besides, it was my fault. Unfortunately there just wasn't any other way to wake Mrs. Bellanger up."

"The poor woman. It's such a shame—"

The doctor interrupted me by putting his hand on my arm. "All this business must have seemed very strange to you. But a few explanations on my part should clarify things. Let's have a cup of tea at a quiet restaurant. The Cascade Hotel, perhaps. What do you think?"

"Yes, that would be nice. I'll get you to sign my autograph book while we're at it." And with that I turned on the ignition and we headed off down the street.

Ten minutes later we pulled up in front of the Cascade. The doorman, who knew me pretty well, looked shocked when he saw my passenger sitting in the front seat. His surprise changed to silent disapproval when, having jumped to open the door on the passenger side, he saw that I got out as well.

"Hello, Paul," I said to him. "I've come for a cup of tea. Taking advantage of the spring sunshine!"

If the flag on my cab had been raised, he would have assumed that I wasn't working and that I was probably with a friend. But my flag was lowered, so I obviously had a fare. Therefore I should not have let a stranger, particularly a man, sit next to me; nor should I have accepted a cup of tea with him.

The situation was troubling. I should have realized that Paul would immediately jump to conclusions—the wrong ones. Dr. Norton didn't help matters as he familiarly tucked his arm under mine and led me toward the tables in the garden.

I only hoped that Paul wouldn't voice his suspicions to his colleagues. Knowing him, he probably had already decided I made a habit of dating my male customers. My reputation in the hotel circuit would suffer and my parents would certainly be notified. I could just imagine my father having me discreetly watched....

Very quickly, however, the doorman became the least of my preoccupations. My companion asked me what I wanted to drink, so I ordered a lemonade while he ordered tea. When the waiter left, Dr. Norton started talking to me in a serious, professional tone. "First of all, I must thank you, Miss Sicard, for your tactfulness. All the same, you must have some questions. I'm sure you're curious as to why Charles and I have taken such care to keep Martin Bellec away from Juliana. Chance had it that, coming back to Marnieres as early as you did, you passed his Alfa Romeo in the driveway. We, of course, didn't try to hide the driver's identity from you—why should we? You know, therefore, that Martin is not in

Rouen, and I'd like to thank you for staying quiet when I told Mrs. Bellanger the opposite."

Putting on my air of a good little girl ready to swallow anything, I responded, "Of course, I'm curious. Only you'd warned me not to pay any attention to what either of you said, so I tried not to. I'd realized that Mrs. Bellanger wasn't well and probably far from her normal self, but I don't understand why you're keeping Mr. Bellec from seeing her. What harm could he do her?"

"Great harm," sighed the doctor. "Since Pierre Bellanger's death, Martin has been a terrible influence on Juliana. Under the pretext of comforting her, he's visited Marnieres much too often. He actually drove her to the brink. While pretending to help her to recuperate, he effectively pushed her further into her melancholy. That wasn't difficult, especially after a shock such as she had had. All he had to do was repeat a few sentences, drop a few insinuations. . . . Furthermore, he pushed her to work until she was exhausted. . . ."

"That's horrible!" I exclaimed. "But why?"

"To get her to marry him so he could get his hands on her fortune."

Our conversation was interrupted for a moment by the arrival of the waiter with our tea and lemonade. When we were once again alone, I continued, "So Mrs. Bellanger is very rich?"

"Yes. Juliana's mother was a very wealthy American. When the woman died six years ago, Juliana, evidently, inherited a great deal of money. She had just finished her schooling and had married Pierre.

With her mother's money she had the factory as well as the chemical laboratory built."

I sipped my lemonade. "What I don't understand," I said as if asking for myself, "is why Mrs. Bellanger said quite the opposite about Mr. Bellec—that his presence does her good."

"She believes it does. Martin has her so much in his power that she imagines she's surrounded by enemies and that he's the only one she can trust."

I practically burst out with the question I couldn't hold back any longer: "Isn't it possible that he loves her? After all—"

The psychiatrist's hand clenched. "No," he interrupted with ill-disguised anger. "He only wants her money, and she's easily taken advantage of. Now that she's in my care she'll be able to see more clearly who she can really trust."

The doctor had just given away his feelings for Juliana Bellanger. By taking care of her, he no doubt hoped himself to exercise a certain power over the young widow. Who would win? Dr. Norton or Martin Bellec? And who was doing the most lying? And why all the lies, anyway? Did they spring from love...or self-interest?

One other thing in particular bothered me. How strange that Dr. Norton should take me into his confidence, going so far as to make me aware that he was in love with Mrs. Bellanger and that he hoped to get rid of Martin.

My face must have betrayed the course of my thoughts. "You're thinking that my private life isn't any of your business, but I have a good reason for



telling you all this," he said with a worried expression. "You go to Verneuil almost every Sunday. Charles knows it and he wants to see you again—I noticed his little display earlier in the kitchen at Marnieres. Anyway, he'll be able to find you easily enough. Verneuil is a small town and I'm certain he managed to find out from you where you go when you're there. I must warn you Charles is a good man, but he likes to chase women."

"I don't know if I'm going to see him again," I responded dryly. "I don't have any plans to . . . but I still don't see what this has to do with your confiding in me."

"Just this. You're very likely to run into Martin Bellec at Marnieres if Charles invites you there, or you might see Martin in a restaurant in Verneuil. In any case, I want to put you on your guard against him and ask you to be as discreet as possible. Martin mustn't learn the address of the rest home where Mrs. Bellanger is staying. For the treatment to be successful, Juliana must be shielded from his harmful influence."

I continued playing the game and said, "If I do find myself in this man's presence, how would he know I'm the taxi driver who picked you up?"

"Don't forget that you passed each other in the driveway. Besides, he often goes to Mimi Tabardieu's. Everyone there will talk about you and your dog. And, finally, as you may be with Charles, Martin won't hesitate to introduce himself and start cross-examining you. He'll ask you dozens of questions and you won't be able to deny that you were



the cab driver. He's very clever and you have to be cautious around him. Just tell him that you drove Mrs. Bellanger and me to the Joan of Arc Hotel. According to what you overheard in the car, Juliana wanted to have a cup of tea and talk with me about certain personal problems before going into the hospital, the address of which wasn't mentioned. Understand?"

"Perfectly. I must say this Mr. Bellec sounds quite dreadful and I hope I don't meet him. . . . But tell me, doesn't his cousin Charles know the address of the place? He might very well give it to him himself."

"No. The only thing Charles might do is tell Martin to ask me."

"I see," I murmured, disconcerted.

I felt like asking if Juliana had been able to telephone Rouen, but I didn't dare. Besides, I was sure Dr. Norton had more than one trick in his bag. The rest home must have had a switchboard and the person who ran it had probably been carefully instructed. . . . "Your number doesn't answer," or "Mr. So and So isn't there at the moment. . . ."

But the doctor was apparently finished with me. He called the waiter, paid the bill and stood up.

To the immense stupefaction of Paul, who was standing at attention near the car, the psychiatrist climbed into the back seat and, as if he didn't know me, ordered, "To the Joan of Arc Hotel, please."

I saw from the doorman's face that I had risen once again in his estimation. If my customer was conducting himself in this way, it must have been because he hadn't gotten what he wanted.

During the drive, Dr. Norton spoke to me further about Martin, injecting this time a certain objectivity. He first of all described Martin as a particularly intelligent person and a man of extreme sensitivity. But then he became less flattering: "Unfortunately Martin has wasted all his talents and suffers from a very serious inferiority complex. He had wanted to marry Juliana in the first place, but she preferred Pierre. At the time, he imagined it was because he didn't have any money. He was the poor relation of the Bellanger family. Three months before his last exam, he abandoned his engineering studies and took off to do his stint in the armed forces. When he came back, he borrowed money to buy a small gas station, then worked like the devil. Today he owns an important farm-machine business, but what is that compared to the factory at Dreux? Now that Pierre's dead, Martin wants Juliana *and* the factory. It's become an obsession with him and he's liable to try anything to get what he wants."

The story was plausible, but I felt only slightly moved by his words. Martin wasn't there to defend himself, and before judging him, I had to hear his side of the story.

By this time we had arrived at Place des Pyramides. As I stopped the cab in front of the Joan of Arc Hotel, I remembered suddenly that I'd forgotten to have the doctor sign my autograph book. I mentioned it to him but he answered, "Not today, Miss Sicard. Next time, if you like. I'll probably need your services again on Monday afternoon. Louis Mercier will phone and confirm it with you Sunday night."

"You'll be staying in Paris, doctor?" I was surprised. "I thought you would be returning to Dijon. Louis told me you have a practice there."

"For the moment I'm staying in Paris. I want to supervise Mrs. Bellanger's treatment myself." This was said a bit distantly, so that, I supposed, I'd understand that this area was none of my business. "It's not that I don't have confidence in my fellow doctors, but I prefer to care for Juliana personally. She needs medicine, but she also needs the presence of a friend."

"You're right. Isolation, away from people you know—that affects the morale. All the same, I imagine she's going to sleep most of the time...."

"Yes...and while she's resting I want to keep her under observation."

One more time I nodded docilely. The psychiatrist altered his serious expression and, after paying me generously for the drive, thanked me for my tact and consideration. "Till Monday. Mercier will call you," he repeated, climbing out of the cab.

As he entered the hotel, I disconnected my meter. I hadn't yet driven as long as I usually did in a day, and I could have tried for a few more fares. But having just about earned enough for the day, I wanted to be alone to puzzle out the day's events. For a moment I considered going into the hotel and talking to Louis, but right away I realized the foolishness of the idea.

First of all, Dr. Norton might still be in the lobby and he'd see me. Secondly, this wasn't the time. I didn't yet have enough of the pieces to extract from

Louis—by frankness or by ruse—the information I wanted. Martin would first have to explain to me his objections to Louis. Why had he called him a shady character? For my part, I was going to write to my father immediately and ask him what had happened with Louis and the Joan of Arc almost a year ago.

I turned to Biscuit. "We're going home, my little pooch."

He jumped up and wagged his tail, quite delighted at the prospect.

I HAD BEEN HOME for barely ten minutes when the telephone rang. I picked up the receiver and recognized, without any feeling at all, the voice that had so often set my heart racing. "Hello, Catherine? It's me, Mark."

Very coldly I answered, "Hello, Mark. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I want to have diner with you tonight."

"Whatever for?"

"To make up with you. We can at least be friends, can't we? We aren't going to have much chance to see each other after this. I'm going to be moving to Lille to work at the plant—Director of Public Relations."

His speech was slurred and I realized he was drunk. For the first time I wondered what I had ever seen in him. Suddenly he was a stranger.

"Congratulations, but dinner's out of the question." There didn't seem much point in giving him any reasons. He simply didn't interest me anymore, and I had no desire to waste time in his company.

"Well . . . ." He was so reluctant to get off the phone, I thought. Then he went on, "Listen, I have some news for you. I'm going to get married . . . but I don't love her. It's you I love, Catherine."

Enough was enough. "Goodbye, Mark," I answered curtly. "I wish you all the best." I hung up with a sigh of relief. I had definitely put Mark behind me.

But my sense of freedom was quickly replaced with an insidious anguish: was I condemned to live my whole life without love? I almost envied a woman like Juliana. Of course, it was horrible to have so brutally lost her husband, but she had had several years of happiness with him, and now two men were vying to make her happy again.

I was getting carried away again. My romanticism still had the upper hand. Maybe there was something else in this conflict between Martin and Dr. Norton, and they were both at fault. But when the doctor insisted that Martin was motivated by monetary interests, was he telling the truth? Or was he himself simply jealous?

I couldn't believe that Martin was as monstrous as the psychiatrist had depicted him. All the same I didn't really trust myself. Martin was charming—and attractive. I hadn't fallen in love with him, of course, but the fact that he pleased me a little too much could have been coloring my judgment.

"I have to be objective about this," I told myself out loud. If I had been blind around Mark, I certainly would have to keep my eyes open around Martin!



## Chapter 5

The next morning I decided to give myself a day off. I used the time to change the oil, then wash and wax my car; I had my hair done; I took Biscuit to eat in his favorite restaurant—a little local spot where the owner, who adored my little dog, always stuffed him outrageously.

Returning home, I started working in my garden. Mrs. Martinon, the elderly woman who occupied the second floor, joined me outside. She sat in the shade of the lilac bushes, her lap full of mending, and started, as usual, to ask me endless questions. I hadn't seen her for three days. What had been going on? Had I met any interesting customers? Had I seen any new places? And how was the young man who used to take me out so often?

After I'd had all I could stand of this sort of inquisitiveness, I found an excuse and took refuge in my



apartment. I tried to force myself not to dwell on the subject of Juliana, Charles and Dr. Norton, and particularly not on Martin. But it was practically impossible, and like a stuck record the confused ideas kept going around in my head.

Three times the phone rang. I didn't answer it, for not only did I not want to accept any jobs, I feared that Charles was trying to get in touch with me. After all, my number was in the phone book, so I was easy to track down. He might be phoning to ask me again if I was going to Verneuil the next day.

I was in the process of telling myself that I didn't have to feel guilty about not calling him as I'd said I would, when Mrs. Martinon's voice carried in through the window: "Catherine, why don't you answer your phone?"

"Because it's my day off," I hollered. "I don't want to see anyone and I want some peace, that's all!"

Vexed, the old woman folded her mending and went back into her apartment.

That evening, after watching television for a while, I went to bed early. Thanks to the classic procedure of counting sheep, I managed to fall asleep with no trouble.

Sunday morning, at the wheel of my now gleaming car, I went to collect my customer from her home in the suburbs. For once she was on time and in good humor. I was in a pretty good mood myself. The day was starting out wonderfully and I couldn't wait to meet Martin at the Old Towers Inn.

After an uneventful ride, a short stop at the Roches School and some shopping in Verneuil, my

customer let me go in front of the Clos Restaurant. "After lunch my son and I are going to a movie. You can pick us up in front of the theater afterward, around four-thirty."

Minutes later, Biscuit at my heels, I was entering the Old Towers Inn. It was scarcely noon, but Martin was already there, standing at the bar and smoking nervously. As soon as he saw me, his face brightened and he strode toward me. "Thanks for coming," he said, taking my hand.

He was looking at me with an openness in which no trace of distrust remained. On the contrary, I could see in his eyes a warm glow, which delighted me. Then he put his arm around my shoulders and led me to the bar.

"What do you want to drink, Catherine? I'll call you Catherine, because as you're in the process of proving to me your friendship, it's impossible to keep calling you Miss Sicard."

"I'll have whatever you're drinking," I answered like an idiot.

He ordered two whiskies and then asked me the question that was tormenting him: "Do you have the address?"

Martin instantly changed; he was now an impatient, no-nonsense man. I realized that if I gave him the address right then, he would have me gulp my whiskey and my lunch at top speed, then he'd leave me there while he dashed off to Paris after Juliana. Having obtained what he wanted from me, he wouldn't have any other reason to see me again.

I realized that I didn't want to let Martin escape,

and driven by a mysterious and irresistible force, I replied audaciously, "I don't have it yet." I added quickly, "But I'll certainly get it tomorrow."

Martin didn't hide his disappointment. "What do you mean? Where did you drop off Juliana and Norton?"

The answer dictated by the psychiatrist sprang to my lips. "At the Joan of Arc Hotel. Mrs. Bellanger wanted to stop for tea and to talk to the doctor before going into the hospital. Unfortunately they didn't mention the address of the place while they were in the cab."

"Then it's all over! I don't see how you can find out tomorrow."

A little dismayed with myself, I continued with my lie: "Dr. Norton told me that he would need my services again on Monday. I'll be very surprised if he doesn't ask me to drive him to the rest home, especially since Mrs. Bellanger asked me to drop in and say hello to her."

"She said that to you? In that case, I'm going to give you a message for her."

"I'm not sure I'll be able to deliver it because Dr. Norton will be with me." And still prodded by a mysterious demon, I continued, "Why don't you come to Paris tomorrow evening? You'll find me at my place around seven. If I haven't returned by then, the key is in the pot of geraniums on the first window at the right."

While I explained how to reach my apartment, I felt suddenly discouraged. What was I hoping for? To win him in two or three hours? Obviously it was only Juliana he was thinking about.

Besides, I felt guilty. Of course, I had every intention of giving him the address of the rest home the next evening, but wasn't the time I spent with Martin until then stolen? An abuse of confidence, that's what I was committing.

The guilt devoured me completely when he told me feelingly, "You're quite a woman, Catherine. I accept your offer with pleasure. Without you, I don't know when I'd ever find Juliana. I tried to talk to Charles yesterday. He's usually so easy to wheedle things out of, but he just wouldn't talk. I keep wondering how Norton managed it."

In mentioning Charles, Martin reawoke my fears of an inopportune meeting. My taxi was parked right in front of the inn, and if Charles wanted to know if I was in Verneuil he'd have no problem. Because I hadn't phoned him as I had said I would, he might suppose that I was in town but simply hadn't wanted to see him. Being a stubborn and sticky fellow, there was a good chance he'd show up unexpectedly. The best thing would be to warn Martin.

I recounted, therefore, everything his cousin had told me in the kitchen at Marnieres. I ended with, "It'll be pretty awkward if he finds us together. He'll also warn Dr. Norton. Don't forget that we're not supposed to know each other."

"Don't worry about that," answered Martin. "Charles left this morning for Paris, where he's having lunch with Richard."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, yesterday when I went to Marnieres to try

to get the address of the rest home out of my cousin, the phone rang at the exact moment I was getting ready to break Charles's face in. It was the eminent psychiatrist. He was calling Charles to arrange to get together with him today at noon at the Joan of Arc. So I grabbed the line and ordered Richard to tell me where I'd find Juliana."

Martin stopped to take a drink of his whiskey and then continued with badly disguised anger, "Norton told me that, for the moment, visiting wasn't recommended. Then I threatened to report him to the police for abduction. He laughed and said it was entirely legal. Juliana had signed a paper stating that she was there of her own free will and that she was leaving everything entirely up to him during the duration of her treatment. He said that he considered my presence actually detrimental to her health and that he'd see how she was in several days."

Martin gave me a wry smile. "You see, I'm up against a wall. But providence put you in my path. Have you decided to help me see this thing out?"

"Oh, yes," I answered fervently.

"Tell me, how was Juliana during the drive?"

"Really tired. I heard her say she was depressed and needed care. But the doctor had given her a shot before we left, and she slept almost the whole way."

Visibly anxious once again, Martin asked, "And did she say anything about me?"

I couldn't lie about that; I didn't have the courage. So I related, as accurately as I could, the dialogue that had taken place in the car between the doctor and Juliana.



Martin was silent for a moment. "Let's have lunch. We'll be able to talk more comfortably at the table," he decreed, swallowing in one gulp the contents of his half-full glass, then led me off, apparently oblivious to the fact that my own whiskey was hardly touched. True, I wasn't wild about the drink, but I was hurt by Martin's total lack of consideration for me.

Without protesting, however, I trailed after him into the dining room, where a table for two had been reserved. Biscuit, whose presence I had completely forgotten, was in the process of rudely visiting one table after another—with a good deal of success, by the way. By the time I called him to me he had tried most of the dishes the inn served. I tied him to the leg of my chair, but I was probably too late to stop him from getting indigestion.

Passively I let Martin choose my lunch for me. My appetite had disappeared by this time and I hardly cared what I ate, so the fact that the meal turned out to be a greasy grilled sausage and a leg of mutton served with overcooked kidney beans didn't faze me.

I was troubled. In concealing from Martin the hospital's address, I had already put myself in the wrong. The image of Juliana getting feebly out of the taxi on Berlioz Street make me shudder suddenly. The poor woman! She wanted so much to talk to Martin, but because of some absurd hope I harbored, I had actually hindered the two of them from getting together.

Martin's voice pulled me back to the present.



"Well! You're lost in thought. What's bothering you?"

"Oh, everything!" I answered, completely disoriented. My lie was bothering me more and more, and real panic was setting in. I didn't even dare to ask Martin the questions that Dr. Norton's words had aroused in my mind. Why hadn't I considered the fact that a few hours stolen from Juliana could possibly have disastrous results? And when I finally did give the address to Martin, he'd go right away to see Juliana, and she'd be bound to tell him that I had dropped her off at Berlioz Street and not at the Joan of Arc Hotel. The result? He'd never forgive me!

Did I dare broach the subject again? Of course I'd be holding myself up to ridicule and, for the moment, he'd be furious. But then, his anger would be quickly tempered by the joy of knowing where Juliana was. It was obviously my only chance to keep Martin's friendship, and who knew? If it turned out that Juliana actually preferred Dr. Norton to him, Martin might in that case turn to me....

I knew that my speculations were just that, but nonetheless I gathered the courage to try to repair my stupid error. "Listen, Martin, there's something I must tell you—"

He silenced me by putting his hand on mine. "I can see how much this business is troubling you. So many points are still obscure even to me. But I have many more of the pieces of the puzzle than you do. Since I have you as an ally, even as a friend, please, let things be for now. Tomorrow you and I will take care of everything—I'll certainly need your help. But

for now just try to relax. Don't think about it anymore and let's just enjoy each other's company. Fate has given us a respite so that we can get to know each other better. You're lovely, fun to be with. . . . Why burden yourself with problems that don't concern you?"

His hand was playing with mine and my confession became stuck in my throat. Becoming bolder, Martin added, "Tomorrow your help will be very precious to me, but today your presence is equally so." He paused, then studying my face, added, "I'd like to take you in my arms and kiss you—"

I started and quickly pulled my hand away, then looked at Martin in astonishment. He smiled. "Did I shock you?"

"No. I just wasn't expecting that kind of suggestion from you."

Instead of pleasing me, his words had made me distrustful. I suspected that his behavior was all part of a scheme. He needed me to help him find Juliana and he wanted to assure himself of my cooperation any way he could.

Suddenly convinced this was the case, I no longer regretted my lie. He wanted to play a game. Well, I would, too!

"You surprise me," he returned, half-serious, half-ironic. "Why shouldn't I tell you that I like you very much? When a man is attracted to a woman, naturally he wants to kiss her. It's a compliment. Obviously I'm not going to pounce on you in the middle of the restaurant or anywhere else; your frozen air is hardly encouraging. Odd . . . when you

arrived earlier I seemed to see something for me glowing in your eyes."

"It's true. I was glad to see you again and to have lunch with you," I acknowledged, slightly embarrassed.

"So what's wrong? Did I disappoint you, or is there someone else in your life?"

"No, there isn't. How about you?"

"It seems I'm a confirmed bachelor. It would take a miracle to change me," he affirmed almost airily.

No doubt the miracle he spoke of was the conquest of Juliana. Then why did he tell me that I pleased him? He would have to pay for that. I was angry, but I knew I couldn't let him see my feelings.

"I'm much the same, you know. I value my independence too much to get tied down. Some of my friends have only one idea: marriage. They took the first guy who came along, and most of them ended up married to a stranger, who was nothing like the man of their dreams."

For a while we philosophized on the problems of marriage. Then, over dessert, Martin asked me suddenly, "What time do you have to meet your customer?"

"At four-thirty in front of the movie theater."

"We've plenty of time, then. Why don't we have coffee at my place?" he proposed. "It's very pleasant there; you'll like it."

I accepted readily. The inn was quite crowded and I found myself craving peace and quiet. Besides, I wanted to see where he lived.

While Martin took care of the bill, I tucked Biscuit

under my arm. Once outside, we got into our own cars, and I followed Martin to his gas station, situated about a mile from Verneuil.

As soon as we arrived, he gave me a quick tour of the garage, the large workshop where cars were repaired and another building filled with farm machinery and vehicles. It looked as though Martin had a prosperous business.

Martin asked the young man working there to park my car in the workshop. "If Charles comes back from Paris early, he's likely to drive by here," he explained to me. "This is on the road from Verneuil to Marnieres and I don't want him to spot your cab." Taking my arm he added, "Now let's go to my place."

Martin's house was fifty yards from the garage, in the middle of a field planted with apple trees and surrounded by a hedge. It was white, with green doors and shutters and tiled roof.

He ushered me into a large room, which I realized instantly I wouldn't have been able to arrange better. Hidden behind an oak bar to the left was a corner kitchen. In front of me was a long table, and to my right some easy chairs faced a beautiful fireplace. Biscuit immediately took over the large sofa. Well-stocked bookshelves covered one wall, and framed photographs, including one of Juliana, sat atop a beautifully carved wooden bureau.

But Martin didn't let me look around for long. He led me to the small kitchen, put some water on to boil, removed a coffee pot from the cupboard and placed the coffee grinder in my hands.

"To work! You have everything you need to make good coffee. Meanwhile I'm going back to the garage for a few minutes. Henry, the fellow you saw at the station, hasn't been working here long and it's the first time he's handled things by himself on a Sunday. I'm going to make sure everything is all right." And without waiting for any protest from me, he disappeared at a lope.

Gradually growing used to Martin's rather abrupt and direct manner, I decided simply to do the task I'd been given.

A short while later, I carried the tray I'd prepared to the low table in front of the fireplace. When Martin returned, I was sitting in an armchair, my nose buried in a local newspaper—anything to make it clear that I had resisted the urge to explore the house.

"Everything's fine at the garage," he said briefly. "While you serve me coffee with double sugar, I'll put on a record."

As the first bars of blues in the purest New Orleans style burst into the room, Martin sat down facing me. "It's nice, isn't it?" He was looking at me in a way that made me feel ill at ease.

"Yes, very," I answered, searching vainly for something else to say. The atmosphere had suddenly become filled with undercurrents. I felt that Martin wanted to kiss me, that he was going to come over and sit next to me. He was just waiting for my consent, and all I had to do was look at him. Even a gesture would have done it.

Lazily I closed my eyes, as if I was totally absorbed

in the music. I heard Martin sigh, then the sound of a little spoon making tinkling noises in a cup. Pretending to return to earth, I opened my eyes.

"A drink? A liqueur?" Martin asked, getting to his feet.

I refused. He poured himself a glass of Calvados and, instead of taking his place in his chair, sat down on the edge of mine. Instinctively I drew away. Yet if he tried anything, I knew I wouldn't resist him.

With a thoughtful air, Martin fixed his gaze on the balloon glass he held between his hands. "Catherine, are you sure Richard Norton will need your taxi tomorrow?" he asked suddenly. "He might very well have said that at the moment and then not get in touch."

Resentment enveloped me. Martin wasn't contemplating kissing me at all! His thoughts were all on Juliana.

"Dr. Norton asked me to keep two hours free for him in the afternoon. Louis Mercier should be calling me tonight to confirm it," I assured him shortly.

Martin bounded from his seat, set his glass on the bureau and pulled an address book out of his pocket. "It just occurred to me that I'd better write down your address and phone number."

He noted conscientiously the information I gave him, then came back and sat next to me, his right arm draped around my shoulders. "I'll be at your house tomorrow night at seven. It'll be too late to go to the hospital, but I'll have the pleasure of taking you out for dinner, all right? Maybe you know of a



nice restaurant in your area, and also a hotel . . . or will your apartment be big enough to put me up?"

Was he only baiting me? I felt quite confused by his last suggestion, and the contact of his hand on my shoulder was paralyzing me. "We'll see about all the details tomorrow night," I answered, drawing away.

I lit a cigarette. At the first puff I felt better and took advantage of the fact by asking him why he had called Louis a shady character.

He smiled and shrugged. "Maybe I exaggerated a little. It's something that happened about three months before Pierre Bellanger's accident. Charles used to go to Paris regularly, where he lost incredible sums of money at the racetrack. Like everyone in the Bellanger family, he stayed at the Joan of Arc, but he was the only one who borrowed money from the manager, who also did some gambling at the time. I don't know what happened exactly. All I know is that Mercier nearly managed to lose his job for lending Charles money that wasn't his own. Pierre and Juliana paid it all back, thereby stopping the scandal. I don't have any other details about the affair."

"Poor Louis! But I'm sure that otherwise he's basically an honest man!"

"Probably," conceded Martin. "If he hadn't been I'm sure he wouldn't have been kept on at the Joan of Arc. Charles may have given him an incredible story about needing the money only for an hour or two—who knows? Mercier let himself be taken advantage of, and he himself 'borrowed' the money from the hotel coffers."

"Does Charles still gamble?"

"I don't think so. Pierre was tired of paying out insane amounts for his brother, so he had him sign a note of debt, which he deposited with a notary. Charles doesn't own anything except half of Marnieres. That was the only way Pierre could keep him from gambling. And he didn't intend to buy it back from his brother, either. If he had, Charles would have only one or two acres of land today."

"But what does he live on?"

"Juliana still gives him the income that Pierre did. In principle he should get only half the revenue from the farm, but in reality he gets much more."

I understood now why Martin spoke of his cousin as a parasite. "So, then, apart from gambling and women, he doesn't do anything."

"Exactly," answered Martin, getting up. He walked up and down the room, then said brusquely, "Wait for me a minute. I have to see to something in the garden."

He was gone for several minutes, during which time I tried to envision optimistically the near future. But the weight of my lie sobered me. What had I gained by it? Unspeakable anguish and not even a kiss!

Martin returned with his arms full of lilacs and a slightly embarrassed smile on his lips—the smile of someone who is happy and confused at the same time.

I was glued to the spot. He actually thought enough of me to give me this marvelous armful of flowers! It was a gesture that touched me to the

heart. Optimism flooded back into my system; if he paid this kind of attention to me, I could be permitted to hope.

He moved toward me and, without giving me any time to tell him how much I appreciated his gesture, told me very quickly as he set the flowers on the table, "Since Juliana asked you to visit her tomorrow at the hospital, would you take her these lilacs? She loves them so much! Of course, you can't say they came from here because Richard will be present, but they'll remind her of me."

He must've noticed my joyous smile change into a ridiculous grimace. "I also picked some for you," he added quickly.

"Thank you, but you shouldn't have," I said lightly. My disappointment was severe and the lilacs gave me no pleasure whatsoever.

"Why? Don't you like flowers?" he asked with fake surprise. I knew he was teasing me.

"I like them a lot," I snapped, not bothering to conceal my ill temper. Suddenly realizing that I must have sounded like a spoiled child, I went on, "Dr. Norton will surely notice that these lilacs came from the country and not from a florist. He'll suspect that I came to Verneuil today. If he questions me, what should I say?"

Martin thought for a moment. "Tell him you drove your customer to the Roches School. You can add that, wanting to avoid Charles, you didn't eat in Verneuil, but at an inn in the country. But don't forget you're not supposed to know that Charles went to Paris today. If Norton asks you why you're avoid-

ing Charles, tell him frankly that you don't share Charles's feelings and that you'd already tried to explain that to him at Marnieres. Norton knows Charles well and won't be surprised."

I acquiesced without enthusiasm. I wasn't used to lying and I found it exhausting. And it certainly had its consequences....

Looking at me carefully, Martin asked softly, "What's still not going right, my little Catherine?"

"There's a hitch: your cousin Charles might very well learn that you had lunch at the Old Towers Inn with a brown-haired woman who has a little dog."

"That's been taken care of. The owners of the place are friends of mine and I've already asked them to tell Charles that I had lunch quickly and by myself. There were two or three others there that know me, but Charles wouldn't know who they were. If he makes any inquiries, it'll be of the owners. Tomorrow evening, when I have the address of the hospital, it won't matter anymore if he learns about our being together. I'm going to return to the Old Towers shortly, by the way, to play a game of dominoes and have supper. If my cousin drops by then, all very well and good."

"All right," I said resignedly. "Now I must go. I don't dare keep my customer waiting."

Martin held out his hand to help me to my feet and I took it mechanically. I was literally pulled out of my chair and found myself against his chest. "Let's have a kiss before we part," he murmured in my ear. He must have felt me instinctively stiffen. "Like brother and sister, of course," he added, kissing me loudly on the cheek.

It took me several seconds to realize that he had let me go and that I was standing, arms dangling, planted to the floor like an idiot—the idiot I hadn't stopped being since I'd met him.

Now he stood at the door, a bouquet of lilacs in each hand, watching me. Did he enjoy making me feel foolish?

With great dignity I called Biscuit, who was still stretched out on the couch, and started in the direction of the garage. While I got in behind the wheel of my car, Martin put the lilacs in the trunk. Then he walked over to the car window, which I lowered.

"Till tomorrow," he said, "seven o'clock. The key is in the pot of geraniums on the first window to the right. You'll give me the address of the hospital and you and I will have the joy of meeting again. Agreed?"

And before I had time to answer him, his lips were on mine. "Delicious," he declared, stepping back quickly.

He stood in the middle of the road and gestured me to pull out. I moved off slowly; I didn't want to display any jerky driving that would betray the turmoil of my emotions. As I drove cautiously past him he said again, "Till tomorrow!" Then he added, "And if you're able to, tell Juliana how much I think of her."

Infuriating man! I stepped angrily on the accelerator. I'd had enough of catering to other people's interests and passions!

## Chapter 6

It was eight o'clock when I pulled up in front of my house. I had no reason to complain: anyone who travels the highways west of Paris on a Sunday in spring, especially near the end of the day, would know that I had made excellent time.

Despite the ease with which I'd made the drive, I was exhausted and my nerves were jangled. My customer had babbled mindlessly for almost the entire trip, and coupled with the disconcerting afternoon with Martin, I found I could now barely function.

Putting my car in the garage, I resolved to go to bed as soon as I'd fed Biscuit. Nothing fancy for him tonight, I thought. He'd have to settle for a can of dog food....

I crossed the little yard, thinking that I should put both bouquets of lilacs in water, when I heard the gate that opened onto the street squeak. I turned



around, expecting to see one of the other occupants of the house, and found myself face to face with Richard Norton.

"Good evening, Miss Sicard. So you've finally returned!" he said, leaning nearer to smell the lilacs. He straightened and added, "I've dropped by three times during the past hour. An elderly woman here told me that you had probably gone to Verneuil as you do each Sunday. I suppose that's where you got the lilacs."

I silently cursed Mrs. Martinon's loose tongue and retorted without becoming flustered that I had picked the flowers at an inn near Laigle. Happily I knew of such an inn, for I had twice driven my customer there. "But that's beside the point," I added. "I'm sure you've not come all the way here to talk to me about inns and lilacs. By the way, did Louis Mercier give you my address?"

"Certainly not!" he exclaimed. "I remembered your address from the commercial card posted in plain sight in your taxi."

At that moment a window opened and Mrs. Martinon's voice called, "Is that you, Catherine? Did you have a good day? Oh, pardon me! You're not alone...."

If Mrs. Martinon hadn't been so nosy, I wouldn't have invited Dr. Norton to come in. But how could we talk, or rather how could I listen to the doctor talk, with an audience?

"Good evening, Mrs. Martinon. I'll talk to you tomorrow. I'm very busy right now," I answered dryly. Then I said to Dr. Norton, "We'd better go

inside. We can't stay here in the middle of the yard, and these lilacs are becoming a nuisance."

The psychiatrist accepted my suggestion and offered, "Give me the flowers. Then you'll be able to open the door more easily."

I wondered what his reaction would be if he knew the truth about where the lilacs had come from and that half of them had been picked for Juliana.

I invited him to sit in an armchair in the living room, then went to put the flowers in the bathtub. When I returned I closed the curtains and asked my guest if he wanted some Scotch. I still had half a bottle that I'd bought for Mark's use. Although I hardly ever drank the stuff myself, this evening I decided I badly needed some sort of a pick-me-up.

While I made the drinks, Dr. Norton said, "Your upstairs neighbor is most helpful; if she hadn't assured me you'd be back, I wouldn't be having the pleasure of this drink in your company."

*Yes, dear helpful Mrs. Martinon,* I thought savagely. Aloud I said, smiling, "But you still haven't told me the reason for your visit."

The doctor took a drink of his Scotch, crossed his legs and, looking at me with his eyes half-closed, said, "Since this morning I've tried to phone you several times. When I got no answer, I concluded that you'd gone to Verneuil. I didn't have anything special to do this evening so I decided to drop by to make sure you hadn't had any troublesome encounters during your trip—and also to invite you to have dinner with me."

I was surprised—and a little frightened. Such sur-

veillance seemed highly suspicious. I became certain that the doctor's attitude regarding the subject of Juliana, Charles and Martin wasn't normal, and wanting to hide my suspicions, I forced myself to answer calmly, "I recall that you already told me I shouldn't see Charles Bellanger. I did everything I could, by the way, to avoid him. I even told him on Friday that my regular customer wasn't going to Verneuil this week. I had lunch near Laigle, principally so that I wouldn't run the risk of finding myself face to face with him in one of the restaurants in Verneuil."

"You acted wisely," approved Norton. "Some women seem to do the most illogical things . . . but you certainly aren't one of them. In your place I don't know if I could have resisted the temptation to seek out Martin Bellec, for example. Everything I confided to you the other night at the Cascade should have stirred your imagination, let's say romantically, and aroused in you the desire to find out more about this mysterious person."

He had avoided telling me that Charles had had lunch with him in Paris. Obviously what he feared most was that I had come across Martin. As his gaze scrutinized me with a sharpness that made me shiver, I felt an undefinable evil. . . .

At that moment Biscuit jumped onto my lap. My little dog's tail-wagging presence helped me overcome the fear that had been taking hold of me. "If I felt the need to poke into the private lives of my customers, I'd better change jobs and be a private detective," I answered as coldly as I could. "Your

entanglements with the Bellangers leave me totally indifferent. Mrs. Bellanger is the only one who interests me, and that's because she's ill and I sympathize with her. By the way, how is she?"

"As well as can be expected," replied the psychiatrist. "I think she'll be better in a few weeks."

"So it wasn't a serious breakdown," I observed. "And I suppose she'll improve greatly without Martin Bellec's bad influence."

"Well, certainly her being away from him will help her to get better. In ten to twelve days she can see him if she feels like it, but not before."

I shrugged noncommittally as if these details bored me. "You're the doctor. You're a better judge than I of Mrs. Bellanger's health."

He smiled in apparent satisfaction. "And now, where are we going to have dinner? I know of an excellent restaurant...."

To be near him for any longer was more than I could bear. I was too frightened I'd make a mistake. This man had a diabolical cleverness, and floundering around as I was in a tangle of lies, I ran the risk of contradicting myself sooner or later.

I managed to assume an expression of heartfelt apology. "You'll have to excuse me. I'm exhausted tonight. Another time it'll be a pleasure...."

He insisted. I refused again and at last he gave in. "I suppose I'll have to dine alone, then."

"You won't be any worse off for it. I'd be pitiful company tonight."

Dr. Norton emptied his glass and stood up. "Where can I find a taxi near here? It's a bit odd ask-

ing *you* that, but since there's no question of going out in yours...."

I looked at my watch: it was nearly nine. "I'm going to phone a colleague who lives at the end of the street. He works nights and I just might have time to catch him before he leaves."

I was in luck, and my comrade promised to be in front of my house in five minutes. When I had hung up, I asked the doctor, "Will you still need me tomorrow?"

"Definitely. I'm counting on you at two-thirty in front of the Joan of Arc. I have some shopping to do in Paris, but you'll be free by six o'clock."

"Will we be going to the hospital?"

"No. I plan to go there in the morning. That's why I won't need you before lunch. I'll hail a cab to take me there, since I don't see any need in having you wait all morning on Berlioz Street or for you to bother with a single run. But why the question?"

"Because I would love to give half my lilacs to Mrs. Bellanger. Could you give them to her for me?"

The doctor didn't seem at all happy with the idea, but I didn't pay any attention to him. "I'm going to wrap them up," I continued. "Even if you don't go straight back to your hotel to put them in water they'll be all right."

Without waiting for an answer I hurried into the bathroom and wrapped up half of the flowers. When I returned to the living room a light beep of a horn announced the arrival of my colleague at the door. "I'll see you out," I told Dr. Norton.

Without saying a word, he followed me to the car



and got in. I said good evening to the driver then gently put the lilacs on the seat beside the doctor. "I'm certain Mrs. Bellanger will be pleased to get these flowers," I said. "You promise to give them to her for me?"

"It's a promise," he said resignedly. "Goodbye, Miss Sicard. See you tomorrow."

And he leaned forward to tell the driver, "To the Joan of Arc Hotel, please."

I closed the gate and went back into the house. Rather put out that his dinner was late, Biscuit was waiting impatiently for me in the kitchen. I spooned out some canned dog food, which Biscuit was too hungry to turn his nose up at, and made myself a sandwich.

While I ate, I thought about the following day. It was going to be a difficult one, but at least I'd be able to make up for my wrongs to Martin. I sincerely hoped Dr. Norton would give the lilacs to Juliana. When Martin saw them Tuesday morning at the bedside of his beloved, he would perhaps hate me less when he found out I had delayed in giving him the address.

After eating, I took Biscuit outside for a few minutes. As soon as we were back, he jumped onto the bed, and with a heavy heart, I got in myself. It took me a long time to fall asleep, because I kept trying vainly to understand why Martin was playing with me. And he was playing with me, I knew. Martin realized I was attracted to him, and in order to get the hospital's address, he figured that he should nurture my feelings.



Maybe I should have been straight with him, I thought. But before I fell into a deep sleep, I convinced myself that in another day all this would be over....

MONDAY STARTED BADLY. My alarm jangled me rudely out of a troubled sleep, the only items in my mailbox were bills, and there wasn't a grain of coffee or a drop of milk in the kitchen.

Just as I was preparing to go out for breakfast at the café on the corner, the phone rang. It was the doorman at the Bristol Hotel, offering me a fare for the day. As I was scheduled to meet Dr. Norton at two-thirty, I had to refuse. It was unfortunate, because the sum offered for the run was high, and despite the money I'd made Friday and Sunday, the week hadn't been the greatest monetary success. My funds were low, especially after taking into consideration the bill the tax office had sent me. There was only one solution: go to work as quickly as possible.

Sacrificing my breakfast, I made my bed, tidied the apartment a little and arranged my lilacs in a vase. If Martin arrived that evening before I did, I wanted him to find the apartment in good shape. All the while Biscuit showed his displeasure at missing his morning milk by whining constantly at me.

"Too bad, old chap," I told him. "We'll have a break around noon, so you'll have to wait until then."

The morning passed very slowly, and the customers were grouchy, every one of them complaining about the high cost of living. I was just plain

worried—apprehensive about my afternoon with Dr. Norton and my evening with Martin.

Around one I treated myself to a steak with French fries and a carafe of Beaujolais. Biscuit charmed the more gullible restaurant patrons and fared quite well for himself.

At two-twenty I stopped in front of the Joan of Arc. I entered the lobby to let Dr. Norton know I had arrived and also to chat a little with Louis, but the latter wasn't around. A little disappointed, I returned to the cab. The doctor joined me five minutes later.

After a barely civil greeting, he asked me to drive him to an address on Saint Germain Boulevard. His voice hadn't an ounce of friendliness, but I pretended not to notice.

"How's Mrs. Bellanger today?" I asked him casually. "Did she like my lilacs?"

"She's as well as can be expected," answered the doctor vaguely. "She was grateful for your gesture and told me to thank you." And making it clear our conversation should stop there, he pulled a newspaper out of his briefcase and started reading.

The traffic was relatively light and I soon arrived at our destination. Opening the car door, he looked at his watch and said, "I hope you can find a parking place not too far away. Let's meet here in . . . let's see . . . twenty minutes."

As he entered the building, a car that was parked along the curb just in front of me had the excellent grace to pull out. I quickly grabbed the space.

I peered at the building where the psychiatrist had

disappeared. Was he paying a house call to a patient? Twenty minutes was a short time for a consultation. Besides, the plaques on each side of the door seemed to indicate that the building had more of a commercial character.

Motivated by curiosity, I got out to look more closely at the list of the building's occupants. At the entrance, I learned that the place was occupied by a notary, a mining company, a research firm and a handful of other small companies of which only the initials were indicated. Unenlightened, I climbed back into the taxi.

When Dr. Norton returned, I noticed only that his briefcase was definitely fuller than it had been before. Still oddly uncommunicative, he had me pull up in front of various stores, and his packages started piling up. He bought everything: clothes, shoes, drugstore items, and even some silverware from a restaurant-supply house.

"You must be setting up house!" I couldn't resist saying when he asked me to take him to a linen shop.

"I need a lot of things for my clinic," he explained tightly.

I didn't push it. I preferred his silence to his subtle questioning. Besides, I was becoming more and more preoccupied with the evening ahead with Martin. Occasionally, just thinking about it, my heart would start beating rapidly. Two or three times I almost hit another car, and it was with immense relief that I finally dropped my passenger at the Joan of Arc. I had to admit that his presence in back of

me, his eyes, which I could feel boring into my neck, had contributed greatly to my nervous state. Naturally he had noticed it. "You're not at your best today, Miss Sicard," he had observed.

"It's the traffic," I answered. "Sometimes it gets to me. I swear it's getting worse and worse every day. You have to be made of steel to keep your cool."

While the doorman of the hotel and a porter took charge of the packages, Dr. Norton paid me, then leaned forward to pat Biscuit. "See you later, little dog," he said. To me he added, "I don't know when we'll meet again, Miss Sicard. I won't be needing a taxi during the day anymore, but if I ever do, I'll call you."

"Thank you. Perhaps we'll run into each other some Sunday at Verneuil—when Mrs. Bellanger is better . . . and if you're still taking care of her," I said treacherously.

"It's possible. I hope so. Goodbye, Miss Sicard." He gave Biscuit a last pat and left.

Despite his doubts I was convinced that he hadn't seen the last of me. I regretted that I'd forgotten to have him sign my autograph book, because unfortunately the next time I saw him he would probably be much less inclined to write in it. It wasn't going to take him long to learn that I had given the address of the hospital to Martin.

I disconnected my meter and headed for home. It was already seven and Martin would just be arriving at my place.

It took me more than half an hour to get there, and sure enough, the white Alfa Romeo was parked

in front of the gate. I pulled up behind it and hurried toward the house, without answering Mrs. Martinon, who called from her window, "There's a young man in your apartment, Catherine. He went right to the pot of geraniums and . . ."

I didn't hear the rest. In moments I was in the living room, my hands in Martin's. "The address is number 32 Berlioz Street," I said, out of breath. I didn't want to lie to him anymore. Between us everything had to be straight and clear.

"Bravo, thank you!" he answered, pulling me against him. "Tomorrow morning I'll visit Juliana. Until then we have the whole evening to spend together. I'm indebted to you and I owe you an evening out. So tonight, your wish is my command."

His lips were already touching mine and I turned my head abruptly. It wasn't to be paid in one manner or another that I had given him the address. I actually felt humiliated.

I managed to disentangle myself from his embrace without showing my rancor. My escape, executed with a smile, could have passed for coquetry. "Sit down," I ordered. "The rules of hospitality oblige me to offer you a drink."

"Great," he said.

A few minutes later we were sitting comfortably face to face and sipping a light white Burgundy wine, of which I had stocked several bottles. Martin rolled the liquid around his tongue like a connoisseur, then looked pointedly at my lilacs, which were already starting to wilt.

"Now tell me, did you see Juliana? Did she like



the flowers? Tell me everything. Especially how she is."

The questions poured out and his hand trembled impatiently. Again I was stymied. Rearranging the facts a little, I said, "I'm afraid I didn't see her. Dr. Norton has refused to let her have any visitors for ten days. But when I drove him to the hospital he offered to take the lilacs in to her."

Martin's face hardened. "No visitors for ten days! We'll see about that tomorrow morning," he muttered direly. "What did the good doctor tell you about Juliana's health?"

"He said she's 'as well as can be expected.' Also that she was very happy with the flowers and thanked me."

"Of course Richard asked you where you got them?"

"Yes, and I said, as we'd decided, that I'd picked them at an inn near Laigle."

"Did he stay long at the hospital? I assume you didn't have to wait for him all afternoon?"

"His visit lasted about a quarter of an hour. After that he did some shopping in Paris."

This mixture of lies and truths was enormously exhausting. My answers started to become more and more laconic. Seeing that his questions wouldn't help him learn anything new, Martin poured us both a second glass of wine and said gravely, "In a short time, Catherine, you'll know the importance of the service you've just done in finding out where Juliana is. Believe me, I'll always be grateful. You're quite a woman—"



Terribly embarrassed, I interrupted him. "Please, Martin, don't talk about it anymore. Tomorrow you'll be rejoining Mrs. Bellanger. I hope that you'll get the situation cleared up and that everything will work out for you." I stopped. The words were choking me. Tomorrow Martin would be gone from my life.

He was looking at me in surprise and puzzlement. "You look done in, Catherine."

"That's how I feel. One of these days I'm going to have a nervous breakdown, too. You can't imagine what tension is like until you've driven the streets of Paris all day!" I added with an ironic bitterness, "At least I have the address of a place where I can go for help."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Martin. "You have to fight back. Look . . . I know a Russian restaurant in the Latin Quarter. It's not the Ritz, but it has a great atmosphere—a few musicians, a nice clientele, good food and excellent vodka. Come on! I'll drive you in my car. For once you'll have your own chauffeur."

How could I have possibly resisted the temptation to spend such an evening with a man like Martin? I realized that this evening wouldn't have a tomorrow, but a few stolen hours with him beat watching television. I accepted and begged him to give me a few minutes. "Just time to change my dress; I won't be three minutes."

"Okay, three minutes for the sake of female vanity!" he answered laughingly. "But really, you needn't rush. No one eats early at this restaurant."

Just as I was entering the bathroom he called, "By

the way, Catherine, did you get a hotel room for me? Usually I stay at the Joan of Arc, but under the circumstances I don't want to run into Richard Norton."

"Oh dear, I confess I completely forgot about it. But I can phone right away. I know a hotel near Maillot."

"That area's a little noisy for someone from the country," he said with a grimace. "Look. It's quieter here and I can sleep on the couch. That'll be much simpler." At my look of distress he added, "I promise I won't bother you. I'm a very discreet man, you'll see. I must confess that while I was waiting for you I checked out your apartment. I know where your bedroom is, but I won't try to force the door."

"You'd be poorly received," I affirmed coldly. I headed toward the closet, coming back with some sheets and blankets, which I dropped on his lap. "If you want to sleep here, well, you'd better make up a bed. I don't have time if I'm to get ready."

"With pleasure!" he retorted. "I'm used to it. Bachelors know how to do these things, you know!"

My anger left me all at once and I contritely offered to help him.

"Don't bother. I'd rather you just worried about changing."

I didn't insist and went into the bathroom. I peered at my face in the mirror. Who was this woman who could lie so brazenly? I had always believed myself to be honest, yet for several days I'd been anything but. Usually so balanced, I was acting like a lunatic. Previously my feelings had been clear and I had easily taken stock of things, but now...!

After splashing my face with cold water, I concluded that I shouldn't keep torturing myself. I had only one more evening to live in this cauldron of sensations. Tomorrow Martin would return to Juliana. He would learn from her that I had lied on Sunday when I'd pretended not to know the address of the hospital. Then he'd never want to see me again.

As for me, I'd go back to my daily routine. The stranger I had been for several days, capable of the worst and the best, enlivened by new feelings and by unsuspected emotions, would once again become the well-behaved little girl, respected but alone. The strong wind that had carried me into an enchanted world would die down to a calm breeze—a breeze that would never take me anywhere....

## Chapter 7

"Wake up! On your feet! Breakfast is served—in the kitchen, of course."

I cautiously opened one eye. Martin pushed back the shutters and sunlight flooded through the windows. Still half-asleep, I managed to confirm that Martin was dressed and shaved. I groaned and turned over in bed, asking, "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock, and it's a gorgeous day."

Biscuit agreed with me that it was too early to get up. He stretched, yawned and curled up again with a sigh.

"Five minutes," I begged. "Give me five minutes to wake up."

"All right," conceded Martin. "But if you take ten, I'll come in here and drag you out of bed." With these words he left the room.

Closing my eyes once again, I relived the previous

evening. The Russian restaurant, with its delicious food and charming atmosphere, then the nightclub where we had danced and talked till three in the morning. We'd raced back at top speed in the Alfa Romeo, and we'd scarcely entered the house when we were in each other's arms. I could still taste the kisses we'd shared and could hear Martin's voice saying a little hoarsely, "Let's stay with each other tonight...."

To have gotten on my high horse, to have played the virginal heroine would have been unwarranted on my part. Martin was trying his luck. It was part of his role as a man; besides, I had too easily agreed to put him up. So at that point I had firmly declared, "You're going to sleep here on the couch, and I'm going to sleep in my room."

He had accepted this decision with a total lack of protest that had at first surprised me. Then I realized with a brutal jolt that the desire he had just shown me wasn't real. It was a sort of formality, not disagreeable, of course, but at the same time not something he actually wanted. I realized, too, as I looked back, that even if I had forgotten Juliana, he hadn't stopped thinking of her for a moment....

I jumped out of bed. The five minutes were up. I was about to live my last half hour with Martin, and I wanted, despite everything, to savor each second.

The kitchen smelled like fresh coffee and hot rolls. Everything was ready: the table was set; the radio was playing softly; even Biscuit's bowl had been filled with milk.

At my look of amazement Martin explained,

"There wasn't anything to eat, and God knows I hunted in all the cupboards, so I went out and bought everything we needed. I brought the paper, too."

I remembered that the day before I had left home without any breakfast, and that I had forgotten to buy any milk or coffee. Slightly embarrassed I apologized, then tucked into the rolls as though I hadn't eaten in days. Martin joined me.

After his first cigarette and some light conversation, Martin nervously consulted his watch. "I think I can leave for the hospital now. Norton surely won't be there at nine in the morning, and I'll be able to see Juliana. I don't know when you and I will see each other again, but it'll be soon, I hope. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course," I murmured. I was willing to see him again, but he certainly wouldn't be interested after he visited Juliana. I felt my smile change into almost a grimace.

Martin raised his eyebrows and watched me with an ironically affectionate expression on his face. "You don't trust me. You think I'm going to drop you, that I'll never get in touch," he said, putting his hand on mine. "You're an idiot, Catherine. On the contrary, I've discovered in you a very special woman. You're not like anyone else I know, and you think I'm going to go around burning my bridges? I've got plans—"

Oh no! His words were more than I could bear. I stood up abruptly. "Let's continue this conversation later. Phone me when you feel like it, but for now, you'd better go to the hospital."



Surprised, he stood up, as well. "What's wrong? You're really upset about something, Catherine."

I nervously dropped my eyes. "No. It's just that I didn't sleep long enough; I need eight hours."

"Then go back to bed. I'll phone you around noon to tell you how everything went," he said consolingly. Holding out his arms he moved toward me.

I couldn't let him kiss me. With an apparently awkward gesture I knocked over the coffee pot, which broke on the floor. I stooped to pick up the pieces, cutting off his intentions.

A little put out, he stood without moving for an instant, then bent to help me.

"Leave me alone, please," I said sharply. "Just call me later."

Once again he hadn't been able to get close to me.

"I hope that by noon you're in a better mood!" he said as he left, slamming the door on his way out.

I dissolved into tears. I must have presented a desolate picture, kneeling on the floor with pieces of the coffee pot in each hand. As if he understood my distress, Biscuit came up to me and wagged his tail. I pushed him away. "You bother me, too! Get out of here!" It was unfair and cruel of me, and I immediately regretted my action.

I stood up painfully. Slowly, still in tears, I tidied the kitchen a little, set the dishes in the sink and went back to bed. To sleep, to forget—I hoped only for that.

Without holding a grudge, Biscuit snuggled into his usual place. At least he loved me. Except for my parents, he was the only one who did. I vowed I'd

never again fall for men with whom there was no future. Mark had seriously let me down and then Martin had come along, lighting up my life with the speed of the touch of a magic wand. I liked everything about him—his directness, his dash, his intelligence, his looks. . . . But fate is so unfair! It always seems that when you finally do meet the man of your dreams, he isn't free or else he doesn't share your feelings. Someone is always in there ahead of you to snap him up.

Juliana Bellanger was ten times more beautiful than I was, and more intelligent, too. I certainly didn't have the brains to be a chemical engineer—far from it! I lost out on all counts.

I sighed, my heart heavy as I imagined Juliana and Martin holding each other close in the hospital on Berlioz Street. And it was all thanks to me.

I GOT UP a little after eleven. I hadn't totally recuperated but I felt capable at least of making a few decisions. And one of them was that I must get away from Paris for a while. I would leave that day for my parents' place on the Mediterranean.

Perhaps a week or ten days out of the city would clear my mind. I knew it wasn't sensible to spend too much time off work, especially after the tax bill I'd received. My finances, like the government's, were always operating at a deficit.

My dad, who had a horror of debts, would surely lend me a little money. It wouldn't be the first time, and I always repaid him.

Suddenly unable to bear the thought of Paris,

Verneuil and especially my apartment any longer, I showered and dressed hurriedly. Why not leave immediately? I was throwing some clothes into my suitcase when Mrs. Martinon walked in without knocking. "There isn't any mail in your box this morning, Catherine. Oh, are you leaving? Perhaps with the young man who stayed here last night?"

Quelling an urge to ask her to leave, I answered calmly, "I'm simply going to my parents', and Biscuit is the only one coming with me. I've decided to take my vacation now instead of in July or August, that's all." And because she just stood there waiting for me to add a word about Martin, I pushed her gently outside. "Excuse me, Mrs. Martinon. I have a million things to do before I leave. I'll leave my keys with you as usual and I'll come say goodbye later."

She didn't dare persist. If her curiosity was unsatisfied, at least she had one compensation: she'd be able to watch television every evening in my apartment—something I let her do whenever I went out of town.

Five minutes later, still fighting with my suitcase, I heard the door open again. Biscuit didn't bark, but ran toward the door wagging his tail, so I figured it must be Mrs. Martinon again. Without bothering to look up, I asked impatiently, "Now what? I told you I'd come up when I'd finished."

"There are a few questions I want to ask you," said a menacing male voice.

I turned around and found myself face to face with Martin, a tight and angry expression on his face. His sudden appearance had been the last thing

I'd expected. I mean, he'd found his Juliana, so why should he want to see me?

I didn't care, however, for the way he was looking at me; but instead of acting meek and worried I snapped aggressively, "Questions and more questions! The address was correct, wasn't it?"

"Yes, perfectly," he answered sarcastically. "But Juliana wasn't there."

The breath caught in my throat and all that came out of my mouth was a strangled gurgle.

"You seem surprised," he continued almost sweetly.

"I... I am!" I stammered. "How was I supposed to know?"

With an angry gesture he stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Exactly. How were you supposed to know?" he grated. "So why the packed bags? Going somewhere? There wasn't any mention of such a plan earlier." His eyes darkened and his jaw tightened at the same moment. He reached out and gripped my shoulders—hard. Then he shook me until I thought surely my head would become disengaged from my neck and topple onto the floor. Suddenly he released me and I staggered backward.

How dared he bully me that way, was my first thought. I saw red and seized the first thing that came to hand—an ashtray—and threw it. Luckily for Martin, he had good reflexes, because my aim was accurate. He ducked and the ashtray flew over his head and crashed against the wall.

Realizing suddenly that I might have seriously injured him, I stood frozen, momentarily, in shock.

Then Martin's hands seized my wrists in a vicelike grip.

"Before you kill me, would you mind explaining what you've been up to behind my back? Norton took Juliana out of the hospital on Sunday afternoon at five. Since then he hasn't been back once. Both the director and the secretary told me this and they were not lying. They hadn't cashed Norton's check yet, and the number of the room Juliana occupied was on it. There's been another woman in that room since Monday morning—I saw proof of that. So talk. I'm listening."

There was only one thing I could do: tell him the whole truth. So I did, overcome with guilt, anger and also regret. "And if you don't believe me," I concluded wearily, "let's go see Dr. Norton."

Martin, who had let me talk without interruption, sighed deeply and started pacing the room like a caged bear. "You idiot!" he said, coming to a stop in front of me. "Do you realize what you've done? Your story is so stupid I have to believe it." He paused, then went on, "In any case it won't be easy to check with the doctor. After leaving the hospital I went over to Joan of Arc Hotel. Norton checked out of there last night." Distraught, he threw himself into an armchair and murmured, "Oh, my God, where can Juliana be?"

Ready to sacrifice anything to try to buy back what I had lost, I assured him, "We'll find her. Dr. Norton has probably sent her with Charles to his own clinic in Dijon, where he'll be joining them. You told me last night during dinner that your

cousin hasn't been seen at Marnieres since Sunday morning."

"Yes, that's probably what happened, and it's all your fault," he threw at me in a voice full of reproach. "I phoned Marnieres earlier. Tita pretends she doesn't know where Charles is. She's managed to learn a few words of French, and she repeats them tirelessly: 'Señor Bellanger on trip. Don't know where.' It makes sense that all three of them would be in Dijon."

Rising to his feet, Martin announced, "I'm going there right away. The more time that goes by, the more Juliana will be influenced by the drugs Norton's no doubt pumping into her. When you delayed giving me the address, did you ever think of that?"

"No, I didn't," I confessed with bowed head and tears in my eyes. "I'm so very sorry. Please forgive me." And from the bottom of my heart I added, "I want so much to be able to help, to do something...."

For the first time since he'd returned he looked at me without anger. His eyes weren't exactly tender, but they had lost their expression of almost hatred that was tearing me apart.

"Are your parents waiting for you? Did you let them know you were coming?" he demanded briefly.

"No. I'd just decided to go."

"Then can you put off the trip for a couple of days?"

"Of course," I assured him hastily. Did he want



me to accompany him to Dijon? I didn't dare believe it, with good reason.

"Listen to me carefully," he said. "Let's say that Charles drove Juliana to Dijon on Sunday afternoon, and then Norton took the train and joined them last night. I found out there's a train that gets there at midnight. In that case, it's possible my cousin might go back to Marnieres today or tomorrow. I can't think of any reason that Norton might need him at the clinic. Are you with me?"

"Uh-huh."

"Then," continued Martin, "returning to Marnieres, Charles finds out that I'm absent. That's fine by him, because he doesn't want to see me. And just so he'd think he was rid of me for a while, I phoned the manager of my garage and told him I was going to Germany for two weeks. The whole district will know about it in a few hours. My business often takes me away, so nothing will seem abnormal about that."

He stopped to light a cigarette and then continued, "My hypothesis about Charles's returning to Marnieres might be correct. For that reason we can't ignore it. Now here's what I want you to do. You're going to telephone him there tonight or even tomorrow if necessary. If he's at the farm, he'll certainly talk to you—I haven't forgotten that he has a 'thing' for you. When you've made contact with him, arrange to meet him here tomorrow evening at eight. I'm sure he'll be more than happy to take you out to dinner."

"But if you're in Dijon, what's the point?" I

objected, not enthused about the idea of spending an evening alone with Charles.

"I'll be back here by eight or a little later," Martin affirmed. "You realize I can't force Norton's hand, though. I only want to make sure that Juliana's all right. Then I'll return, corner Charles here, and make him spit out the truth. I want to make him call another doctor to examine Juliana—the only person who can do that is her nearest relative. So if I'm held up for any reason, have dinner with him and invite him back to your place for a drink afterward. I'll be here to meet you."

Martin's plan seemed viable and, wanting to prove to him my good will, I proposed, "Should I phone Marnieres right now?"

"It's better if you wait until evening. If he's going home, it won't be until the afternoon. Don't forget that we're supposing Norton arrived in Dijon only last night."

"But Charles could very well stay on there, couldn't he? You never know."

"I'll see about that when I get there. If he's still in Dijon, I'll find out easily enough. He isn't capable of staying shut up in a place like a clinic for hours on end. He tends to gravitate toward a certain category of bar. There are three or four in the city; I know them all and I'll check them out."

"And if you find Charles, will you still come back here tomorrow?" I asked, overcoming with difficulty the anguish engulfing me.

He frowned. "No, I won't have time," he said curtly. "And let's get one thing straight: I abhor underhanded dealings and lies."

This was too much and I bristled, "What would you call what you want me to do with your cousin Charles if not underhanded, I'd like to know?"

"My dear Catherine, sometimes these things are unavoidable. Besides if it hadn't been for your little games, I wouldn't have to be doing all this. You can regret it all you want, but the damage is done. So in case you aren't able to get hold of Charles either tonight or tomorrow, there'll be ninety chances out of a hundred that I've already got my hands on him. If you haven't heard from me in forty-eight hours, zip up your suitcase and run to your parents."

"But how can I leave without knowing anything?" I protested. "You could give me a call just to reassure me."

"Do you think I owe you anything? Now you're talking as if you have some rights in this affair. Well, you don't. Now I've got to go. You've already made me lose enough time as it is."

I turned away and furtively swiped at the tears I couldn't keep from leaking out of my eyes. Then, taking a few steps away from him, I said in a strangled voice, "We might never see each other again, and you'll never forgive me!"

"That depends on whether or not Charles has left Dijon."

As I fervently prayed that Charles had left, Martin continued in a hard voice, "Look, Catherine. If Charles is still in Dijon, I have no idea when I'll feel like seeing you again, or even if I'll ever feel like it. Your foolish manipulations could have repercus-

sions on Juliana's health, and that would be difficult for me to forgive." And he left without adding another word.

Throwing myself onto the couch where Martin had slept I dissolved in tears. It was probably an illusion, but it seemed to me that the couch still smelled a little of his tobacco and after-shave.

I don't know how long I lay there, but I was pulled out of my stupor by Mrs. Martinon. "I'm bringing Biscuit back," she announced as she entered the room. "When that young man came into the building earlier he left the gate to the street wide open—and your apartment door, too, I guess. Your dog took advantage and ran across the street to the butcher shop. I'd just gone down to hang up my wash, and the butcher called to me to come get him."

Biscuit jumped up on the couch and pressed himself against my leg. Still flat on my stomach with my face buried in a pillow, I didn't dare get up—my swollen eyes and total dejection were far too plain. "Thank you, Mrs. Martinon," I mumbled, then turned on my side, presenting my back to her curious gaze.

My rudeness didn't deter her, however. When she sniffed something in the air, it took all the ruses known to man to get rid of her.

"Are you ill, Catherine?" she persisted. "Or are you just tired? You didn't get much sleep last night. I heard you and the young man come in. At my age I sleep so lightly. It was at least three a.m., I'm sure." It was impossible to miss the disapproval in her

tone. She went on relentlessly, "I suppose you're getting a little rest before leaving for your parents' place? It's dangerous to drive when you're tired, especially when you have to go so far."

"I'm so tired I've put off leaving for two or three days," I answered, still mumbling sleepily and not changing my position.

"Ah ha!" she exclaimed. "I'll bet it's the young man who's changed your mind. He's much nicer than your other friend, Mark, the one who doesn't come around anymore. He was too much of a snob. This time you've chosen very well. You know, it's really time you got married, had a home, children...."

I knew the refrain by heart; she never missed an occasion to repeat it to me. I wasn't the only one to be chastised about marriage. All the single women of the area went through it. Every one of us only half listened to her, but we never contradicted her. Her age and especially her kindness stopped us from putting her in her place as perhaps she deserved.

This time, however, my patience, or rather my nerves, snapped. I sat up on the couch and fairly shouted, "Mrs. Martinon, thank you for bringing Biscuit back. But I want to be left alone, do you hear? Alone! I've had just about enough of your questions and your advice. I'm of age, I'm vaccinated, and I know my own mind!"

Then I flopped onto my stomach again while she gasped, "Well! I simply can't understand the young people of today!"

With relief mixed with a certain remorse, I heard



her shut my door and go back upstairs. I had obviously hurt her, and I felt badly. "I'll make it up to her by inviting her to watch TV tonight," I said to Biscuit. And suddenly my anger was directed toward him: "If you hadn't been so busy paying a visit to the butcher earlier, you might at least have been around to bite Martin when he was manhandling me!"

I stopped abruptly, realizing that no one, especially a little dog, deserved the brunt of my bad humor. Why should my own stupidity have repercussions on others, anyway?

I looked at my watch: two o'clock. There was no question of phoning Marnieres before five or six, so what should I do? Work would be the best solution. Between runs I could surely find a phone booth where I could call Charles.

When I make a decision I don't waste any time carrying it out. In record time I washed my face and changed my clothes. Before leaving I went up to Mrs. Martinon's and, without letting her say a word, gave her my keys. "I'm going to be working late tonight. Go down and watch television," I said rapidly. "I'm sorry for having been short with you. I'll explain later." And I ran down the stairs without hearing her reply.

During the afternoon I had a few relatively good runs, enough to make a day's wage. Two or three customers wanted to make conversation, but their sentences fell into an almost total void. My mind was too preoccupied with other matters. I was following Martin to Dijon and hoping his trip was suc-



cessful. I was going over the words I would say to Charles later if I reached him, and praying with all my might that I would. Wasn't that my only chance of seeing Martin again?

Around six o'clock a woman had me drop her off on a corner on which there was a phone booth. Being a little superstitious, I chalked it up as a good omen. I even found a parking place in the same block.

Heart pounding, I got out of the cab and entered the phone booth. A few minutes later I was on the line to Marnieres and I recognized Tita's voice as she said hello. Her greeting was followed by several incomprehensible words in Spanish. I figured that if Charles was there, he would understand them. Perhaps the pair of them had worked out a system that if someone like Martin called, he would make a sign to the woman to answer that she didn't know where he was. But he wouldn't be distrustful of me. With Juliana in Dijon and Martin supposedly in Germany, what would he fear from me?

I summoned up my courage and asked as naturally as I could, "Mr. Bellanger, please. It's Miss Sicard calling."

Gibberish exploded in my ear. I thought that Tita hadn't understood me and so I repeated the sentence more slowly, pronouncing each syllable. At last she understood. "Señor Bellanger on trip," she told me with a terrible accent.

"When will he return?" I insisted. "*Quando* Señor Bellanger return?"

"Don't know. Señor Bellanger on trip."

"Okay. I'll call back later," I said, infinitely disappointed. But she had already hung up.

Disconcerted and perplexed, I stood thinking in the phone booth. Was Charles in Dijon, or still on the road, or was he in Marnieres and refusing to speak to anyone? How could I find out?

For a second I was tempted to drive to Verneuil. But if Charles had decided not to see anyone, I'd be sure to find the door closed and those two vicious watchdogs outside of it. Maybe he hadn't returned from Dijon yet. The best thing would be to call back in an hour. That was what Martin had told me to do anyway.

I phoned back at seven, then at eight, at nine and at ten o'clock, with no success. I worked until midnight and went home completely discouraged. Happily Mrs. Martinon's favorite TV program had ended much earlier and she had gone up to bed. As usual, she'd left my key in the pot of geraniums. As I groped for it I mused sadly over the incredibly marvelous evening I'd spent with Martin. It had only been yesterday, but those precious moments already seemed so far away. Since then a gulf had been dug between Martin and myself. It looked as if I had no way to fill up the emptiness that separated us, nor even the chance to prove to him my sincerity and good intentions.

## Chapter 8

Despite my fatigue, I slept badly that night and woke up at dawn. Tortured by anxiety, I tossed and turned in bed, waiting for nine o'clock so that I could phone Marnieres.

Once again I reached the Spanish woman and listened to her monotonous litany: "Señor Bellanger on trip. Don't know where...."

My chances of getting hold of him and requesting that he come to Paris that evening were becoming slimmer and slimmer, as were those of my ever seeing Martin again. Discouraged, I finally got dressed and crossed the yard to pick up my mail from the box. On Wednesdays I usually received a letter from my parents, and I was hoping they'd be sending me some news about Louis Mercier's past.

The letter had arrived and I opened it with fumbling fingers. Alas! My father, whose long career had

endowed him with extreme discretion, didn't tell me a thing I didn't already know. He even reproached me for my curiosity, asking what right I had to ask for details on a subject that was none of my business. Who was it who had called Louis a shady character? The man gave me good, honest jobs, didn't he? Did I have any complaints? He was surprised that a daughter of his would tell tales about someone she didn't know much about. And so on, and so on.

Furthermore my father insisted on getting some details straight. In my letter I'd told him only that I'd met a friend of a customer, someone who was familiar with the Joan of Arc Hotel. Without dwelling on it, I had recounted the reaction of that person when Louis Mercier's name had come up in the conversation. To make a long story short, dad was worried about me, and his letter was more moralistic than affectionate.

More and more dejected, I wandered around the yard for a while. I didn't have to worry about being bothered by Mrs. Martinon because every Wednesday she traveled to the suburbs to spend the day with her married daughter. While I was mulling things over I threw a few sticks for Biscuit to chase. I envied my little dog his delight in this game. How I wished that my cares and troubles would vanish in the wake of a favorite pastime!

What was happening in Dijon? Was Juliana all right? What would happen if, because of me, she really went off the deep end? What if she died? Such thoughts filled me with terrible anguish, and my

helplessness dismayed me. What could I do? Nothing, except try to get hold of Charles. Maybe he had left Dijon late yesterday and had spent the night somewhere. I clung to that possibility.

All day I stayed at home and regularly called Marnieres. Monotonously, Tita reiterated the same words. By six-thirty, after a final phone call, I gave up the effort.

For a long time I lay stretched out on the couch, listening to the sounds of the street and trying to keep alive, despite everything, the hope that I would see Martin again. The young couple who lived on the third floor came home as usual at seven-thirty. I still hadn't moved when Mrs. Martinon arrived home at nine-thirty. I hadn't turned on my lights, so she must have thought I was out or in bed and so went straight up to her place. If Biscuit hadn't demanded his supper I would have stayed there on the couch all night.

THE PHONE WOKE ME with a start, and at the same time pulled me out of a nightmare. I stumbled into the living room, picked up the receiver and muttered a sleepy hello.

A far-off voice answered, "Miss Sicard, please."

"Speaking. Who's calling?"

"It's the Saint Etienne Hospital in Auxerre. Mr. Martin Bellec had a car accident last night on the highway. He gave us your phone number so that we could notify you. He'd like you to come out here as quickly as possible."

"Oh! An accident. . . . Is it serious?" I demanded, thoroughly awake now.

"Mr. Bellec suffered a head injury. He was badly shaken up and we'll have to wait several days before knowing for sure that he doesn't have any internal bleeding. He was unconscious for several hours and only came to this morning. Since then he's been asking for you."

"I'll leave right away," I said. "It'll probably take me a couple of hours to get there." And I hung up without even asking how the accident had happened. I had only one thought: to be with Martin. He was hurt, and he wanted me.

It didn't take me long to get ready. Once I was on the highway southbound out of Paris, I opened up the engine and covered the miles between the capital and Auxerre in record time. I found the Saint Etienne Hospital easily—it was next to the cathedral of the same name—and parked. For the first time I felt not a twinge of guilt as I abandoned Biscuit in the car; then, legs flying, I raced into the building.

At the desk I was received by an affable secretary. I told her my name and asked her for Martin's room number. Her face clouded. "Mr. Bellec's been unconscious for the past hour. You can see him, of course—he's in room nineteen. But don't stay more than a few minutes. Dr. Laforge wants to talk to you, by the way. Would you rather see him now or after you've seen the patient?"

"Afterward," I answered, my throat constricted. Then I asked the question that was haunting me. "Is he in any danger?"

"I don't believe so," the secretary said softly. "But Dr. Laforge is the best judge of Mr. Bellec's condition."



The ambiguity of her response didn't reassure me. "Where's room nineteen?" I asked shakily.

"On the second floor. Just turn left at the top or the stairs," she explained with an encouraging smile.

I took the stairs two at a time, my heart in my throat. I stopped in front of nineteen, knocked lightly, then gently opened the door.

Martin, dear Martin, was lying there with his eyes closed and his head bandaged. Near the bed a nurse was holding a syringe full of a colorless liquid. I thought I was going to faint.

"Courage, my dear," the nurse said bracingly, seeing my pale face. "This isn't the time to go under. Have a seat." She indicated a chair.

I sat and tried to pull myself together, but after a short and futile struggle, I burst into tears.

"Now don't cry," the nurse said. "There's no reason for it. In a few days your young man will be on his feet again."

"Do you think so?" I hiccuped. "But he's in a coma—"

"—which he'll pull out of in no time," she affirmed. "I'm going to give him an injection, and I'll be very surprised if he isn't talking to you within an hour. I suppose you're Miss Sicard, the woman he's been asking for?"

"That's right."

"Well, he's going to be delighted to see you. What a time he's given us!" breathed the nurse. "When we told him that we'd reached you and that you were coming, he seemed to calm down. But he was so upset we had to give him a sedative. Since then

he's been unconscious. But don't worry, we're used to treating car-accident victims. His reaction is common. Now I'm afraid I must ask you to leave. You can come back later when he's awake."

Before going I approached Martin's bed and called him softly. He didn't react and with despair in my heart I went back downstairs and was ushered in to Dr. Laforge's office. After offering me a chair he got quickly to the point: "The X rays show no signs of any fractures other than two cracked ribs, but Mr. Bellec has multiple contusions—particularly on one leg—and a head wound. I have to keep him under observation for the next few days to make certain he has no internal bleeding. He has a solid constitution, and if everything goes well, he'll be able to leave here Tuesday or Wednesday morning. I don't anticipate any problems, actually." Then he added, "Are you a member of his family?"

"No, just a friend."

"I see," he said with an understanding nod.

I was still worried about Martin's condition, however, and I wasn't about to drop the subject until I knew more. "But what about this coma he's in, doctor? His head wound? And how did the accident happen?"

"I only had to use three sutures to close up his head wound. As for his 'coma,' as you call it—you see, he's not that deeply unconscious—well, I'll explain. His initial loss of consciousness was due to shock and the blow to his head. Right now he's really just in a state of induced sleep. We had to sedate him since he appeared to be in the grip of

some acute anxiety, which certainly isn't conducive to healing. As for the accident, it took place on the highway near here, around eleven p.m. Mr. Bellec was alone, and no other cars were involved. He was driving much too fast, and his car must have hit the embankment. It rolled right over. He hadn't even been drinking, nor did it look like an attempted suicide. Mr. Bellec confirmed that himself."

"So what happened?"

"The patient said he'd been in a hurry and very preoccupied. He took his eyes off the road for one second . . . but look, he'll no doubt tell you all that better than I would," concluded the doctor with the smile of an accomplice. "Right now I suggest you go out and get something to eat. That will help you pass the time better than sitting around here. Come back early this afternoon, but not too soon, because I want to examine him when he wakes up."

I didn't feel like eating anything. My anxiety had completely killed my appetite, which the smell of disinfectant had already dulled. Nonetheless I retrieved Biscuit from the car and ordered a cup of coffee in a nearby restaurant. It did feel good to get out of the hospital for a while. I had always disliked that kind of environment and I reaffirmed my conviction that I would have made a terrible nurse.

While I sipped my coffee I speculated about what had happened in Dijon. Why had Martin called for me so insistently? It wasn't out of affection or love, that was for sure. Did he have some sort of catastrophic news? A thousand suppositions of the worst kind ran through my head.

After walking Biscuit around the block I put him back in the car. Then I went to visit the cathedral. But it was neither the need for prayer nor a desire to gaze at the frescoes and bas-reliefs that drew me inside its portals. I simply wanted a place where I could sit undisturbed and try to come to some sort of peace with myself.

By one-thirty, not much better off than earlier but unable to wait any longer, I returned to the hospital. Once inside I had to wait some more—a wait that seemed interminable. Dr. Laforge was with the patient, the secretary explained.

Finally I was allowed to go into his room. Seeing me, Martin made a grimace that might have been a smile. His lips were split and swollen, and the area around his eyes and nose was blackened.

"Does it hurt very much?" I asked him anxiously.

"I expect I'll live, but I won't be able to get out of bed for several days." He made an effort to move and winced with pain. "Feels as if I was hit by a bus."

"You were very lucky," I said. "You could have been killed!"

"But I'm stuck in bed and I can't afford to be!" he groaned. "Were you able to reach Charles?"

"No. He never came back to Marnieres. At least not by six-thirty last night. And you? What happened in Dijon?"

"Nothing. Norton's disappeared. He sold his clinic a month ago, and I couldn't find a single trace of him or Juliana."

Slowly, for his head obviously hurt, Martin told

me that he had arrived in Dijon late Tuesday afternoon. He had first of all had a cup of coffee in a café near Dr. Norton's house. By questioning the café owner, he'd quickly learned that the clinic had changed hands. Martin had gone to see the new owner, a young doctor from Marseilles. The man had met Richard Norton only twice—the first time when he had visited the place and the second at the notary's, to sign the ownership papers. All Martin had been able to find out was the name and address of the notary, whom he had gone to see the next morning. But, hiding behind professional secrecy, the man would not say where the doctor was currently living. Martin had spent the rest of the day questioning the psychiatrist's relatives, but with no luck; the man had literally disappeared.

Desperately worried about Juliana, Martin had started to drive to Paris. It had been too late to phone me, for if I was with Charles, he reasoned we would have already been at a restaurant. He'd counted on me to drag the evening out as much as possible and had hoped to arrive in time to catch Charles at my place.

"That's why I was driving so fast. I don't know what happened after that. I must have fallen asleep for a fraction of a second, and look what happened," he concluded somberly.

"But why didn't you phone me around seven?" I asked in surprise. "You would have found out that I hadn't been able to contact Charles, and then you wouldn't have to have driven like a lunatic...."

He raised his arm, grimaced as he let it fall back



on the sheet, and looked at me dourly. "Yes, hindsight is wonderful. But at the time my full concentration had been on learning Norton's whereabouts. When I gave up, it was after nine. By speeding, I figured I could get to your place before one in the morning. Now I ask myself why I didn't call you first but at the time I was sure that Charles was dining with you. His being with you was my only hope of finding Juliana and I latched onto it without thinking."

Exhausted after talking so much, he closed his eyes and appeared to have fallen asleep. After several minutes I called his name, but he didn't answer. Worried, I softly stroked his hand. "Are you asleep, Martin?"

Nothing. No reaction. Was he unconscious again? Frightened, I rang for the nurse, who arrived a moment later.

"Do you need something?" she asked calmly.

"He . . . he fell asleep so suddenly. . . . I tried to wake him, but I couldn't," I stammered. "Is he all right?"

She took Martin's pulse, then raised his eyelid. "He's just sleeping. Your visit must have tired him out, and he's still under the effect of the tranquilizer we gave him this morning. Don't worry, he'll be awake in an hour or two," she said with a smile. "Why don't you tour the town? It'll make you feel better."

I followed her advice and, accompanied by Biscuit, went looking for a florist, a bookstore and an inexpensive hotel where I could stay for the night.



There was no question of returning to Paris. Besides being too tired to drive, I didn't want to leave Auxerre without being completely reassured about Martin's condition. Too, he no doubt had more to tell me and would probably want me to do a few things for him. He surely couldn't have summoned me all the way to Auxerre only to find out if I had had supper with Charles.

I went back to the hospital with a dozen red roses, a couple of mystery novels and a few magazines. Martin was still sleeping, so I sat on the chair by the bed and tried to bury myself in a book.

Around five he finally opened his eyes. "Are you still here, Catherine?" he murmured. "I'm glad." Then, seeing the flowers, he added, "You shouldn't have...."

"Of course, I should have!" I protested. "I also brought you some things to read if you—"

"My head hurts so much," he interrupted with a grimace. His eyes closed again.

A little while later he seemed to become restless and feverish. He started to get delirious, calling out for Juliana in a way that broke my heart. Dr. Laforge, alerted by the nurse, ordered me out of the room.

After fifteen minutes the doctor joined me in the corridor. "He'll be all right, I believe. The fever should disappear in a few hours," he said. "In any case, no more visiting today. Come back tomorrow morning around ten. If the fever goes down and he's had a calm night, we can safely assume he's over the worst of it. but until then I can't say for sure."

Holed up in my tiny hotel room that night, I had some terrible moments, which I won't dwell on. Suffice to say that since then I've never been able to like that town.

THE NEXT MORNING as I entered the hospital, the secretary welcomed me with a smile. "You can go right up, Mr. Bellec is much better today. The doctor's already examined him and he told me to let you know that the patient should be on his feet in a week."

I thanked her and ran up the stairs as fast as I could. Martin's face was a mosaic of unusual colors, but his expression, in fact his whole being, seemed much more alive than the day before. "Good morning, Catherine," he greeted me in an almost normal voice. "Sit down. We have to talk." He was definitely better; his authoritative character had resurfaced.

I obeyed without saying a word. He moved a little and then groaned, "Good lord, I hurt everywhere. Providing I don't become crippled—"

"Crippled? Why on earth should you become crippled?" I retorted a trifle impatiently.

"You don't know how much pain I'm in," he answered, annoyed at my lack of sympathy. "The doctor told me that nothing's serious, but I think he's being overly optimistic."

He was in pain, I'd no doubt, but I knew he was exaggerating so that I'd feel sorry for him. I said, "Dr. Laforge knows his job and I trust him. You're much more yourself this morning, by the way."

"It's obvious you're not in my shoes," he sighed. "But that's not what I want to talk to you about. Since I'm stuck in this bed until Tuesday, on the condition, of course, that Dr. Laforge isn't wrong about me, I need you to do me a favor."

"Whatever you want," I hurried to assure him.

"Do you have to drive that lady to Verneuil on Sunday?"

"Yes. I was going to cancel before leaving for my parents', but I didn't do it when my trip was postponed."

"Good. Sunday, then, I want you to have lunch at Mimi Tabardieu's. Tell her that you drove Juliana to the hospital and ask her if, since then, she's heard any news and if Charles is at Marnieres. In short, try to get out of her the slightest bit of information that could help us. She knows everything that goes on in the area. Charles might have returned yesterday, or he might return today or tomorrow. He thinks I'm in Germany, so he won't bother to hide. If Mimi tells you he's there, go to Marnieres—Charles won't find your visit odd—and suggest to him that you have supper together in Paris on Tuesday night. I'll come to your place that evening to corner him."

"But if Charles has come back, he'll find out from Tita that I phoned him several times, and he'll return my call."

"That's all right. He won't be able to get hold of you before tonight or tomorrow. Since you can't stay here forever, you'd better leave today. So if he calls you, suggest that you have lunch together Sunday in Verneuil, and then you can still ask him to

come to Paris Tuesday evening. He'll probably jump at the chance."

"All right," I agreed without enthusiasm. "So you want me to leave today."

"Yes. There's nothing for you to do around here and you may as well work and earn some money tomorrow. As for Sunday I'm counting on your enterprising nature to come up with something. Look around, search, keep your eyes and ears open. I don't see why you'd want to stay here holding my hand. I already have a nurse—not a good-natured one, mind you, but a competent one."

Hurt by the fact that Martin wasn't begging me to stay by his side, I exploded, "What was the point of having me come here in the first place? You could just as well have given me your orders on the phone. You've got one right at your elbow!"

He tried to sit up and fell back on his pillow with a grimace of pain. "I have my reasons," he said after several moments of silence. "Listen, Catherine. You already lied to me once. After that you swore you'd try to make it up. Please understand that I'm terribly worried about Juliana. Oh, if only I hadn't had this cursed accident...."

He pulled himself together and went on curtly, "I'm sorry if you feel hurt. But I don't need your solicitude, I need your help. Your sympathy is of no use to me. Thanks for the flowers and the books. I appreciate them. But did Juliana get my lilacs?"

Martin was right about certain things, but why should he torture me this way? He had called me to his bedside and now my presence exasperated him. I

had already paid dearly for one stupid lie. Even the fact that he was in the hospital was largely my fault. I reflected sadly that my little bit of foolishness had been enough to unleash a whole series of catastrophes.

My responsibility was clear. I absolutely had to find Charles, Dr. Norton or, better yet, Julianna. Ready to uncover heaven and earth, I stood up and said calmly, "I'll leave immediately. I can see that you can't stand having me around. I don't blame you. In your place I'd probably detest me as well. Anyway, I have a plan—"

"You have a plan?" interrupted Martin, very interested. "You can tell me about it later over lunch."

"What do you mean, over lunch?" I asked, astounded.

"The nurse told me we can order in meals from a nearby restaurant for our visitors. Of course Dr. Laforge's authorization is needed, but he gave it to me willingly and I ordered lunch for you. I have to settle for hospital food, of course."

I looked at him with wide eyes, not daring to react. I was completely nonplussed. He jumped from cruelty to kindness with an ease that was baffling. "Thanks, that's kind of you," I said in as neutral a tone as I could muster. "But wouldn't you prefer that I returned to Paris immediately?"

"No," he stated. "First of all, I need you to run a few errands for me. I want you to pick up a transistor radio, pajamas, and some cigarettes. It's already eleven. You wouldn't get to Paris before midafter-

noon in any case, so your day is shot. What really counts is that you go to Verneuil the day after tomorrow. I don't know what your plan is, but what interests me most is Sunday."

"My plan is to visit an old friend of mine—Lieutenant Clavier. I suppose you know of him? Anyway, since he takes off every Friday evening for his house in the country, I won't be able to see him until Monday morning."

"Lieutenant Clavier? Of course I've heard of him. Great idea! He's a friend of yours? Explain it all to me later. Right now go do my shopping, and when you come back, try to sneak poor old Biscuit in here with you. I feel like seeing him. All you have to do is hide him in your jacket. Once he's in the room he'll be okay. He can stay and share our lunch."

I didn't argue. I listened quietly to Martin's instructions about the radio and pajamas he wanted, took the money he gave me and left to carry out his orders. As I went downstairs, I wondered if he was still going to persist in tormenting me during lunch... and if I wouldn't actually feel an unhealthy pleasure in letting him do it.



## Chapter 9

I arrived home around eight that evening, having not only eaten lunch with Martin, but having also spent the afternoon with him. I was buoyed up and confident. My idea to enlist Lieutenant Clavier's help had gone over well with Martin, and he'd been pleasant to me all afternoon.

We'd spent most of the time tossing around the possibilities of different plans, but Martin had become so enervated that as the afternoon came to an end he had grown feverish again. Dr. Laforge hadn't thought it was serious, but he had attributed the relapse to my presence. His discovery of Biscuit lying under the bed hadn't improved his mood and I'd been reprimanded. I'd calmed him down by telling him I was leaving immediately for Paris.

"That's the best thing you could do for Mr. Bellec," he had replied. "As long as he has a fever, I

won't release him from the hospital. If you want him to get out on Tuesday, you'd better leave him alone."

In theory I was to come pick up Martin Tuesday morning. It was his idea. "My car's in pieces," he'd said, "and besides, I won't be in any shape to drive. I'll have to take a cab, so why not yours? You can take me directly to your place, where together, I hope, we'll wait for Charles. There's a good chance you'll see him on Sunday."

He had told me he would phone me daily. "I'll call in the evenings when you're more likely to be home. And I haven't forgotten that you've already lost two days' work because of me. I'll compensate you for that later."

We had parted good friends, and I carried his farewell smile with me all the way home. As I entered my apartment, however, my mood changed. My loneliness hit me smack in the face, and I felt that it would never depart.

I couldn't hope for anything from Martin. Even when I did see him, the shadow of Juliana was always between us. If anything bad were to befall her, he'd hate me forever. And if I managed to find his beloved, he'd quickly forget me. Maybe he'd provide me with a little companionship for a while....

My unhappy thoughts erased Martin's farewell smile from my mind. What was left for me? A certain obligation to fulfill, then perhaps the satisfaction of succeeding, and then, nothing. But I did play a key role in this affair, and as long as it wasn't over,

I was valuable and Martin counted on me. For the moment, I was a flesh-and-blood person and Juliana merely a shadow. When Juliana was found, it would be my turn to become the shadow, a shadow that would quickly fade away....

Exhausted by the events of the past couple of days, and my inner turmoil, I discarded my clothes, climbed into bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

I could have easily slept till noon the next day if Mrs. Martinon hadn't felt the need to knock on my door in the middle of the morning. Thursday morning was the first time I'd ever gone off without telling her goodbye and without leaving her my key, and therefore she was concerned about me. I told her I'd had to drive a customer to the country, and that instead of coming back the same night as planned, he had decided to stay a day longer. "If I'd known, I'd have told you, of course," I said with conviction.

My fabrication seemed to satisfy her curiosity though she had hoped that something more exciting had happened. She wanted to talk about the young man with the white car, but I had no intention of filling her in on my private life.

After she left, I wrote my weekly letter to my parents. I assured my father that my questions concerning Louis Mercier were of no real importance. I also pretended that I'd never again run into the customer who had called Louis a shady character. I'd been intrigued at the time, I wrote, but it was no longer on my mind. I then went on to say that what I was really worried about was my tax bill, and that if he

could possibly lend me some money, it would be a big help.

When I was finished, Biscuit and I left for work and didn't return until seven that evening. My regular Sunday customer phoned me shortly afterward to confirm that she'd be waiting for me the next morning at ten as usual. Then Martin phoned. He was feeling much better and Dr. Laforge had allowed him to walk around the room a little.

"But I still have a lot of pain in my ribs and my one leg. I must have a million bruised muscles," he complained. "By the way, I will be able to leave on Tuesday. I'll phone you tomorrow evening at eight, and I hope you'll have news from Verneuil."

"I still haven't heard from Charles," I answered. "I'm afraid he won't be at Marnieres."

"Don't forget you've been out of town for two days," was the retort. "He might have tried to get in touch with you and finally gave up. Now he might be waiting for you to show up, especially if Tita told him you'd phoned Monday and Tuesday. In any case, it's vital that you find out what's going on there. If Charles has disappeared as well, you should let Lieutenant Clavier know."

Martin gave me some further tips on how I should approach Mimi Tabardieu. "And for heaven's sake, don't slip up. Remember, if my name is mentioned, you haven't seen me since the day we had lunch together there. She'll probably tell you I'm in Germany, and you have to act as though that's no concern of yours."

"But what if she has told Charles that I met you at her place that infamous Friday?"

"I warned Mimi about that; she'll keep it quiet. First of all because she doesn't like Charles very much, and secondly because when someone asks her to keep a secret, she does." Then Martin quickly said good night and hung up.

He hadn't even asked me how I was or if I had had a good trip back the night before. Selfish wretch, I thought to myself.

So that I wouldn't sink into the depression I felt coming on, I took Biscuit to his favorite restaurant. After dinner I played a few hands of whist with some other patrons while Biscuit, stuffed to the gills, slept on a bench.

It was after midnight when I arrived home again, and I was thankful to have avoided several hours of loneliness, not to mention the company of Mrs. Martinon. Knowing I'd be alone, she would have come down to watch television with me and no doubt pester me with more questions. Her inquisitiveness was becoming impossible to bear....

SUNDAY MORNING, as usual, my customer was late and in a foul mood. All the way to Verneuil she complained bitterly about her marriage problems. Finally we picked up her son at his school, and during our drive to the Salmon Hotel she kept up a constant stream of scolding because of his low marks and bad-conduct report. I left them in the main square—the one jabbering and the other sneering—and drove off without asking anything other than the time I should pick them up.

"Three-thirty," the son told me. "I'm supposed to

be grounded and so I'm not allowed to be out for very long."

In one sense, that would work out well for me. If Charles was at Marnieres, I'd have a good excuse not to stay long. I'd be able to drop in quickly, leaving him with the promise of a whole evening alone together.

When I reached Tabardieu's around twelve-thirty, the restaurant was crowded. For the most part, the people sitting at the bar were locals. From behind the cash register, a woman I heard addressed as Francine looked me over curiously. She probably had me pegged as a friend of one of the Parisians who had country homes in the area. I approached the bar. Two young men moved aside to make room for me, and then Francine asked me what I'd like.

"I'd like to talk to Mrs. Tabardieu. Isn't she in?"

"She's busy in the kitchen at the moment, and I'm taking her place out here. If you have to see her urgently, I can go get her."

"No, don't bother her. I'm not in a hurry. I'll have a Perrier while I wait, please."

While she served me, Francine couldn't stop herself from saying, "It's strange I've never seen you before. Do you have friends in the area?"

"No, I don't really have any friends around here. I had lunch here once, and I decided to come back because I remembered how good the food was."

A customer beckoned and Francine had to swallow the next question that jumped to her lips and move away. As she served drinks to other customers, she glanced at me frequently. She was clearly



intrigued, and until she had more information about me she wouldn't be at peace. Biscuit, whom I had wisely kept on his leash, became her pretext. "He's really cute. What's his name? I'm crazy about animals."

Mimi's arrival cut short her words. "Why, hello," Mimi said. "It's nice of you to drop by again."

"Well, I couldn't resist sampling more of your food, Mrs. Tabardieu. I'd like to have lunch here, if it's possible." I glanced at the packed tables.

"Of course. Only you'll have to wait a little. On Sundays a lot of people take their time. But in an hour or so everyone will be gone."

In actual fact, the restaurant emptied within about twenty minutes. Francine, too, left. She lived nearby and her husband was waiting, she explained, but she was going to come back later to give Mimi a hand with the preparations for the evening meals.

Mimi set me up at the same table I'd shared with Martin the time before, and slightly depressed, I ate my meal with only Biscuit for company. Because I absolutely had to question Mimi, I invited her to have coffee with me. She accepted gladly and came to sit at my table.

"I think I'll drop over to Marnieres," I began. "Do you think I'll find Mr. Bellanger in?"

"It would surprise me if you did," she answered, smiling. "Charles has been in Paris for at least a week, and I don't think he's coming back till next week."

"Darn! I'd have liked to hear how his sister-in-law is. When I drove Mrs. Bellanger to the hospital the other Friday, she wasn't in the greatest health."

Mimi responded quickly, "She must be all right now, because she's getting married next Thursday."

I almost dropped my cup. "Getting married!" I was stunned. Martin had sent me here to get some news. Well, he'd be getting it all right. . . . How would he react when he heard about this?

I'd no doubt the future bridegroom was Dr. Norton, although I didn't feel I should ask Mrs. Tabardieu the question directly. I would appear to know too much for someone who supposedly hadn't seen anyone from the area since that Friday. I said as casually as I could, "I suppose Mrs. Bellanger is getting married here, and to someone from the area?"

"No, the ceremony will be in Paris. Mrs. Bellanger is marrying Richard Norton, the doctor you drove to Marnieres that day. In one sense, I'm not surprised. Richard Norton is an old friend of the family's. But I didn't think she'd be so quick to remarry, and like this, so—well, I hate to say it—furtively. If the banns hadn't been posted at the town hall, no one would have known."

My brain began to function at top speed. The addresses of the married couple would have to be mentioned on the banns! If Juliana and Dr. Norton were getting married in Paris, then the doctor had to be living there . . . . and his address was written only a short distance from where I was sitting!

Swallowing my coffee, I asked Mimi for the bill, and a few minutes later was parking my car in front of the town hall. On the other side of the street was a little park bordered by linden trees. Some men were playing *boules* and they looked up from their

game to watch me get out of the car. For them, as for Francine, I posed an enigma: who was I and what was I doing in their village?

To keep them from seeing my real purpose I first strolled in the park with Biscuit. Still maintaining the pretense of walking my dog, I nonchalantly approached the town hall. Feigning indifference, I stopped in front of a public notice. Next I pretended to be interested in a few political placards still up from the last election, and then very naturally I arrived in front of the very publication of banns I was looking for.

Juliana Bellanger and Richard Norton were going to be married the following Thursday at the city hall of a Paris borough. The psychiatrist lived at 174 Boulevard Voltaire.

I whistled for Biscuit and got back into the car, leaving my audience across the street to wonder about me. If I hadn't had so much on my mind, I would have loved to join them. As it was, I had to use the hour I had left to think. I drove a little way out of the village and parked my cab on a deserted sideroad. Then I lit a cigarette and tried to plan my next move in light of my new knowledge.

But first I wondered what Martin's reaction would be when I told him what I'd learned. I shivered at the thought. At least this time there was no question of my hiding any of the truth.

What should I do? Go the Boulevard Voltaire and try to see Dr. Norton or Juliana? But what would I say to them? Would they even let me in?

Charles had to be with them. I could watch the

building, then pretend I'd met him by chance when he came out. I'd suggest that we get together for supper Tuesday evening. But there wouldn't be any point to that. If Juliana was really getting married, then she must have been feeling fine . . . and she must have consented. And visiting Lieutenant Clavier would now be pointless, as well, since I already had Dr. Norton's address.

The only thing I could do was tell Martin, a painful and difficult task. Not only would he hold me partly responsible for Richard Norton's conquest of Juliana, he might also have another attack of fever, for God only knew how this shock would affect his health, which was already weakened by the accident.

For a long time I sat without moving in the car, and when at last I drove on to Verneuil, my morale was registering at zero.

ARRIVING HOME AT SEVEN, I raced to the phone directory. There weren't any Nortons listed at 174 Boulevard Voltaire. It wasn't surprising, of course. He had lived there for such a short time that his number wasn't listed in the book. I called information, but was told that there was no new listing anywhere in Paris for a Richard Norton.

Finally I just sat, unmoving, nervously awaiting Martin's call. The slightest sound made me jump. Unfortunately, upstairs, Mrs. Martinon was entertaining her daughter, son-in-law, and three grandsons. The children, of course, seemed determined to break my ceiling in. . . .

The jangle of the telephone snapped my already frayed nerves. I snatched up the receiver.

"Hello, Catherine," Martin said. Then coming right to the point, he demanded, "Well? What did you find out at Mimi's? Did you get any news about Charles?"

I cleared my throat and courageously told him everything. Martin listened without saying a word while I repeated my conversation with Mimi and described my visit to the village's town hall. When I had finished, he said in a flat voice, "I need to think about this before making any decisions. I'll call you tomorrow morning. Don't go out before you hear from me, okay?"

"Okay," I repeated. "But what do you have to decide? I don't see what—"

"I see," he cut me off sharply. "So good night. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

He hung up, leaving me worried and perplexed. Was he going to do something foolish? Martin hadn't let one word about his feelings escape. Was he simply angry or was he miserably unhappy at the news? It was impossible to tell. In any case he had thirty-six more hours in the hospital. During that time he wouldn't be able to get up to anything too foolish....

This thought comforted me somewhat. Tuesday morning when I picked him up in Auxerre, I'd try to reason with him. But I could worry about that then.

ONCE AGAIN I WAS WRONG, and once again Martin made me jump to his tune. At ten-thirty the next



morning a cab stopped in front of the house and Martin climbed out. Suitcase in one hand, a cane in the other, he slowly crossed the yard. He had only one small bandage on his head, and the skin around his eyes and nose was a study in green and yellow.

He entered my living room, where surprise had glued me to the floor. "Well!" he exclaimed. "I sure had a hard time getting out of that damned hospital." He fell into an armchair and continued, "What a scene with Dr. Laforge! I had a lot in my favor, though. My ribs are taped, nothing else is broken, there's no infection, so why should they want to keep me there?"

Raising his eyebrows, he looked at me and added rudely, "You look awful. What's the matter with you?"

Pulling myself together with difficulty, I answered, "Nothing. I guess I just look odd because of the shock of seeing you." Then, angrily, I asked, "Why in the world did you leave the hospital so soon? You're crazy! You're even using a cane—"

"Enough!" he ordered. "Offer me a cup of coffee instead. Then I'll need a taxi for an errand I have to run in Paris. Yours will do—provided it's available, of course."

"It's at your disposal," I sighed. "You want me to drive you to 174 Boulevard Voltaire, don't you?"

"Naturally," he said bitterly. "I want to give my best wishes to the happy couple. That's the way it's done, isn't it?"

Martin looked exhausted, and I felt that nothing about this visit to Richard Norton augured well. I



could sense that he was desperate enough to try anything. How could I get him to calm down? Certainly not by contradicting him.

"I'll make you some coffee," I said resignedly. "Then we'll go." I couldn't help adding, "But what do you hope to prove? You were right—it certainly seems Juliana was sick. I suppose she was suffering from exhaustion and that's why she went to Berlioz Street; and it was then that she must have decided to marry Richard Norton. For reasons of her own she wanted to do so in privacy, without a lot of fuss, so she took advantage of the time that everyone thought she was in the hospital."

"Plausible, but I don't believe it," retorted Martin with a withering look. "I want to hear Juliana tell me with her own lips that she wants to marry Norton."

I went into the kitchen. I wasn't convinced, either, that what I had suggested was what, in fact, took place. There was something very wrong, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The speed with which Dr. Norton had won Juliana's hand was definitely suspicious, for one thing. When I'd first driven him to Marnieres, there had been no question of a wedding. The doctor hadn't even been sure about Martin's importance to Juliana. At least that was what I had gathered during our conversation at the Cascade.

The law called for posting banns at least ten days before a wedding. The banns for Juliana and Richard, therefore, must have been put up on the first Monday after that Friday, or else the ceremony couldn't be taking place as soon as it was. Therefore,

the doctor must have persuaded Juliana to marry him in about forty-eight hours. Highly unlikely.

And the necessary legal papers? How had he so quickly procured all the necessary documents?

Then I remembered that, when we had been about to leave the kitchen at Marnieres, Dr. Norton had asked Charles if the suitcase and papers were ready. Were these the documents? Had he been so sure he would win Juliana's hand? Or had he annihilated her will with drugs?

If I had thought that the wedding was a logical result of a normal courtship, I would have felt a secret satisfaction. Then whatever it was that Martin felt for me—and I sensed there was something—might yet evolve into love. I'd show him how understanding I was. I'd be the friend who was there when the going was rough—someone who little by little became indispensable. . . . But, alas, that wasn't the case. There was something very *abnormal* about the whole business.

But perhaps we were about to solve the puzzle, for wasn't the key to the whole enigma at Boulevard Voltaire? This time Martin had every chance of finding his Juliana. And when he did I'd fasten my suitcase and flee to the south of France.

When I came back into the living room with the coffee, Martin was asleep. I set the tray on the table and feasted my eyes on the face of the man I loved. I had no doubt that this would be the last time I'd be able to look at him so lingeringly.

His face was still bruised looking, of course, but I loved it nonetheless. Then I dropped my eyes to his

hands, with their long, expressive fingers. For some time I sat there staring at them, regretting the caresses they would never give me.

Suddenly the hands shot upward and started turning back and forth. My startled gaze flew to Martin's; he was watching me sardonically. Feeling myself blush, I looked away and began to serve the coffee.

"Well? Are my fingernails clean?" he asked as he took the cup I held out to him.

I shrugged and held back with great difficulty the tears that burned in my eyes. I was embarrassed beyond belief and this further humiliation was too much.

He took a sip of his coffee and put his cup down on the table without taking his eyes off me. But his expression had changed—it had become serious and concerned. "Come sit here," he ordered, indicating the arm of his chair.

I obeyed without thinking, too tired to argue or even to try to understand. All I wanted was for him to disappear as quickly as possible from my life. His presence served only to torment me.

"So, little one, are you still in love with me?" He had put his hand on my knee.

The contact and his words hit me like the lash of a riding whip. I jumped up without thinking and found myself in the middle of the room. "In love with you!" I fumed. "The blow on your head must have damaged your brain!"

What did he expect? A sigh, a softly breathed yes-I-love-you-Martin as I swooned on his shoulder?

He'd wait a long time before he got any such thing out of me, the egotistical, self-serving—

"Ah!" His exclamation interrupted my pleasurable thoughts. "You gave me the impression of being, shall we say, particularly sensitive to my presence, Catherine. When you hid the hospital's address from me, you swore you did it so that you could see me again. Was that a lie, too?"

"I liked you well enough at the time, but a lot has happened since then. I noticed, before I was foolish enough to really fall for you, thank heaven, that you happen to be in love with Juliana. Sure, we had a light flirtation, you kissed me two or three times. . . . But I'm not an idiot. I know enough not to get involved with a man who's in love with someone else, especially when the someone else is a woman like Juliana!"

"You're an astute woman, Catherine," he answered with a crooked smile, "and most insightful. I never realized that you'd taken my feelings for Juliana into account."

"Well, now you know," I replied with exasperation. "And I wonder what you're waiting for before flying to her rescue. The taxi is at your disposal."

Martin's face darkened. He finished his coffee and rose painfully to his feet. Leaving him limping across the yard, I went on ahead with Biscuit to get my cab out of the garage. With some difficulty, Martin got into the front seat. Biscuit made himself comfortable on his lap and we drove off.

It was noon when we arrived at the Boulevard Voltaire. I managed to find a parking space not far

from number 174, and when I'd turned the ignition off I said to Martin, "Do you want me to come with you?"

"Absolutely," he answered authoritatively.

Leaving Biscuit in the car, we crossed the street, and I examined the six-story building with curiosity. Old and shabby looking, it didn't correspond at all to the type of place I'd imagined that rich people like Richard Norton and Juliana Bellanger would choose to live in. I expressed my thoughts to Martin.

"I was thinking the same thing," he said. "Norton must have sold his clinic in Dijon for a damned good price. He can certainly afford a comfortable apartment."

"You never know. The facade might be seedy but the interior might be very nice. That happens sometimes," I said without much conviction.

The door to the building was ajar, and we entered the dark and dirty vestibule. To the right, all along the peeling wall, stretched old mailboxes. On each of them a business card or a piece of paper carried the name of the occupant. Richard Norton's had been scribbled on the card of a Juan Fernandez, who lived in number 304.

"You know this Fernandez?" I asked.

"Never heard of him," he groaned. "Let's go up."

The ascent to the third floor was painful—physically for Martin and emotionally for me. The steps had been worn in the center by the tread of many feet, and they obviously hadn't received the sweep of a broom for weeks. As for floor wax, the superintendent must not have known the product existed.



The sordid atmosphere multiplied my anguish. Juliana couldn't possibly live here. Yet she was going to marry the man who did. We weren't living in the Middle Ages so she must have consented to the wedding—surely she wasn't being forced to marry against her will. . . . I sensed a catastrophe.

Outside the door to apartment 304, Martin put his finger to his lips and stood very still. We listened, but not a sound came from Fernandez's apartment. Noticing that the door was badly in need of a coat of paint, I once again wondered why the psychiatrist had chosen such a residence and what Fernandez and Dr. Norton had in common.

"Ring the bell," whispered Martin in my ear. I obeyed. Nothing moved in the apartment. I rang again, two times, three times. No one opened the door.

"I think it's pretty useless to persist," I said after a few minutes.

"Let's go see the superintendent," grumbled Martin. "I bet we'll learn some interesting information. You go ahead of me and ask the questions; I'll come in at the appropriate moment."

Some minutes later I knocked at a door on the ground floor. It was opened by an old woman who asked in a rough voice, "Yes? What do you want?"

"Does Dr. Richard Norton live here?" I asked politely.

Her eyes blinked and her crafty look was tinged with distrust. "Yes, what of it?" she answered after a second's hesitation. "You must have seen his name on the box before you went up."



"Yes, but no one was up there. Do you know when he's coming home?"

"Dr. Norton doesn't tell me what he's doing. He comes and goes. When he leaves on a trip, he doesn't have to tell me."

"And Mr. Fernandez? Do you know when he's coming back?" I insisted.

"He's away, too. Come back tomorrow. One of them may be in then." With fists on her hips she waited for me to leave.

At this point Martin stepped forward and pulled a bill out of his wallet. In a voice full of meaning, he said, "I would really like to have a word with you, Madame. Nothing compromising. But I'd be very appreciative if you'd answer two or three simple questions."

Her eyes fastened on the money and she said quickly, "Come in. I'll see if I can answer your questions."

As he came into the room, Martin slipped the bill into the old woman's hand and promised to give her another if her answers satisfied him. The woman motioned us to sit down and then said, "Go on, I'm listening."

"When did Dr. Norton supposedly move in here?" asked Martin.

"Well, a little more than a month ago—a month and a half maybe."

"Did he have a broken wrist at that point?"

"I believe he moved in the day after his accident. Yes, that was it. Mr. Fernandez came to see me and said that his friend Dr. Norton was going to live at

his place. He said his friend had broken his wrist the day before in a car accident and couldn't work for a while. The doctor was going to be looking for another apartment at the same time, because he wanted to open an office in Paris."

"And what does Mr. Fernandez do?"

"He's a salesman."

"Married?"

"Good heavens, no. I mean, just imagine. He's almost never home, always doing all that traveling...."

Martin was showing an exemplary patience I couldn't help but admire. "Dr. Norton's never in, either, is he?" he said. "His address is here, but in fact he lives somewhere else...."

The old woman squirmed in her chair. "I wouldn't know about that. I don't spy on my tenants. Mr. Fernandez said that he was going to share his apartment with a friend and that's all I know."

"Yes," Martin said thoughtfully. "That's why, in good faith, you can put up a residence certificate for Dr. Norton so that he'll be able to get married in Paris."

"I don't see anything wrong with that," retorted the superintendent, suddenly worried.

"Nor do I," assured Martin with a grim smile. He stood up, and I did likewise. If he was satisfied then it was fine by me. I had only one desire: to get out of this dingy building.

He handed another bill to the concierge. "Last question: have you ever seen Dr. Norton's fiancée?"

"No," she answered. "I didn't even know he was

engaged, but between you and me, he's probably living with her in a comfortable nest somewhere. The apartments here aren't really what a doctor and his wife would like. They're all right for down-and-outers, though."

## Chapter 10

As soon as we left the building I filled my lungs with a deep breath of air. It wasn't that Paris air, even in spring, is particularly pure, but after the staleness of the building it seemed to have a special freshness.

Turning toward Martin, I felt my heart contract. He was leaning heavily on his cane and he looked very depressed. I couldn't bear to see him so low when he was usually so brimming with life. Forgetting all about my jealousy, I said sadly, "I feel horrible. I was hoping we'd at least find Dr. Norton."

"Well, I'm not surprised," he responded calmly. "You underestimate the intelligence of our dear psychiatrist. He's got an address here so that he can quickly—and secretly—get married. Fernandez and the superintendent must be raking in a bundle—the one for putting him up, or rather saying he is, and the other for making out the certificate. But he must

be hiding somewhere in Paris with Charles and Juliana."

"I still don't get it," I objected. "It's either one of two things: Juliana is in perfect health and has decided to marry Dr. Norton. In that case they don't have any reason to hide. Or else she's been drugged and has no idea what's going on. But in that case, what's going to happen next Thursday? She'll have to answer yes to the justice of the peace and sign the papers...."

"That's exactly the part of the mystery that's puzzles me, too," he sighed. We took several steps toward the cab where a lonely Biscuit was looking dolefully out the window. Suddenly Martin stopped. "I can see only one solution: let's go see your Lieutenant Clavier."

"Yes, let's. We'll tell him the story, all the details, and I'm sure he'll help us. But we have to wait until two-thirty—he's never in his office before then."

After stopping for lunch, we drove to the Orfevres Quai, where Clavier's office was situated. Leaving poor Biscuit on his own once again, we entered the hallway outside the lieutenant's office. His assistant asked us to sit down and wait. "Mr. Clavier is busy with someone just now. You may have to wait a while."

"That's all right. We absolutely have to talk to him, so we don't mind waiting," I responded, determined to sit there all day if necessary.

Smoking cigarette after cigarette, Martin and I sat on the bench usually occupied by prisoners and witnesses to crimes.

Several times I tried to exchange some words with Martin, but he hardly answered me. Evidently I wasn't worth the effort. We saw several men in handcuffs being led by. There was one woman as well, and I confess that the sight particularly bothered me. I realized, of course, that she was much worse off than I was. I wasn't wearing handcuffs, nor was I going to jail, but I felt as guilty as if I had committed a major crime. And maybe I had. If only I had given the address of the hospital to Martin in the first place, we wouldn't have been sitting there now! Instead of wasting time with me that Sunday at the Old Towers Inn and at his place, Martin would have rushed off to Berlioz Street. He would have arrived in plenty of time to see Juliana, because she hadn't been spirited away from the hospital until five in the afternoon. At this moment I heartily wished he had found her.

Finally, after an hour and a half, we were told that Lieutenant Clavier would see us and we entered his office. A short man of about fifty, the lieutenant was a nervous individual, brimming with intelligence and always impeccably dressed. He was efficient as well as scientific; a bachelor who appreciated beautiful women and good food.

I introduced Martin to him. Inviting us to sit down and he asked, "Well, Catherine, problems? Tell me what brings you to my office. You look so serious...."

I took a deep breath and launched into my story. I told him everything, without omitting a single detail. Several times Martin injected a word to clar-



ify certain points concerning Juliana, Charles and Richard Norton.

After listening attentively to both of us and scribbling some notes from time to time, the policeman finally sat back in his chair and looked dubiously at us. "Let's see what we have: Mrs. Bellanger, her brother-in-law and this Dr. Norton have disappeared. You want us to find them, but you don't know what charges to lay since you aren't sure what wrong has been done."

"You see, that's why we're coming to you. I don't think the police would act on what I've just told you. But since you're a friend, and you know I wouldn't come to you unless I was sure there was something very wrong . . ." I let my words trail off.

"The story is curious," Clavier said musingly. "Institutionalizing people against their wills are still relatively frequent occurrences, but that isn't the case here. Mrs. Bellanger apparently agreed that she needed help. Mr. Bellec claims that she's perfectly sane. You yourself, Catherine, judged her to be tired but normal. Both of you suspect Dr. Norton of influencing her in an unorthodox way to get her to marry him. Now . . ." Here he paused and looked at us both. "Isn't that a bit farfetched? Did it ever occur to either of you that perhaps they simply want to get married and be left alone?"

"No!" Martin stated emphatically. "Why, then, would Norton have done such a song and dance with Catherine? Why disappear so completely? Why stop me from seeing Juliana? Why sell the clinic in Dijon? Why—"

"I'm positive, lieutenant, there's something crooked in the whole affair," I interjected forcefully.

"Okay, let's say there is," conceded the policeman, "but what can I do? It's impossible to open an inquiry. As I said, you don't have any grounds to justify it."

"Can't you try to find out where Dr. Norton is? If Martin could only confront him, he'd sort it out with him," I offered timidly.

"It's feasible. However, I doubt that I could find out in the short time left between now and Thursday, the wedding day. Your three friends could be hiding somewhere outside Paris. In town or out, they've must be staying at the residence of a third party. Now that's the difficult part. Do you realize the time it could take?"

"I don't doubt it," murmured Martin. He thought a few moments and then turned to me. "Catherine, would you be kind enough to leave me alone for a few minutes with the lieutenant? I want a few words with him alone."

Mortified, I pretended to take the suggestion agreeably. "Of course!" I said, smiling. "Take your time."

When I went back out to the corridor, I was fuming with anger, and my curiosity was almost unbearable. What could Martin possibly want to reveal that I couldn't hear? Probably details about Juliana and himself. I'd always felt that Lieutenant Clavier had a certain amount of respect for me. But now I wondered if I'd gone down in his estimation. Not only had he heard my confession about my lie to

Martin, but he was now, perhaps, receiving an earful concerning Martin's feelings toward Juliana. How young and foolish he must think me!

Their conversation lasted nearly half an hour. Finally the door of the office opened. Lieutenant Clavier and Martin shook hands heartily.

"I understand and you can count on me," the lieutenant was saying. With a wave in my direction he added, "See you later, Catherine. It'll be soon."

"Yes, I hope so," I answered, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice. Unbelievably an amused look crossed Lieutenant Clavier's face. Oh God, it was worse than I'd feared. He was actually laughing at me! Furious, I turned on my heel and headed toward the stairs, deliberately walking quickly. Martin wouldn't be able to keep up, and that was the idea. I was too angry at him to want to be near him. I hoped he'd call to me to wait. I'd punish him by doing the opposite.

Martin never did ask me to slow down, but suddenly taken by remorse, I stopped in the middle of the stairs. "Satisfied with your interview with my friend?" I questioned.

Finesse has never been my forte.

Martin's reply was a sarcastic, "It was man-to-man talk, my dear," and he continued to limp down the stairs. Outside he took my arm and said easily, "Let's go to your place. I need a good bath. Then we'll go eat at our Russian restaurant. I feel like going back there, don't you?"

I had carefully guarded the memory of that evening spent with him. It had been a wonderful night,

and to try to repeat it would be a letdown. A mood like that couldn't happen twice—especially considering the ill feelings between us at the moment.

However, I told Martin that yes, I felt like going back there. Not because I enjoyed tormenting myself, but because if I had to suffer because of him I wanted to do so near him.

AS I STOPPED the cab in front of my house, Martin leaned forward to look at the meter. He had insisted that I keep it on that morning before setting out for Boulevard Voltaire. I'd done as he wished; a taxi is a taxi and he would have had to take one in any case.

He pulled some bills out of his wallet and put them in my purse. A little embarrassed, I murmured a thank-you under my breath. He smiled and, without giving me time to react, leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips.

"That's your tip," he said mockingly.

If Biscuit hadn't been there I would have clouted him, no matter how sore his bruises were. "Stop this stupid game," I fumed, getting out of the car. "Come on in and take your bath."

Martin started to follow me, but stopped in the middle of the yard and said, "I forgot to ask you if you'd put me up until Thursday. I assume it's okay with you?"

I shrugged. "I guess so. Your bed is still made up."

"You see," he explained as he started walking again, "I'd like to stay at your place until I hear from Lieutenant Clavier. Besides, I'd rather that everyone in Verneuil still continue to think I'm in Germany.

Obviously Charles and Richard don't want me to know anything about this marriage, so it would seem like a good idea to let them continue to believe that I don't. I bet they've even phoned my garage to make sure I'm still absent."

We entered my apartment and Martin went straight to the armchair he'd apparently laid claim to. Lowering himself gingerly onto it, he explained, "I'm sure I'm the last person they'd care to see at the wedding. My absence fits in with their plans perfectly."

"But if you'd stayed in Verneuil, you would have read the banns. Or, at least Mimi would have told you about them."

He smiled slightly. "The secretary at the village's town hall is an old girl friend of Charles's. She's still crazy about him. If he'd asked her she could have conveniently 'forgotten' to post the banns or she might, at least, have put them up in a half-hidden corner. Anyway it was a risk they had to take. But finding out that I was going to be out of town for two weeks, they did everything legally."

"So you intend to go to the wedding? You don't even know what time it'll take place."

"Lieutenant Clavier promised to find out. That's all he could do to help. Short of a miracle, it would be impossible to track down anyone in so little time."

Then Martin asked me to run a bath for him. While he washed, I changed my clothes. Not having many appropriate outfits, I donned the same dress I had worn the previous week. I doubted that he'd notice.

I had just finished brushing my hair when he called to me from the living room. I found him dressed in my bathrobe. He glanced at my dress, remarked, "Nice," then asked, "Could you run an iron over my pants? The accident didn't damage my suitcase, but the clothes inside are all wrinkled."

With a sigh I started to work. He watched me for a few moments, then said teasingly, "A foretaste of marriage. It's a state that entails some services, you know. Will you be willing to perform them?"

"What wouldn't a woman do for the man she loves?" I retorted acidly. "Too bad I haven't met him yet."

"Ah, yes," was all he said.

Half an hour later, both of us finally ready, we left for the Russian restaurant. During dinner Martin drank a great deal of vodka. Our conversation was strained, our thoughts elsewhere. At the end of the meal Martin ordered a bottle of champagne, called the musicians and had them play melodies that would have made a platoon of soldiers weep. Mechanically he took my hand. Until we left he didn't let go of it.

How long had we sat there without saying a word, so close and yet so far away from each other? I don't know. It was a strange and melancholy evening.

AS HE HAD the week before, Martin made breakfast in the kitchen. But instead of being awakened by him, it was the telephone that pulled me brutally from my sleep at ten o'clock. I heaved myself out of bed and ran into the living room to answer it.



It was the doorman of the Crillion Hotel. He was offering me an interesting run: driving an elderly Englishwoman to Versailles. Not to visit the château, which was closed on Tuesdays, but simply to take her to the Trianon Palace for lunch and drive her around the area.

"Don't accept any work, okay?" hissed Martin from the armchair where he was reading the paper. So I turned the job down, with the excuse that I was already engaged. When I hung up, Martin decreed, "For today, Wednesday and Thursday, your taxi is hired by me. Even if it doesn't leave the garage, I'll pay you. I have priority rights, don't I?"

"I guess so," I agreed resignedly.

"You're beautiful when you get out of bed," he continued, watching me with an indefinable look.

Registering suddenly that I was dressed only in my nightie, an almost transparent bit of nothing, I fled to my bedroom.

A little later, dressed in a sweater and jeans, I rejoined Martin in the kitchen. As Biscuit lapped up his milk, I sat down at the table and helped myself to a roll and some coffee, as well as a section of the paper Martin had bought.

"You could at least say good morning!" he complained.

"Oh, sorry. Good morning. Did you sleep well?" I answered distractedly, without even bothering to lower my paper.

Abruptly he yanked it out of my hands. "If you think I'm going to live like this for the next forty-eight hours, well, you're wrong. I can't stand sulks."

"I'm not sulking, I'm reading," I lied. "And please explain to me how you think the two of us can live together until Thursday."

"Well, we can't go out much. The lieutenant's going to call as soon as he has news, and someone has to be here to answer the phone. He knows I'm staying at your place till Thursday."

Decidedly my feelings on the matter hadn't counted at all. Martin and Lieutenant Clavier had tranquilly dealt with me and my apartment without even consulting me. "So we're going to stay holed up together for forty-eight hours," I moaned.

"Is the idea so repulsive?"

"Oh, no, it's all right." I kept myself from adding that, on the contrary, the idea pleased me and frightened me at the same time.

"As you've noticed," continued Martin, "I'm much better today. This morning I can walk without a cane. So I'll be able to cook and maybe fix a few things in your apartment."

A man used to organizing things, he set me diverse tasks to do. All morning he didn't leave me a moment to breathe. After having cleaned the whole place, I went out shopping for the list of things he had drawn up. And what a list! Then, while he simmered something on the stove—he wouldn't tell me what it was—I had to wash all the dishes he'd used.

While we were having lunch, Mrs. Martinon paid a visit. She fell into raptures over the rabbit in mustard sauce Martin had cooked.

"I'll give you the recipe," he promised, proud as a peacock. "But come have supper with us tonight. I'll

make you scallops à la Normand." And he turned toward me, adding, "It'll be pleasant having Mrs. Martinon eat with us tonight, won't it, Catherine?"

I could hardly disagree and I gave a weak smile of approval. The old busybody went back up to her place positively glowing, after she'd asked Martin a number of questions: "Why do you have a bandage on your head? Oh, a car accident? Where? Tell me...."

During the afternoon Martin didn't stop for a second. His energy made me dizzy. At six o'clock Lieutenant Clavier phoned. After greeting me briefly, he asked to speak to Martin. Their conversation was short, but it seemed to satisfy both of them.

"The wedding is supposed to take place Thursday morning at ten-thirty," Martin said when he'd hung up. "As for Señor Fernandez, he's been in Spain for the past three weeks. The lieutenant is doubtful he'll come up with any more information, but I thought as much." His face hardened. "We're going to have a little sport the day after tomorrow at the city hall," he muttered between clenched teeth.

"But what will you do? Create a scene?" I shuddered, horrified at the thought of an ugly confrontation.

"You'll see."

"You know, sometimes you frighten me, Martin."

"Don't think about it. For the moment let's keep living together like a young married couple—I mean, almost like a married couple. Don't you think it's fun?"

"Not really." I was lying. On the contrary, I was

loving every moment I spent with him. And I knew that, in barely two days, I'd be miserable.

Before he'd come, my apartment had been little more than a place to sleep. I'd been happy to come home and leave again in a hurry. But now the walls, the furniture, even the air I breathed had been transformed. Martin had given my home life. What emptiness I would feel when he left!

WEDNESDAY NIGHT I TOSSED and turned in my bed until dawn. Finally Martin knocked on my door and called, "Get up, Catherine. It's time."

I felt like a condemned prisoner in his final hour. This was the last time Martin would call me, the last time I'd have breakfast with him. But I couldn't let him know my real feelings and tried to appear in good spirits. It wasn't easy. I had a dreadful headache, puffy eyes and drawn features. I'd slept badly and it showed.

Deciding to brave it out until the end, however, I got up and went into the bathroom. A little later, having dressed and put on some makeup, I joined Martin in the kitchen.

His face looked worse than mine. The atmosphere during breakfast was nothing like the way it had been the past couple of days. We were nervous and silent, and neither of us felt like eating. Only Biscuit was his normal self, sniffing around the kitchen, wagging his tail.

Martin decided we should leave at ten o'clock, since he didn't want to arrive too early. "We shouldn't get there before ten-thirty, when the cere-

mony begins," he explained. "I want to surprise them in front of the justice of the peace." He stopped, lit a cigarette and continued, "My suitcase is packed, but I'll leave it here. I'll come back to get it and at the same time pay you what I owe you. I'm not sure where I'll sleep tonight; it may be here again. Everything will depend on what happens at the city hall. Now let's go!"

Just as we were leaving the house, Martin put a hand on my arm. "You've been wonderful since my accident. I'll never forget it, you know."

Despite the tears rising under my eyelids, I forced myself to say coolly, "I'd like you to remember something good about me! If I come out to Verneuil with my customer and we run into each other, maybe you can buy me a drink for old-time's sake."

I tried to move away from him, but he wouldn't let me. "Look at me," he ordered.

I had the feeling that his eyes could see right into my heart. An overwhelming shyness paralyzed me but, as if hypnotized, I obeyed him. Then, because I was afraid I was going to lose control, reach out to him and let flow all the words of love I'd been storing inside, I made a desperate effort and escaped, Biscuit at my heels. From the yard I called, "Close the door and put the key in the pot of geraniums. I'm going to get the car out of the garage."

Martin's leg was greatly improved, and his limp had almost vanished. As he quickly got in beside Biscuit and me, I noticed he had reverted to his previous morose mood. He indicated the meter. "Turn it on. Just because you got money from your parents

yesterday morning to pay your taxes doesn't mean you should work for free."

The traffic wasn't bad, so we arrived in front of the city hall at ten-twenty. I left the cab in Biscuit's care and like an automaton followed Martin into the building.

My mind was a jumble of thoughts, and to say I felt ill at ease was putting it mildly. My hands trembled, my heart was pounding and a cold sweat covered my back.

Once inside the city hall I simply walked behind Martin, barely noticing my surroundings.

Martin turned to the right, then up a short flight of steps, through a double door and up a white stone stairway. He stopped on the second-floor landing, turned to me and said, "Go have a peek, but don't enter the room if the ceremony's started. When there are a lot of couples the same day they have to wait for each other. I'll stay here. Come back and tell me what's going on."

I went up to the door, which was ajar, and cautiously peered into the room. A couple—not Juliana and Dr. Norton—were in the process of signing the marriage register. I looked quickly around the crowded room and finally spotted the tall figure of the psychiatrist. Returning to where Martin was waiting I told him what I'd just seen.

"Good," he said calmly. "The people who've just signed the register won't take long to clear out. After that it'll probably be Norton's turn."

There was a commotion at the doorway and about ten people emerged. The married couple didn't



appear to have been at all touched by the experience they'd just shared. I understood the reason when I overheard a woman who was following them out complain to her companion, "All the same, he might have added a few nice words. But nothing! Not a sentence more than the legal minimum, which he delivered in that awful monotone...."

I didn't have time to hear more, for Martin pushed me by the elbow. "Go on! And wave to me when the ceremony starts."

Once again I approached the door. The justice of the peace was intoning, "We're going to proceed with the marriage of Richard Norton, here present, and Juliana Bellanger...."

The words were lost on me. I was sure my eyes were playing tricks, for although Dr. Norton and Charles Bellanger were standing there, the blond woman next to the doctor was not Juliana.

Recovering my senses, I ran back toward Martin. "The woman," I panted, "the woman who's marrying Dr. Norton isn't Juliana. It's someone else!"

He gripped my arm. "Someone else? Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes! The justice of the peace said she was, but she wasn't. I'm positive."

"Okay, I'm going in there. Follow me. I might need you as a witness."

Martin rushed into the room and, stepping between the minister and the couple, pronounced in a loud voice, "I oppose this marriage!" Pointing his finger at the woman, he added, "This person is not Juliana Bellanger."

The official stood there with his mouth gaping. As Charles turned ashen, Dr. Norton bit his lip, and the false Juliana colored violently. An old man on the doctor's left blubbered in dismay, "What's going on? They asked me to be a witness, but I don't even know them. I don't want any trouble...."

But Martin had grabbed the psychiatrist by his lapels and was threatening between clenched teeth, "Tell me where Juliana is or I'll break your face in."

At that moment I was brushed rather roughly aside. "Out of the way, Catherine," stated the authoritative voice of Lieutenant Clavier. "And you, Mr. Bellec, keep calm, please."

Flabbergasted, I saw him wave his identity card under Richard Norton's nose while Martin stuffed his hands furiously into his pockets.

"The woman with you, is she or is she not Mrs. Juliana Bellanger?" questioned the lieutenant.

It was Charles instead of Dr. Norton who answered, "No, this woman isn't Juliana. I might as well tell you everything. I've had enough of—"

"Later," interrupted the lieutenant. "You're all going to explain everything in my office, but first I want to know where Juliana Bellanger is."

"195 Faisanderie," announced Charles, who seemed anxious to ease his conscience. "She's in Mrs. Mercadier's apartment, on the third floor."

"Are you Mrs. Mercadier?" the policeman asked the impostor.

"Yes, I am," she murmured almost inaudibly.

The justice of the peace started to speak, but Lieutenant Clavier stopped him with a gesture. "Excuse

me, I have one more question to ask these people. Then we'll explain everything." And looking fixedly at Dr. Norton, he continued, "What is Mrs. Bellanger's actual state of health?"

"She's sleeping, under the effect of tranquilizers. But rest assured, she's not in any danger, and a nurse is looking after her."

At that point Martin broke in and declared, "I'm going there right now. We can't leave her like that."

"All right," said the policeman. "But when you get there, don't do anything before the precinct doctor arrives—I'm going to send him over immediately. He'll examine Mrs. Bellanger and then probably have her taken to a hospital for observation. After you've seen her, come to my office." Turning to me, he added, "Drive Mr. Bellec over there, Catherine. And I'll want you back at my office, too, so I can record your statement."

I didn't have time to agree or disagree. Martin had taken me by the arm and, glaring at the crowd of curious people who had gathered, was already leading me toward the exit.

## Chapter 11

On Faisanderie Street Martin jumped out even before I had time to park. Leaving me there, he ran to the entrance of number 195 and went inside.

Love had certainly given him wings! As if under a spell, he had forgotten his aches and pains and no longer even seemed aware of my presence. Natural, I supposed, that he should leave me far behind. . . .

Alone once again, my anguish over losing Martin and my remorse about Juliana sunk me to the depths of despair. Biscuit seemed to sense my unhappiness and he licked my hand consolingly.

I patted his head distractedly and said aloud, "I guess I'd better go up there and see the poor woman. It's the least I can do." Nervously I got out of the car, entered the building and pressed the button for the elevator.

I didn't dare try to imagine the spectacle that

awaited me three floors up. I knew only that, no matter what happened, the bright bubble of my dreams was about to be pricked. I was resigned to a life of loneliness. All I was able to hope for was that I would lose my deep feelings of guilt and regain some peace of mind; and all that depended solely on Juliana's health.

The door of the apartment was ajar. I pushed it gently. In the vestibule a distressed young woman in a white uniform looked up at me. I asked her the question that leaped to my lips: "How is Mrs. Bellanger?"

"She's fine. She's under sedation, that's all."

Half-reassured, I let out a deep breath while the nurse continued, "What's going on? I was insulted and practically knocked down by a man who said his name was Bellec. He ordered me not to move before the police arrive, and then he rushed into the bedroom. I don't understand what's happening. Dr. Norton phoned the agency and asked for a nurse. I was hired for one morning. When I arrived, the patient was sleeping and the doctor ordered me to stay near her until he came back."

"Has she woken up since you've been here?"

"Just once. She asked for something to drink, then went back to sleep again."

I made myself smile at her. Evidently she didn't know anything, and I sympathized with her distress. "Don't worry," I said reassuringly. "You won't be mixed up in anything. I'd like to see Mrs. Bellanger. Where's the bedroom?"

"The first door to the right, along the corridor."

"Stay here, I'll be back in a few minutes."

The door to Juliana's room was open. Not daring to go in, I stopped in the doorway. In a glance I took in the beautiful decor of the room, all luxury and elegance. But then my gaze was riveted to the two occupants.

Juliana was lying in a huge bed, which was covered by a magnificent fox spread. Sitting next to her, Martin was softly stroking her hair. "You're here at last," she murmured. "I've been waiting for you such a long time."

"Yes, my darling," he answered. "The nightmare's over. There's nothing to be afraid of now."

Unable to listen to any more, I turned abruptly and moved away. For them, I didn't exist; I would have to leave them alone to talk about their future, while I sought refuge in my past. I was sure that from then on I would find happiness only in my memories.

There was no use kidding myself. What other man could offer me even a quarter of what Martin had given? These past few days . . . weren't they worth a whole lifetime? I didn't have any right to complain. Many women had never known love at all!

I went back to the vestibule, my face mirroring the sadness that was sweeping my heart. The young nurse noticed my morose expression and, afraid that something had happened to Juliana, asked worriedly, "Is the patient awake? Does she need me?"

"No, she doesn't need you. Having Martin at her side is the best remedy on earth for her."

"Oh, good. I was worried for a minute," she breathed.



"I might as well leave," I said mournfully. "A doctor will be along shortly. Would you kindly tell Mr. Bellec that I've gone? Though he won't be overly concerned about me in any case."

"You're very pale all of a sudden. Don't you feel well? Maybe you should sit down," the nurse suggested, once again worried.

She tried to take my arm, but I pushed her away. "No, leave me alone. I want to get out of here, that's all. I've had enough. . . ." And leaving her completely at a loss, I ran out the door and toward the stairs, too distraught to wait for the elevator.

I wasn't even in the cab before I burst into tears. I got in and started the engine. Instead of going toward the police station, I drove to the Boulogne Woods and circled the lake until I was able to pull myself together.

WHEN I ARRIVED at the station a little after noon I was immediately shown into Lieutenant Clavier's office. He was with a stenographer.

"Well! You certainly took your time getting here," he growled. "How's Mrs. Bellanger? The doctor I sent hasn't phoned me yet. I hope he doesn't take much longer."

"I saw her only briefly," I replied. "Martin was at her bedside and they seemed to have a lot to say to each other—I didn't want to butt in. All I can tell you is that she's been sedated, but otherwise it seems she's normal."

I was making a superhuman effort to appear composed, and I hoped the lieutenant didn't notice my

struggle. "Fine," he said. "Now let's get to your statement. What interests me first of all is what happened on Friday, April twelfth, the day you drove Richard Norton to Marnieres, then took him and Mrs. Bellanger to the hospital on Berlioz Street...."

For more than an hour he had me recount almost everything I knew about the affair, while the stenographer took it all down. During this time the precinct doctor phoned. From Lieutenant Clavier's face I was able to learn that the news was good. After hanging up he told me with a satisfied smile, "Mrs. Bellanger will pull out of it with no problem. A week in the hospital should be enough to detoxify her from the drugs that were pumped into her. But let's finish your statement and I'll tell you everything."

Around two o'clock I finally read and signed my statement. Then Lieutenant Clavier stretched and announced, "Now we're going to have some sandwiches and coffee." He picked up the phone and gave his request to an assistant, then turning to the stenographer, ordered, "Dumoinès, make yourself scarce, okay? Get something to eat and be back here in half an hour."

When we were alone, the policeman lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "You know, it's a curious story. Norton had it all neatly planned out and he was two jumps from the finish line. It all started when Mrs. Bellanger perfected that formula for the lubricant. It's likely to bring in a considerable fortune, and Norton started looking for a way to get it. Marrying the beautiful widow seemed the easiest solution. She didn't respond to his overtures, how-

ever, so he tried to work on her in other ways. With the help of Charles and the Spanish couple he himself had placed at Marnieres, he started administering drugs to her in her food without her being aware of it. But...."

Already I had stopped listening. All I could think about was what the conclusion of this affair was costing me: Martin, and with him all my dreams. Norton's diabolical machinations and Charles's weaknesses didn't matter to me. I didn't care that Mrs. Mercadier was Dr. Norton's faithful secretary and that Juan Fernandez was Tita's brother.

As I tried to look attentive, my thoughts kept flying to Faisanderie Street. I couldn't blot out the picture of Martin sitting on Juliana's bed, Martin caressing her hair and murmuring tender words.

I jumped when Lieutenant Clavier said severely, "Are you listening to me, Catherine? You seem to be elsewhere."

"Yes, yes, I'm listening."

I heard vaguely that it had been through the secretary at the village town hall that Charles had managed to get Juliana's birth certificate as well as the documents on Pierre's death. Armed with these, Mrs. Mercadier had been able to take the place of the young widow at the wedding. After that, still drugged and faced with a *fait accompli*, Juliana either would have had to resign herself to the marriage or be shut up in a psychiatric ward for the rest of her life.

Now, I mused, she would live with Martin. He'd probably move in with her at Marnieres. Mimi

Tabardieu would prepare the wedding feast. The whole village would attend....

A sensation that I was suffocating came over me. I had to escape. When the assistant came in with coffee and sandwiches, I stood up. "Excuse me, lieutenant, but I have to go. I have a customer waiting for me at the Maurice Hotel, so if you don't need me for anything else...."

He raised his eyebrows. Obviously he didn't believe me, but I didn't care. "So that's why you seemed so distracted. What a professional conscience! And here I thought you were thinking about your true love."

"I don't have a true love. I'm perfectly happy being single and I don't have the slightest desire to change my status," I retorted, reaching the end of my rope.

"Now don't get angry. I'm only joking. See you soon, Catherine. Keep in touch."

I headed quickly for the door, murmuring, "Yes, of course I will. And thank you for all your help. So long!" A few minutes later I was outside. With slow steps I headed for my taxi. I got in and mechanically patted Biscuit, then started the car and pulled away from the curb without even thinking about where I was going.

I knew I wanted to put off going home, because there I'd only wallow in my depression and loneliness. Maybe, I thought, I could gather my reserves by driving around the city. Noticing that my meter was still running, I turned it off without even looking to see what the total was. I wouldn't bother to

charge Martin for his last ride in my car. It would be my parting gift to him.

A man on the sidewalk hailed me. By reflex I stopped. After giving me an address, he tried to start a conversation, but I didn't even bother to answer him. When I let him off at his destination he paid me but didn't leave a tip. "That'll teach you to be pleasant to people," he said angrily. "And it's the last time I'll ever take a cab driven by a woman!"

I'm not the type to take comments like that sitting down, but this time I made absolutely no reaction. Nothing, not even insults, could touch me.

I felt like having a cup of coffee. I parked the car and, accompanied by Biscuit, entered the nearest café and found a table by a window. For a long time I sat there as though in a trance, watching the passersby without even seeing them. The thoughts racing through my head were sheer torment....

I'd fallen in love with Martin that very first day. And ever since then Juliana's shadow had been between us. Now, just as I'd been dreading, she was no longer a shadow, but a flesh-and-blood woman whom Martin could hold in his arms.

I was convinced that if Juliana hadn't existed, Martin would have loved me. I knew he felt something for me; there was a magnetic attraction between us, and we both knew it. I had often had the impression that we'd been made for one another.

I had to stop torturing myself this way. The smart thing to do would be to go home, pack my bag and head off first thing in the morning for my parents' place.



AGAIN SENSING MY DISTRESS, Biscuit huddled against me affectionately. Night fell slowly. Since I'd arrived home I'd been lying prostrate on the living-room couch, my eyes fixed on Martin's suitcase. When would he come for it? Tonight? Tomorrow?

I had decided to leave at dawn for the south of France, and I prayed Martin would arrive before then. Why was I willing to inflict the added suffering upon myself? Simply because I loved him from the very core of my being. I'd have done anything just to see his face once more for a few moments. When he was with me, I seemed to experience in one hour more feelings than I had in years. My awareness heightened, my responses became deeper and more passionate, and my sensitivity sharpened to such a pitch that I vibrated like a violin string.

At eight o'clock Mrs. Martinon called my name and knocked on my door. I didn't answer her. She jiggled the doorknob, but I'd taken the precaution of locking myself in. "Catherine! You're not ill, are you?" she asked anxiously.

I replied in what I thought could pass for a sleepy voice, "No, I've just gone to bed early. I'm leaving tomorrow morning for my parents' place and I want to be well rested for the trip. I'll come up then to say goodbye and to give you my key."

Resignedly the woman went back up to her apartment. But she had pulled me out of the numbness in which I'd been taking refuge for the past few hours.

I rolled off the couch and Biscuit began to jump up and down excitedly. He was hungry, and then I remembered that I hadn't eaten anything for



twenty-four hours. I decided I'd better feed both of us, even though I had no appetite whatsoever, and I headed toward the kitchen.

I had a long drive ahead of me the next day, and I needed the strength. So, after opening a can of dog food for Biscuit, I fried an egg for myself, which I ate standing up in front of the stove.

I went into the bedroom and started to pack for the trip. I was in the process of piling some clothes into my bag when I heard footsteps on the walk. Biscuit jumped up joyously and ran to the door. The steps sounded louder, and then I heard a firm but quiet rap.

For a second I couldn't move. I didn't need to see or hear Martin to know it was him.

"Good evening, Catherine," he said when I opened the door. I thought I detected a certain embarrassment, a vulnerability in his tone.

"Good evening, Martin. How's Juliana?" I said quickly, moving aside to let him enter.

"As well as possible. I've found her an excellent nursing home. In a week or so they think she should be able to go back to Marnieres. After a period of convalescing, she'll be able to return to work."

"And Dr. Norton and the others?"

"Juliana doesn't want to press charges. I don't know what Lieutenant Clavier has decided or whether he'll charge them or not. In any case, Norton will be dealt with by the medical association. Charles has agreed to my suggestion that he take a job with a farm-machine manufacturer in Germany. He's quite skilled in mechanics, and if he works

hard, he could get himself a diploma as a technical engineer. Later, we'll see. I don't know what's happening to Mrs. Mercadier or Tita, but that's the least of my worries."

"So you've come to get your suitcase?"

"Yes, and to settle accounts with you. I owe you a lot—"

I really didn't have it in me to talk about money so I interrupted him, "When are you going back to Verneuil?"

"I don't know yet. That all depends...."

We were standing face to face in the middle of the room, suddenly not knowing what else to say. Martin reacted first. Heading for "his" armchair he said, "You know, this is an occasion that calls for champagne. You wouldn't happen to have any down in that cellar of yours, would you?"

It just so happened that I did have a bottle of champagne I'd been keeping for a "special occasion." Unfortunately "special occasions" were not major occurrences in my life, so the bottle had been there for some time. I supposed that opening it now was the least I could do for Martin.

When I told him I had some, he was delighted. "Terrific! And there's so much to celebrate! We've had quite a day, haven't we?"

"That's true. You must be very happy."

"I am. But I hope to be even more happy in a short time."

My throat knotted. Yes, in a short time, Juliana and he.... To hide my sudden tears, I hurried down to the cellar for the champagne.

When I came back to the living room, Martin had gotten out champagne glasses and had put some ice in a bucket. He opened the bottle and filled the glasses. "To your health!" he said, raising his glass toward mine.

"To your happiness!" I responded, with death in my heart.

A strange look crossed his face. "Come here," he ordered, sitting in his chair and slapping the arm with the flat of his hand.

"No, Martin, I—"

"Don't be silly," he cut in with his no-nonsense voice. "What are you afraid of?"

I shrugged and, too tired to argue, gave in to his wish.

"Are you going to visit your parents now?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm leaving very early tomorrow morning."

"May I come with you?" he asked very softly.

"What?" I couldn't believe my ears. Was he making fun of me?

"I said may I come with you? Will you take me along? How much more plainly can I say it?" He smiled at me almost as if we shared a joke, then put both of our glasses on the floor.

"But why? What about Juliana?"

"What about her? She's fine. She's in the hands of an excellent doctor, and she's in a first-rate nursing home. She can get along without me for several days—time enough for me to meet your parents. I don't want to marry you without letting them know. We'll have to decide with them when and where the

wedding will take place. Personally, I think it should be held in Verneuil, in the middle of June."

Bewildered, not knowing if I was dreaming, I stared at him. "But you love Juliana!"

"Yes, I do—like a sister," he explained. "We grew up together, you see. Our fathers were childhood friends, as well. When Juliana's father died, her mother, an American, went back to the United States. She figured she'd be staying there only a short while and so she left her daughter with my parents. Juliana at that point was barely a year old, the same age as me. But her mother stayed in the States and remarried. After that she made only occasional, brief visits to France. She had two other children by her second husband, and although she sent money for Juliana's education, she never had Juliana come to the States to live with her. Thus Juliana and I grew up together; we were very close. I've never thought of marrying her, though."

Tears were springing into my eyes, but this time tears of joy. "So is it me you really love?" I asked incredulously. "Is it true?"

With one hand he pulled me onto his lap and kissed me deeply. Then he took my face between his hands and looked at me. Little flames were dancing in his eyes. "I love you," he told me gravely. "And I want to marry you." Then, becoming once again his exuberant self, he almost let me fall off his lap. "Now let's have another glass of champagne to drink to our happiness!"

For more than an hour we sat there, Martin holding me on his lap, the pair of us making all kinds of

plans and punctuating them with kisses. Martin organized our future down to the smallest details. As we discussed our wedding plans, he suggested that we invite Lieutenant Clavier. That jogged my memory and I asked, "By the way, why did you have me leave his office the other day?"

"So that I could explain to him the truth about Juliana and me, and also to confess my feelings about you. I wanted him to come to the city hall and was afraid he might think I was acting out of jealousy. On the other hand, I didn't want you to learn how I felt about you just yet, especially right there in front of someone else. Love should be discussed when two people are alone together."

"Oh, Martin," I sighed. "If only you knew how happy I am!"

"Well, I know how happy I am."

Then he added, "And starting tomorrow morning, you're going to be my own personal chauffeur. I'm going to be needing your taxi every day, forever, so it will never be free again. And I want to be the last person to sign your autograph book!"

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Until Martine met Richard, she was young, carefree and happy. But now she was irresistibly drawn to a man who worshipped the ghost of a woman who had died tragically....

**27. Web of Fear by Luisa-Maria Linares**

Danielle was lonely in Paris without her husband. Then suddenly her hollow life became complicated—by a half-empty suitcase and a dead body!

- 28. Journey into Danger** by Doris Faber  
Lorraine had gone to Japan to find Ralph, her childhood sweetheart. But instead of Ralph she found—a murderer!
- 29. Spell of the Antilles** by Liliane Robin  
Yvonne flew to Guadeloupe for a peaceful holiday—and found herself trying to solve the mystery of her sister's sudden death.
- 30. Heart's Ransom** by Caroline Gayet  
Julie loved her fiancé, Simon. She was in love, and happy—until the night someone threatened her life!
- 31. Time of Illusion** by Roberta Roleine  
Lured by the haunting strains of a violin, Simone found herself in love...trapped by the man she should have feared the most.
- 32. Dark Shadow of Love** by Helena Simart  
Angela hated Steve when they met...but her hatred was fast turning to love. Only one thought struck terror into her soul—was she in love with a murderer?
- 33. Letter from a Stranger** by Liliane Robin  
Jennifer was on a train, prisoner of a man she detested. The train sped through the night, its destination Venice—but for Jennifer, it was a journey into terror!
- 34. Fated to Love** by Roberta Roleine  
Paulette awoke, screaming, from a horrible nightmare. But soon the nightmare started to come true. She had to stop it from unfolding to its cruel end...the death of the man she loved.

**35. Cruel Masquerade by Helena Simart**

Corinne vowed she would avenge her sister's death. She knew Raymond was implicated in the tragedy, so she set a trap for him—but she trapped herself!

**36. Affair of Hearts by Denise Noël**

Elise and Julien were happily married. But then Julien met an enchanting green-eyed woman—and vanished. Those emerald green eyes were destroying Elise's world....

**37. Prisoner of Lemnos by Caroline Gayet**

The police found a body on a deserted beach...and turned Caroline's holiday into a nightmare. For the prime suspect in the murder was...her husband!

**38. Deadly Triangle by Roberta Roleine**

Nicole was torn between two men: Guy and André. But one of her suitors was a vicious killer...who might kill again. She couldn't choose!

**39. Lost Honeymoon by Claudette Jaunière**

Genevieve's husband had been kidnapped on the eve of their honeymoon, and now she knew why. Millions of dollars were at stake—and so was her life!

**40. Dangerous Pretense by Helena Simart**

Elisabeth, accepting an assignment to impersonate a playgirl heiress, expected a carefree country summer. But then she discovered that someone was trying to kill her....

**41. Kiss of Vengeance by Roberta Roleine**

Her trip to Norway to be reunited with Karl, her husband, was turning into a disaster—Karl had disappeared. Monica turned to his family. But they refused to believe she was Karl's wife!

**42. Identity Unknown by Lorena**

The man standing in front of Sarah was obviously poor – but undeniably attractive. Too late, Sarah realized she was in love with him...a total stranger!

**43. To Love Again by Denise Noël**

When Claire inherited a detective agency, she decided to investigate her fiancé's death. Only one person could get in her way – Simon Delaunay. Why wouldn't he stay out of her life!

**44. Fatal Legacy by Luisa-Maria Linares**

In a crowded airport, Audrey's traveling companion had been ruthlessly murdered. Audrey panicked. What if the bullet had been meant for her?

**45. Secret at Jester Moor by Roberta Roleine**

Tristan was her guardian, but Amanda hated him. She had to escape him now – or he would take her to his castle in Cornwall and lock her up....

**46. A Stranger Threatens by Léo Dartey**

It had started as an innocent visit. But Moira's peaceful stay at a quiet country home was disturbed – by a mysterious man with a gun!

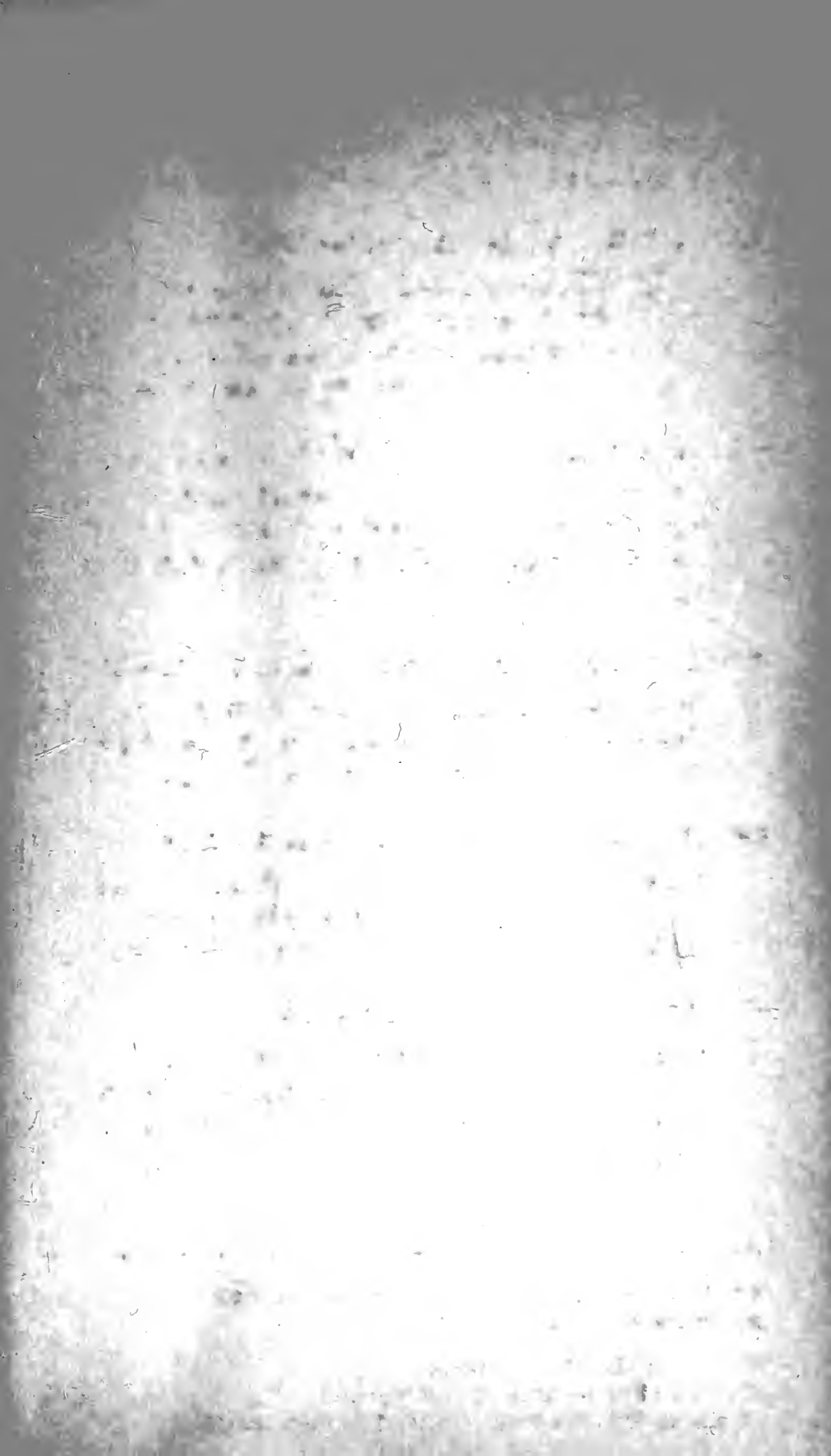
**47. Traitor's Mask by Denise Noël**

Laurel was determined to track down an unpunished war criminal. But her search ended when one of her suspects turned out to be her own husband.

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# The day had begun like any other...

But before it had ended, Catherine found herself plunged into a tangle of lies and deceptions, of intrigue...and love.

She had encountered a bizarre situation that threatened to turn her life upside down. Whom could she trust? The handsome doctor who seemed able to plumb the depths of her very soul, or the unpredictable, disturbing Martin Bellec, a man whose motives were impossible to gauge?

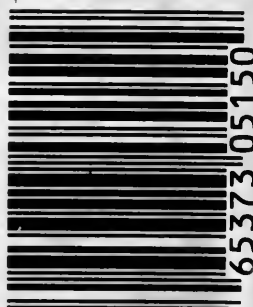
And although Catherine could not have known, her choice was a matter of life and death!



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