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Harlequin Presents...

ANNE  
WEALE

the river room



# **THE RIVER ROOM**

**Anne Weale**

"You're too naive. Don't trust David."

James's tawny eyes glinted in the light of the candle on the table between them. In spite of his warning, Marina knew that he was far more dangerous than her friend David.

James Sebastian was one of the nine top interior designers in Europe. Handsome, wealthy, excitingly masculine, he could have had any woman in the world--except Marina.

But now she was certain that, on her side, physical attraction had deepened into love. And loving him, how much longer could she resist him?

## CHAPTER ONE

THE first time Marina saw him, she was looking out of the shop window and he was emerging from the Plough with a tall, thin, elegant blonde who looked as if she might be an actress.

Marina had noticed the pale grey Rolls-Royce tourer as soon as she had come downstairs after her lunch break, but it had not surprised her particularly to see such an opulent car among the usual assortment of Land Rovers, Beetles and Minis in the parking spaces surrounding the Market Cross. The Plough, originally a coaching inn, was now a restaurant with a reputation for *haute cuisine* which often brought the rich and famous to the small country town where Marina had spent most of her life. Nor did it surprise her when, instead of returning to their car, the tall dark man and his companion strolled across the square towards her shop. Many of the patrons of the Plough were attracted by the sign *Antiques and Curios* hanging above the doorway of the Georgian house on the opposite side of the square. Sometimes they peered through the windows and went away. Sometimes the doorbell would jangle, and they would come inside to look round the large ground-floor showroom.

Marina's grandfather had taught her to distinguish the browsers from the buyers, and her judgment was seldom wrong. As the man and the blonde girl approached, she summed up the girl as one of the new wave of collectors who would be attracted by fashionable *bric-a-brac* rather than a serious and knowledgeable collector in search of the kind of antiques which had once been the shop's stock in-trade but were now increasingly hard to come by. The man she put down as an indulgent escort, prepared to pay for whatever took the girl's fancy.

But on this occasion her judgment was only partially correct. When the couple entered, the girl made a beeline for a beaded 1920s evening dress which was hanging at the back of the shop. The man, instead of glancing around him without much interest, said a civil 'Good afternoon' to Marina and, almost at once, made for a display of plates.

The one he took down from the rack was an early blue and white earthenware soup plate transfer-printed with a picture of a girl with two

goats. Watching him as he turned the plate to the light to look for the rippled glaze which was a distinguishing feature of many early pieces of Staffordshire blue, she was struck by the beauty of his hands; strong hands with long, square-tipped fingers and well-kept short nails.

Both he and the girl were very tanned, as if they had recently returned from wintering in the West Indies, or possibly from a skiing holiday. The girl wore a number of rings, but none of them was a wedding ring and Marina formed the impression that the pair were what gossip columnists called 'close friends'. Why she thought this she couldn't be sure, unless it was because she sensed that their relationship was an intimate one, yet the girl's pretty face lacked character and she did not look capable of interesting the man on any plane other than the physical.

In a way they were complementary as his face had too much character to be considered good-looking. It was a cold February day, and he was wearing a zip-up blouson of what Marina thought might be racoon fur. On some men it would have looked theatrical, even effeminate. Not on this one. His emanation of masculinity was as unmistakable as the fact that his girl-friend's aura of scent was French and expensive.

'Is there somewhere I can try this on?' asked the blonde.

The fact that her question caused Marina to give a slight start made her realise how intently she had been studying him and, with some embarrassment in case the other girl had noticed and been amused by her interest in him, she said, 'Yes, in the room on the right down the hall, but it isn't heated, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, that won't bother me,' said the girl, and she disappeared.

When she had gone, Marina said to the man, 'It's a pity that plate is damaged. You've noticed the crack, I expect.'

Her grandfather had always made a point of mentioning flaws and repairs, and she liked to do the same.

The man raised his head and looked at her. His eyes were a strange tawny hazel, almost golden in colour.

'Yes, I have. Isn't the price rather high in view of the damage?'

'It's a rare pattern. I've never seen it before, either in the shop or in the books on Staffordshire blue. At one time collectors would only accept perfect pieces. Now everything pre-Victorian has become so scarce that a hairline crack isn't important.'

He nodded. 'I'll have it.' He put it carefully on a table and began to prowl round, looking at other things. 'You've been in the trade for some time, I gather?' he said, speaking over his shoulder.

'For about twelve years.'

He glanced at her, lifting an eyebrow. She was twenty but looked younger. 'With your parents, presumably?'

'With my grandfather. He died early last year, after forty years in the trade. He'd have a fit if he could see some of the things I'm selling now. But if I stuck to his definition of antique the shop would be empty,' she said, with a regretful shrug.

The blonde reappeared. 'What d'you think, darling? Fun?'

The man looked her up and down, and she spun on her heel, making the beading shimmer. Her tanned back and bare brown arms looked incongruous in the wintry room where, even though there was an oil heater burning in one corner, Marina needed woollen tights and a thick-knit sweater over her lambswool polo to keep her comfortably warm. But the blonde showed no sign of goose-flesh. She began to parade round the showroom with the studied grace of a professional model.

'Watch it! You'll knock something flying.' The man seemed more interested in the contents of a glass-lidded display case in which Marina kept small objects too valuable to leave lying about.

The girl pouted at him. 'I thought I might wear it at the Wroxleys' party tonight.'

'Why not?' He looked at Marina. 'May I look at the portrait miniature you have in here?'

'Of course.' The key to the case, and her other keys, were clipped to her waist by means of an old silver chatelaine which had lost its original accessories. 'Would you like a magnifying glass?'

'I have one, thanks.' He unzipped his blouson and, delving in an inside pocket, produced a small folding glass through which he peered at the tiny portrait on ivory of a white-wigged gentleman in military uniform.

Marina, alert to the possibility that, in spite of the girl's reference to the Wroxleys, these people might not be trustworthy, did not say, 'The Vicar thinks it's by Samuel Shelley, but, 'Someone who used to collect miniatures when they cost a few pounds each thinks it's by Samuel Shelley.'

The man looked at the price tag and, without comment, put it on top of the plate he had bought. He continued to look at other things, and the girl went on prinking and preening in front of a mirror.

Eventually, she said, 'Yes, I'll have it. I was going to wear a Jean Muir tonight, but so will half the women there, probably. This dress has much more ... what's the word, darling?'

The man did not seem to be listening.

'Cachet?' Marina suggested.

'Yes, that's it—cachet. I say, you don't think it may start to smell nasty in a warm atmosphere, do you?'

'No, I'm sure it won't,' Marina assured her. 'It was sold to me by the family of an old lady who died here a few weeks ago. She had been a lady's-maid, and they told me she had a trunk full of beautiful clothes once worn by her former employer. She would take them out every so often to make sure the

moths didn't spoil them. I sold most of the clothes to a member of the Costume Society who has a weekend cottage here. This is the last of the dresses, and I think it was probably only worn once or twice. It's because the condition is so good, with all the beading intact, that it's rather expensive.'

'How much?'

Marina told her.

'Oh, that's all right. Put it on the bill,' the girl said airily. She went off to change.

By the time he was ready to leave the shop, the man had selected objects worth more than four hundred pounds, and Marina was obliged to say politely, 'I'm afraid. I can't accept cheques except from regular customers.'

'Very wise, but I'm paying cash,' the man said, producing a wallet.

It was the point at which a fellow dealer would have shown her his card and asked for a discount. However, the man said nothing and started counting out notes. As, usually, dealers were the only people who went about with fat wallets, and everyone else brandished credit cards, Marina could not repress her curiosity about him. When he had finished counting, she asked, 'Are you also in the trade?'

'No, merely "a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles",' he quoted, smiling at her.

Perhaps it was the brownness of his skin which made the excellence of his teeth noticeable. Everything about him—the thickness of his dark hair, the taut dark skin at his jaw, the strange, arresting golden eyes—was indicative of health and vitality. He made her aware suddenly that most of the people she met in her day-to-day life were overweight, or had colds, or were depressed by the weather and their fuel bills.

This man and the elegant girl were not of that everyday world, but came from another sphere of life where winter could be escaped, discomfort



avoided, and time passed quickly because there were always interesting things to do, colourful people to meet, parties, laughter, excitement.

As she made out a receipt and wrapped up the things he had bought, she was conscious that he was watching her.

'Have you another string to your bow if the antique trade, as you've known it, declines even further?'

'No, but I expect I shall manage. I'm lucky in that most of the people in this area who have nice things to sell still come to me rather than to what Grandfather used to call the bandwagon dealers—the ones who don't really know much about antiques except that there's money in them.' '

The blonde reappeared. She tucked her arm through the man's and snuggled against him. 'Thank you, darling. A lovely prezzy.'

In her high-heeled boots of soft pale grey leather she was as tall as he and had only to turn her head to murmur something in his ear. Marina had little doubt that she was promising to express her gratitude more demonstratively later on.

As she watched them return to the car, she wondered if the Logans had been invited to the Wroxleys' party. Mr Wroxley was an extremely rich manufacturer who, several years earlier, had bought a beautiful, shabby Queen Anne house a few miles away. The former owner, an impoverished baron, was no longer alive, and his widow lived in a granny flat in the home of her daughter, one of Marina's favourite customers.

The Hon. Mrs Robert Logan had been coming to the antique shop for as long as she could remember, but she and Marina had met when she was fourteen and Marina was eight and newly arrived from America where her parents had been killed in a road accident. Jane Logan had been, and still was, the owner of a magnificent dolls' house, and for years every penny of her modest pocket money had been spent on miniature furnishings. Now she came to the shop for things for her own house, but as her husband was not wealthy, and they had three sons to educate, she could not afford to indulge her taste for antiques as freely as the owner of the grey Rolls-Royce. It had

been Jane who had given Marina her first opportunity to demonstrate the flair which, but for her grandfather's sudden death, would have dictated her choice of a career.

In the closing years of his life, old Mr Merryweather had foreseen that, although he had taught her everything he knew, his granddaughter would not be able to carry on the business after his retirement. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, the demand for antiques had grown until it far exceeded the supply of fine quality furniture and porcelain, and in his eyes 'he artifacts of the Victorian period might sometimes have quality but never the beauty of the craftsmanship of earlier reigns.

He had encouraged Marina to develop her talent for drawing and design, and she had been in her first year at art school at the time of his fatal heart attack. He had been a vigorous man, who had expected to live into his seventies, and made little provision for any other eventuality. Consequently she had had no choice but to break off her training and take on the running of the shop, above which they lived, and which was her invalid grandmother's only source of income.

Had it been her grandfather who had been left on his own, semi-bedridden, Marina could have borne her disappointment with inward as well as outward fortitude. She had adored the old man; they had had everything in common, including a dutiful patience with her grandmother, a difficult woman who had become more trying in old age.

But for Jane Logan's friendship, Marina would have been very lonely. The town was the kind of picturesque, peaceful place which delighted the middle-aged and elderly but made the intelligent young gravitate to somewhere more lively. There were one or two farmers' sons who cast an interested eye in her direction, but she did not respond to their overtures, not wishing to spend her Saturday afternoons at rugger matches, and her Saturday nights eating T-bone steaks and listening to long dissertations on the merits of various sports cars.

Jane's husband was a naval historian who sometimes wrote scripts for television documentaries, and from time to time at their house Marina had met interesting people from the world of books and TV. But the company

she craved was that of her fellow art students, and she knew it might be years before she could resume the career so happily begun. Meanwhile she made the best of things and, since the success of her scheme for the Logans' drawing-room, a number of other interior design commissions had come her way.

The next day was Sunday and, after she had prepared the lunch, she went up to her workroom on the top floor to continue the work of hand-stitching two pairs of interlined curtains for the people who had bought White Lodge.

She had scarcely sat down when the telephone rang, and she hurried downstairs to answer it before the noise of the bell jarred her grandmother's sensitive nerves.

'Marina ? Jane here. I would have rung you earlier, but we went to a party at the Wroxleys' last night and didn't get home until all hours. Lucky me, having Mummy to baby-sit. Look, love, somehow or other you've got to get hold of a granny-sitter and get over here, double-quick. Your hero is coming for drinks.'

'My hero?' Marina said blankly.

'James Sebastian! We met him at the Wroxleys' last night. He's an absolute dish, I may tell you. He's going to do the whole house for them—the mind boggles at the cost of it. I knew you'd be green with envy at my meeting him, so I nobbled him for a twelve o'clock drink on his way back to London. He has to catch a plane or something. Probably he thinks we're as rich as the Wroxleys and that there's another huge fee in the offing. Anyway, he promised to drop in, and you've got an hour to make yourself stunning and join us.'

'Oh, Jane, I'd love to, but I can't,' Marina exclaimed in dismay. 'Mrs Bates is away, helping her daughter who's just had another baby, and there's nobody else I can ask.'

'Surely there must be?' said Jane. 'Mummy would come, but she's got a lunch date herself, dammit. Look, you wouldn't be gone much more than an hour.

Surely your grandmother can survive for that length of time? You bully her for a change. Tell her it's a chance you can't miss.'

'You know I can't. She'd work herself up, and cry, and I'd feel a monster. If James Sebastian is going to do up the Hall there'll be another chance to meet him. What's he like?'

'Difficult to describe. There's something ... oh, blast! Can you hear the howls in the background ? By the sound of it I've a casualty on my hands. I'll pop in and tell you all some time tomorrow. 'Bye!'

Marina heard the receiver go down at the other end of the line, and replaced her own with a muffled groan of frustration.

Of the nine leading European interior designer- decorators whose work she particularly admired—Henri Samuel, Stefano Mantovani, David Hicks, John Stefani- dis, Geoffrey Bennison, Dudley Poplak, David Mlinaric and Esteban Cerda—James Sebastian was the one whose style never failed to please her. To meet him would have given her spirits a fillip for months to come. She wondered if he would be amused or appalled by the fact that, when Jane had given her a free hand and a shoestring budget to redecorate their drawing-room, she had borrowed a couple of ideas from schemes of his seen in the glossy magazines.

He was a designer who not only excelled in the magnificence of *le Style Rothschild*—meaning interiors which combined priceless furniture and paintings with an atmosphere of ease and comfort—but who also had a genius for using inexpensive materials to achieve lavish effects. Not for him the stylish gimmickry of a collection of cobalt glass medicine bottles arranged on a white side- table; marvellous to look at, maddening to dust. His taste, although boldly inventive, was always compatible with the practicalities of life.

As it turned out, she did not have to wait until the next day to hear what he was like in person. Jane, guessing the intensity of her curiosity, came over to see her after lunch, when, as Mrs Merryweather was having a nap, they were able to retire to Marina's bedroom and chat in private.

'Well now, first of all,' Jane began, 'he was *most* impressed by our drawing-room. He said that as you had pirated several of his ideas, he had no compunction about pinching some of yours, and he actually got out a pad and made notes of those cushions you did for me.'

'He didn't?' Marina's grey eyes lit up with astonishment and pleasure.

'He did. He didn't find a single fault. I felt sure he was bound to criticise something, but he praised it all; the colours, the arrangement of the furniture, the grouping of the paintings—everything.'

'I expect he was just being polite.'

'No, because he asked for your telephone number. I think, when he comes back from abroad, he'll probably ring you up and offer you a place on his staff. Not that you'll take it, I know, but think what an invaluable contact for when you *are* free.'

It made Marina uncomfortable to discuss possibilities which could come about only after Mrs Merry weather's death.

She asked, 'What did Robert think of him ?'

'You know Robert. Before they met, he was inclined to bracket designers with male ballet dancers. But having met Sebastian, he had to admit there was nothing effeminate about *him*, whatever the others may be like.'

'Some are, some aren't, I suppose. How old is he ? What does he look like ?'

James Sebastian was not a designer who courted personal publicity, and Marina had never seen a photograph of him.

'Early thirties. Rather un-English looking. Very unobtrusively dressed compared with Mr Wroxley, who had a midnight blue moire waistcoat and bow tie to match, with diamond waistcoat buttons, studs *and* cufflinks—can you imagine?'

'Yes,' said the younger girl, laughing. Then, 'What do you mean by un-English looking?'

Jane hesitated. 'As a matter of fact I've been holding out on you. You've met him. He was here, in the shop, yesterday.'

*'That* was James Sebastian? Goodness!' Marina said faintly. 'Not at all the way I imagined him.'

'How did you imagine him?'

'I'm not sure, but not as he is.'

'There's certainly nothing of the languid aesthete about him. He struck me as an intensely physical person. If I hadn't been told what he did, I should have put him down as a climber or a professional skier.'

'Who was the blonde girl?' asked Marina.

'Lara Lester, a rising star in the fashion firmament, apparently. On the skinny side—as, of course, they have to be—didn't you think? Not particularly bedworthy. To quote Robert, "As flat as an ironing board". I should have thought a man like James Sebastian would have preferred someone more cuddly.'

'She had a beautiful skin. He bought her the beaded blue dress which she said she was going to wear last night. Did she?'

'Yes, and spent most of the evening making up to Mr Wroxley while James Sebastian was being lionised by all the women. I wonder if Mrs Wroxley put them in adjoining bedrooms ? She's rather a simple soul, and in spite of her daughter's matrimonial upsets, I don't think she realises quite what a wicked world we live in.'

'When they came to drinks with you this morning, did he and Lara seem fond of each other?' asked Marina. 'I thought yesterday he was very offhand with her, but it may have been only because he was busy buying up my best things.'

'Maybe he finds her boring except in bed. She didn't seem terribly bright. Her heavy flirting with Robert may have been to annoy James, or perhaps she's one of those girls who flirt with everything in trousers.'

About ten days later Marina answered the telephone and heard a girl's voice say, 'Miss Marina Linwood?'

'Speaking.'

'Hold the line, please, I have a call for you.'

There was a pause in which Marina wondered who it was whose time was so valuable that they could not waste even seconds, but expected her to do so.

'James Sebastian here. How are you, Miss Linwood?'

We met when I was in your shop recently, and I believe your friend Mrs Logan will have mentioned that I was impressed by your work in her drawing-room.'

'Yes, she did.'

Before she could think of a graceful way to express her pleasure at his approval, he continued briskly, 'As you probably know, the Wroxleys invited me to see their house with a view to redesigning the interior. Unfortunately they want it done at once, and I have too much work on hand to take on anything else for at least eighteen months. So I've had to refer them to another designer and, unless something unforeseen occurs, I don't expect to be in your part of the world for some time to come. Hence this telephone call to discuss something which I should have preferred to talk over in person.'

'I see.' The excitement she had felt at the sound of his voice began to ebb. She was not going to meet him again.

'Mrs Logan told me that you were at art school, training to become a professional designer, when your grandfather died. In the light of your work for her, combined with your knowledge of antiques, I'm prepared to offer you a junior position on my staff.'

'Thank you, Mr Sebastian. There's nothing I should like more. Unfortunately it's quite impossible for me to leave my invalid grandmother.'

'In view of the uncertain future of the antiques trade, don't you think it would be wise to persuade her to move to London and let you pursue a career with a more secure future?'

'If I could persuade her, I would, but I know she will never move from here. Besides, here I can be within call most of the time. In London I'd be out all day, and I shouldn't be able to afford a full-time companion for her.'

'No, I see your difficulties. I'm sorry. It's a pity for your gifts to be wasted. However, if the time comes when you can move, come and see me.'

'I will. Thank you very much.'

'Goodbye, Miss Linwood.'

'Goodbye.' She replaced the receiver, and stared dully at her reflection in the looking glass above the telephone table.

The mirror reflected a face which depended for its charm not on colouring—her hair was light brown, her eyebrows and lashes rather darker—but on its shape and expression. Wide-set eyes above broad, high cheekbones and a wide, pretty mouth gave it character, and expression sometimes gave it beauty. When she smiled, people thought her lovely. When, as now, she was deeply unhappy, she could seem almost plain.

'Who was that on the telephone, Marina?' she heard her grandmother call, from the sitting-room. The telephone was on the first floor landing, midway between shop and workroom, but Mrs Merryweather's hearing was too poor to have caught her granddaughter's side of the conversation.



Marina straightened her shoulders, and assumed an expression of cheerfulness. Entering the sitting-room, she said, 'Only a customer, Granny. Can I get you anything before I go upstairs again?'

The autumn *House & Garden* carried a feature on James Sebastian's penthouse apartment in London. The text mentioned that he also had a pied-a-terre in Rome, and a converted farmhouse in the south of France.

Marina studied every detail of the photographs. Looking at the picture of his bedroom, dominated by an eighteenth-century four-poster, she could not help wondering how many girls had shared it with him, and whether he and Lara Lester were still together or had long since separated and found new partners with whom to spend a few months before boredom set in. It puzzled her that some people were able to sustain love for years, while others quickly grew tired. She wondered where her fate lay. Sometimes she could not help feeling that love had already passed her by because, although young, she lived in such a quiet backwater, and all "the men who might suit her were out in the mainstream of life.

During her time at art school, she had been in love, but nothing had come of it. The boy concerned had been involved with another girl.

A month before her twenty-second birthday, her grandmother died. She could not grieve for the old lady as she had for Angus Merryweather.

It was Jane who made her follow up James Sebastian's offer, for it seemed to Marina that too much time had elapsed for him still to be interested in her.

She debated writing or telephoning for an appointment, but in the end she decided to spend a few days in London, and to go to his office without a preliminary approach. In that way, she stood a chance of seeing him. If she wrote, the only result might be a politely regretful note to say he was fully staffed for some time to come.

His premises were in Brook Street, off Bond Street, above the elegant showroom where people who admired his taste but could not afford his

services were able to buy certain of his fabrics and broadloom carpets, the now-classic Sebastian chair, his famous reading lamp, and a large range of useful objects and charming bibelots designed by him and suitable for Christmas and wedding presents.

The showroom was empty when Marina pushed open the glass door between the two windows, one displaying an antique desk and a Persian rug, and the other showing a modern table set for supper *a deux* with stream-lined crystal and stainless steel.

An attractive girl came forward to ask, 'May I help you?'

'I should like to see Mr Sebastian,' said Marina.

'Have you an appointment?'

'No, but he told me to come. He—he offered me a job.'

'Oh, I see,' said the girl, her manner changing from polite deference to friendly equality. 'Well, in that case, you ought to have gone in by the side door and up the stairs. The lift is really only for clients. Wait a moment, I'll ring his secretary and see if she can fix an appointment for you. I know Mr Sebastian is out now because I saw him leave in a taxi. What name shall I say?'

'Marina Linwood.'

The girl went to a writing table at the rear of the showroom, and pressed one of several buttons on an internal telephone.

She spoke in a low voice, but Marina heard her say, 'Pat? Julie here. I have Marina Linwood in the showroom. She says J.S. has offered her a job.' After a moment, she put her hand over the mouthpiece, and asked, 'How do you spell your surname?'

'L-i-n-w-o-o-d.'

The girl repeated this into the telephone, listened, replaced the receiver, and gestured at a door with a glass porthole. 'You'd better go up and see Pat. You can use the lift this time. Top floor.'

When the lift stopped, Marina saw through the porthole a lobby with two doors leading from it. One was closed and marked Private; the other was open, showing a woman seated at a desk, typing. As Marina stepped out of the lift, the woman rose to greet her. She was in her middle thirties and everything about her from her crisp short hair and immaculate make-up to her guilt-buckled patent shoes suggested efficiency and order.

'I'm Pat Wilson, Mr Sebastian's secretary. How do you do, Miss Linwood? Please come and sit down. I don't seem to have your name in my files. When did Mr Sebastian suggest you should come to see him? Usually he asks me to make a note of that sort of thing.'

'A long time ago—last year. He called at my grandfather's antique shop on his way to see some people named Wroxley who wanted him to redesign their house, Oakfield Hall. He saw some of my work at another house, and about ten days later—at the beginning of February—he rang up and offered me a job which at the time I couldn't accept.'

While she was speaking, Mrs Wilson—Marina had noticed her wedding ring because it was the only one she wore—had reached for one of several leather-bound books on the shelves by her desk. When she opened it, Marina saw that it was an appointments diary.

'Yes, I have a note of his visit to Oakfield Hall,' she agreed. 'And the date explains why you aren't in our files as you should be. I've worked for Mr Sebastian for eight years, but I was away for several weeks at that time and we had a series of rather disorganised "temps". Now, let's see about an appointment. It would have been advisable to ring up beforehand, or to write. Mr Sebastian is always very busy, and often abroad. Are you in London for several days?'

'Yes, until Friday afternoon.'

As Mrs Wilson was referring to the current appointments diary, the lift door opened and out stepped her employer.

He walked into her office, looked without recognition at Marina, and said courteously, 'Excuse me a moment: Pat, did you manage to contact Grigson?'

'Yes, there's a note on your desk.'

As he disappeared through a door which presumably connected her office with his, Mrs Wilson also asked Marina to excuse her. She followed him into his room.

Marina could not help being dashed by his failure to recognise her. She had not expected him to remember who she was, but she would have thought that her face would have rung a faint bell. True, his life was a kaleidoscope of faces, and she saw far fewer people, but sometimes customers returned after an interval of years, and as far as she knew she had never failed to realise she had seen them before.

His secretary reappeared. 'Mr Sebastian has fifteen minutes to spare and will see you now, Miss Linwood,' she said, holding the door open for Marina to pass into the adjoining room.

It was a large room, occupying an area two-thirds the size of the ground-floor showroom. In the centre was an immense partner's desk with Chippendale chairs facing each other across it.

She realised suddenly that the whole top floor must have been added to the original building, because here there were windows on all sides overlooking the roofs of the neighbouring buildings and admitting maximum daylight.

She had no time to notice anything else because James Sebastian was coming towards her, smiling, his hand outstretched to take hers in a firm clasp. 'You must forgive me for not recognising you immediately, Miss Linwood. I came upstairs preoccupied with delivery delays and, if you won't mind my saying so, the first time we met you were more concerned with warmth than with elegance. Today you look very *Vogue*-ish.'

She was not deceived into thinking that now he remembered her personally. Her work, yes, he might remember that. But the reference to her cocoon of woollies was, she guessed, a shrewd guess based on the fact that it had been February. As for the compliment to her present appearance, a salve to her amour propre merely. She had done her best to look pleasing, but nothing about her would have turned James Sebastian's head had they passed in the street. He saw girls with good legs and small waists every day of his life, and although what she was wearing might seem out of *Vogue* to an ordinary man, it was unlikely to deceive the trained eye of a designer.

Mindful of the short time before someone else claimed his attention, she said coolly, 'Thank you. Perhaps the job which you offered me is no longer open, Mr Sebastian ?'

'There's always a place here for talent. You're a free agent now, are you ?'

'Yes, my grandmother died last month, and the antique shop is in the hands of an estate agent.'

By now he had gestured for her to sit down, and had taken his place on the other side of the great desk. After eyeing her thoughtfully for some moments, he said, 'I suggest you come here for six months—a probationary period on both sides. We shan't pay you as much as you'd earn as a shorthand-typist, but the work will be interesting and varied, and the prospects are good if you pull your weight. I was impressed by your taste, but I remember Mrs Logan telling me that she gave you a free hand. That doesn't happen very often, and the ability to handle tactfully clients who change their minds, or refuse to make them up, is as important as a good eye for colour and proportion. When can you start?'

'As soon as I've found somewhere to live.'

'My secretary may be able to help you out temporarily. Early last year she lost her husband, and she lets some of the rooms in her house in South Kensington. If none is free at the moment, she can probably put you on to something suitable. I'll see you again when you join us.'

He rose and, feeling somewhat dazed, Marina realised the interview was over.

He walked with her to the door. For the second time in less than ten minutes she felt the strong grip of his fingers, and the magnetism of the tawny hazel eyes looking down into hers.

'Goodbye, Miss Linwood,' he said pleasantly.

Then the door was being closed behind her, and she was back in the smaller office.

'Any luck?' asked his secretary kindly.

'Yes, a six months' trial. I can hardly believe it,' Marina confessed.

'Good for you,' said Mrs Wilson, smiling. 'When do you join us?'

'That depends. Mr Sebastian said you might be able to rent me a room while I'm looking for somewhere unfurnished.'

'My three best rooms are taken. There's a tiny attic you could have, just as a temporary expedient. You'd better have a look at it before you commit yourself. If you like, you can come home with me when I finish here at four-thirty. That wouldn't interfere with your plans for the evening.'

'That would be fine. Thank you. I'll see you later.'

Marina left the building by the staff staircase, and headed in the direction of Bond Street in a state of bemused delight.

That evening she telephoned Jane to tell her the news that not only did she have a job, but some temporary lodgings in a fairly quiet square not five minutes' walk from South Kensington Underground, and only a few minutes further from the inexhaustible riches of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

'So I'm coming back on Thursday instead of Friday, to pack my clothes, and returning to London on Sunday to start work on Monday.'

'You sound on top of the world. How did you manage to organise some digs so quickly?' asked Jane.

Marina explained, and added, 'Pat's mother lives with her and looks after the little boy. I gather the husband died of some rare disease, and they have quite a struggle to cope with the mortgage, hence the lodgers. If I can, I want to find somewhere unfurnished which I can decorate, and where I can have my own things. But, to begin with, until I make friends and find my feet, a room in Pat's house will be better.'

In her first week in London Marina recaptured the *joie de vivre* she had felt in her short time at art school. Just as, after the death of her grandfather, she had woken up in the morning conscious of a cloud over her life, now she woke with the happy awareness of being young, and free, and in the right niche at last. The world was her oyster. She felt like smiling all the time.

During those first five days she saw little of J.S., as he was called by his staff, but she began to know all the other people who worked behind the scenes at Brook Street, and some of the specialist craftsmen who gave form and substance to his designs.

The most senior member of the staff, second only to J.S. himself, was a formidable woman in her fifties known to him, and to Lance and Dominic, her two assistants, as Sybilla, and to everyone else as Mrs Fox-Lennox. Her assistants were always young men, and J.S. always had girls, Marina discovered.

All the design assistants, as they were called, had ambitions to become famous designers. Meanwhile it was their job to organise the components of a design; the two-inch braid of precisely the right shade of red for the border of a curtain, the special switch-plates, the oversize wrought iron fire basket, the apricot paint exactly matching a snippet of silk, the hand-painted blinds.

On the Friday of her second week at Brook Street, Marina was in the room which housed hundreds of "Samples of everything from curtain velvet to ceramic tiles, when J.S. put his head round the door.

'Get your coat and come down to the showroom.'

Hurriedly she put away the swatches she had been studying, and rushed to the cloakroom for her jacket, scarf and gloves.

He was talking to Julie when she reached the showroom and continued to do so until a taxi drew up outside when he turned to Marina and said, 'Right. Off we go.'

In the cab he gave the driver an address, before leaning back and saying to her, 'I understand you haven't yet been to our repository, so I thought I'd take you along and introduce you to Fred, the guardian of our treasures.'

'Thank you.'

'My pleasure.' His glance travelled swiftly over her, noting every detail from her boots to her gold hoop earrings. It was not altogether the impersonal inspection of an employer studying an employee to make sure her appearance was up to the standard required of her, she felt. As she turned to look out of the window, pretending to be unaware of his scrutiny, she had the uneasy feeling that also he was appraising her skin and her figure, not dispassionately, but as if they were on a social footing.

'How have you been getting on ?' he-asked, obliging her to turn her face towards him.

'I've learned a lot. I haven't done anything useful yet.'

'You will.'

'I'm not sure what you have in mind for me. Am I being trained to become a design assistant?'

'No, you need to learn what they've learnt, but it's your existing knowledge which you and we want to apply. Already you're qualified to go to the principal salerooms and on forays into the provinces to keep us supplied with antique decorator pieces. After a year or so of general work, I see you specialising in assignments where a knowledge of period is essential.'



After a pause, he added, 'I'm assuming you're serious about it and mean to make this your career, and not let a man persuade you to drop it and keep house for him?'

'Oh, no! I mean yes—I am serious.'

'Good, because as you're aware we are investing a good deal of time in you, and it's always extremely annoying when a girl reaches her potential and thereupon opts for marriage.'

'I should have thought most girls would have had to go on working after marriage now that setting up home is so expensive.'

'Yes, but continuing to work for that reason is not the same as being a career-girl. The working wife's prime consideration is her husband's comfort and convenience. The career-girl puts her job first.'

'And should never marry, you think?'

'Preferably not. I don't suggest she should live alone,' he said dryly. 'But living with a man doesn't seem to put as much strain on a woman as marriage does. If she has to work late, the thought of his uncooked supper doesn't make her feel guilty. She assumes he'll either eat out or cook his own steak.'

'That could be because the kind of girl who lives with a man doesn't care very much if he does go without his supper.'

'Do you disapprove of free love?' he asked, looking amused.

'I don't think there is such a thing. There's free sex. How can love be free? If you love someone, you're bound to them by your feelings. If they're in trouble, you worry about them. If they're ill, you're anxious till they're well again. If they die, you grieve. If one feels all those things anyway, I can't see any reason to boggle at being bound officially as well as emotionally.'

'I'll re-phrase the question. Do you disapprove of free sex?'

She knew she was starting to blush, and was annoyed with herself for allowing the conversation to reach this point.

'It's not a subject to which I've given much thought.'

He said, 'I think you should give it considerable thought. While you were living in a small country town, with an invalid grandmother on your hands, it may have been an academic question. But living in London, and looking as you do now, it won't be long before it becomes a practical one.'

At this point, to Marina's relief, they reached their destination. The repository was a former chapel now crowded with a strange assortment of furniture, paintings and ornaments which were dusted and kept in good order by Fred Archer, a little man with a cap on his head and a green canvas apron round his waist.

'You know we're down to our last blackamoor, Guv,' he said, bringing up the rear as they walked up and down the aisles which made it possible to reach every object stored there.

'They're hard to get hold of now, Fred. If you ever see a blackamoor, Marina, snap it up, whatever the condition. Also Dublin mirrors'—tapping the glass of an oval mirror, its heavy black frame ornamented with a row of small dome-shaped glass discs.

They were there for nearly an hour, by which time it was half past five. As they taxied back to the West End Marina expected him to drop her near an Underground station and tell her to go home.

Instead, he said, 'Would you like to come to a private view at the Palladio Galleries?'

'Yes, very much, Mr Sebastian.'

'When we're not in the office call me James. I told Pat not to worry if you weren't home until late. Are you comfortable with her? Have you started to look for a place of your own?'

'Yes, all last Saturday and Sunday, but I think it's bound to take some time. Meanwhile I'm very happy with my little room in Pat's house.'

'Good.' He looked at his watch. 'We'll have a drink at the Westbury and a wash and brush-up before we stroll round to the Galleries. The view doesn't start until seven.'

Marina was glad of the opportunity to comb her hair and repair her lipstick in the powder room at the West-bury Hotel. As she dried her hands on a pale pink linen towel and chatted to the attendant, she was aware at the back of her mind that working for someone like \* James was not the same as working for a middle-aged man with a wife and grown-up children, or for someone who, like Lance and Dominic, was not interested in women as women. In James's company she was conscious of an undercurrent of excitement.

'What would you like to drink?' he asked, when she joined him in the lounge.

'Could I have a Harvey Wallbanger?'

'Why not?' He ordered it, with a gin and tonic for himself.

Marina glanced round the lounge which was full of people in every kind of evening dress. A girl in two yards of clinging green silk, with a blond mink jacket to cover her bare arms and back, and an escort who looked old enough to be her grandfather, was eyeing James out of the corner of her elaborately painted eyes. It was, Marina discovered, an exhilarating feeling to be with the most attractive man in the room, even if they were there on business rather than pleasure.

'What did you have for lunch?' he asked, when their drinks arrived.

'A cottage cheese salad. I have my main meal at night.'

'In that case I think we'd better have some blotting paper, or you may find yourself seeing double at the view.' He asked the waiter for sandwiches.

The Harvey Wallbanger came in a tall glass, with ice, and tasted more of orange juice than alcohol. But it had a delayed kick, and when they arrived at the view and she was offered another drink, she was glad James had made the Westbury waiter give her six or seven of the small chicken and smoked salmon sandwiches from his silver platter.

She had been to private views before, but never one as grand as this. Most of the people seemed there to see and be seen, rather than to study the paintings. From time to time women surged up to James, greeted him effusively —'I can't tell you how much I adore my *divine* new bathroom. I *live* in it—literally live in it!'—and looked with interest at his companion whom he introduced without explaining her connection with him.

At one stage, when a woman and her daughter were with him—the daughter making desultory chit-chat to Marina but gazing at James—she thought it tactful to drift away and gaze intently at one of the pictures which had a red star on the frame to indicate it had been sold.

It was while she was doing this that she was picked up by a nice-looking young man who confided that he wouldn't know a Picasso from a Van Gogh and was only there because his godmother was interested in the artist. While they were talking his godmother came up, which gave him the chance to ask Marina her name, and to introduce himself and the elderly woman who had responded to his discreet signal to join them. But not so discreet that Marina had missed it.

'Are you in the art world. Miss Linwood?' she enquired, clearly aware that her role was to help her godson to regularise the encounter.

'I'm in the useful arts field, but you're a connoisseur of the fine arts, so your godson was telling me.'

'Oh, no—not a connoisseur. David exaggerates. I'm an amateur merely. Which of the useful arts is your line of country?'

'All of them really,' Marina answered evasively.

She felt that if David wanted to know her, he should work a little harder himself and not rely on his nice godmother, who reminded her of Jane's mother in that she had the air of being really a country person, but one who could look perfectly at home in Knightsbridge when\* on a visit to London.

Presently she became aware that James had approached and was waiting to be drawn into the conversation.

'Lady Grigson, may I introduce James Sebastian.'

'How do you do, Mr Sebastian. I once stayed in a house which had benefited from your skill—a quite extraordinary transformation to anyone who had known it before. This is my godson, David Leigh. Mr Sebastian is one of our most distinguished interior designers, David.'

The two men shook hands. David was as tall and well- built as James, but otherwise their looks were in striking contrast, the younger man's fair hair and rather ruddy complexion emphasising James's darkness, and what Jane had called his 'un-Englishness'.

While James was asking Lady Grigson about the house she had mentioned, David turned to Marina and said, 'I'm afraid interior design is another closed book to me. Is there any hope that you might have lunch with me tomorrow and enlighten my ignorance? Or'—glancing at James—'am I trespassing?'

'No, but I'm afraid I never have time for more than a quick snack at lunch-time.'

'Dinner, then?'

'Thank you, but I've only been in London for a fortnight, and just at the moment every spare minute is taken up with flat-hunting. Perhaps when I'm rather more settled ...'

He nodded. 'Where do you come from ?'

Before she could tell him, James said, 'We must go or we shall be late, Marina.'

'Late for what?' she enquired, as the uniformed doorman touched his hat to them as they left.

'For our supper. Do you like Italian food?'

'Yes.'

'Can you walk to Soho in those boots?'

She nodded.

'Good. Not being a smoker myself, after an hour in that atmosphere I need some fresh air.'

Fortunately the heels of her boots were only of medium height, and James moderated his long stride to her shorter one. As they walked, they discussed the paintings.

It was only when they were settled at a corner table in a restaurant where evidently he was a regular customer that he said, 'Were you sorry to be whisked away from your admirer?'

'Hardly. I'd only just met him.'

'I know. I saw him going into action. A smooth operator.'

'Not really. Just someone out of his element looking for a friendly face.'

'All the same, I'll check him out. We can't have an innocent country lass falling into the clutches of a city slicker before she's had time to learn how to pick out the wolves.'

'I'm not seventeen,' Marina said lightly, 'and there are wolves in the provinces, too.'

He smiled at her, his tawny eyes glinting in the light of the candle burning between them. She knew how easily, in spite of her vaunted self-possession, he could, if he chose, demolish her assurance. He was far more dangerous

than David Leigh, and had he been taking her out to supper from personal interest rather than to give some attention to a new member of his staff with whom, up to now, he had not had time to become acquainted, she would have been on her guard with him. As it was, she felt reasonably sure that when he smiled into her eyes, he was only teasing her. Probably it was his way with all women.

Once or twice during their meal he and the waiter exchanged brief remarks in Italian, causing Marina to ask, 'Do you speak many languages?'

'Five, including English, but German is the only one which I had to learn the hard way. For three generations before mine, the Sebastians have married foreigners. My great-grandfather married an Italian. My grandfather's wife was Spanish, and my mother is French. We have innumerable relations in all three countries, and as a boy I spent all my holidays abroad, picking up languages from my cousins rather than from textbooks.'

'Do your parents live in England?'

'No. My father is dead. My mother lives near Lyon where her family manufacture textiles. My grandfather owned a furniture shop in the Midlands and, every year on his way to Spain with my grandmother who came from Barcelona, he would stop at Lyon to buy upholstery silks. My father was going to follow him into the business, and that's how he met my mother, just before the last war. During the war my grandfather died and the shop was bombed, and my father was able to realise his private ambition to become a painter. Not a very good one. Now you know my history. What about yours?'

'My father was in the Foreign Service. I was born in Brussels, and we lived there and then in Washington until I was eight when they were killed in a car smash. After that I lived with my grandparents.'

'No brothers or sisters?'

'No, and just as well. My grandparents couldn't have coped with more than one child.'

'But lonely for you, I should imagine. I have a brother and three sisters.'

'No, I wasn't lonely,' said Marina. 'I made friends at school, and I loved helping in the shop and going to auctions.'

It was half past ten when they left the restaurant. As he followed her into the taxi, Marina said, 'Oh, please— you needn't bother to come with me.'

'It's on my way.'

In the taxi he didn't talk, and she found it difficult to think of anything to add to their easy flow of conversation in the restaurant. In spite of the opening in the glass between driver and passengers, and the spaciousness of the back seat, and the fact that for most of the way the street and shop-window lighting made it almost as bright as by day, there was something curiously private about the back of a London taxi, she thought.

She found herself sharply aware of the man in the opposite corner, his arms folded over his chest, his long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankle, his plain chestnut leather shoes immaculately polished. She wondered about his domestic set-up. Presumably he had a housekeeper or a manservant to look after him.

^Because of the silence, it was rather a relief to reach Pat's house where James got out and turned to assist Marina.

She said, 'Thank you—for the view and for a delicious supper. It's been a most enjoyable evening for me.'

'And for me. Goodnight.'

He waited on the pavement until she had gone up the steps to the door, and unlocked it. Then, with a wave, he got back in the cab and drove away.

Marina had been working for him for three months, but had seen little more of him, when one afternoon after Christmas she was summoned to his office.



He did not invite her to sit down, but said briskly, 'At the end of next week I'm going to Spain. Would you like to come along?'

'I'd love it. What is the project?'

'Two projects. A restaurant, and a private house. Have you a passport?'

'No, but I can soon get one.'

'You'll also need an international driving licence. Pat will tell you our flight times, and anything else you want to know.' With a nod of the head, he dismissed her and picked up the telephone.

In the outer office, she said to Pat, 'I've just been told about the Spanish trip. What part of Spain are we going to?'

'To the Costa Blanca, which is here,' said Pat, going to a large map of the world on the wall and indicating a stretch of coast approximately half way down Spain's Mediterranean seaboard. 'You'll fly to Alicante and pick up a hired car to drive north to Javea. You'll be staying at the *parador* there.'

'What's a *parador*?'

'It's a hotel owned by the State, and a lot of them are in castles or other historic buildings. I think the one at Javea is modern. J.S. always puts up at a *parador*, if there's one near wherever he wants to be.'

'How long shall we be away?'

'Six nights.'

Marina spent the evening thinking about clothes for the trip. She worked out a basic wardrobe and spent the rest of the week buying what extras she needed to cover all eventualities.

As the day of departure drew near her excitement increased. She had not been abroad since her childhood, and Spain was high on the list of countries she wanted to visit. But her mood of happy anticipation was considerably

damped when, the night before, Pat came to her room while she was packing, and said, with a rather wry smile, 'I think it's only fair to warn you that, some time during your trip, J.S. is sure to make a pass at you.'

## CHAPTER TWO

MARINA straightened from bending over her suitcase. 'What do you mean?'

Pat sat down on the other side of the bed. 'I've never discussed him with you because a secretary shouldn't gossip about her boss, and J.S. was wonderfully good to me after Dick died, and I like and admire him. But I like you as well, Marina. You're different from most girls of your age. In some ways you're far more mature; in others rather naive. I may be wrong, but I don't think you've ever been deeply involved with a man—I mean to the extent of sleeping with him—and it wouldn't be right to let you go abroad with J.S. without knowing the kind of man he is.'

Marina said, 'The first time I met him, he had a beautiful girl with him. Lara Lester. They were obviously lovers.'

'He's had more than one girl-friend since Lara. To put it bluntly, he's the worst and most ruthless womaniser I've ever known. Generally speaking, men who have a succession of women aren't really great lovers, rather the reverse. They have some emotional hang-up which prevents them from having a proper, lasting relationship. I don't think that's true of J.S. I don't know what his trouble is. I only know that every girl who goes on a trip overseas with him ends up in his bed. By all accounts, it's a very agreeable experience. The pain comes when he loses interest, but they have to go on working for him. He never gives them the sack. It's they who can't stand the strain and have to give notice. So, if you're bent on making a career with us, think it over carefully beforehand.'

'I don't have to think it over,' Marina said firmly. 'I've not the smallest intention of jumping'into bed with him.'

Pat said gently, 'That's what I meant about your being rather naive. Don't tell me he doesn't attract you?'

'He's attractive—yes, I agree,' Maxina acknowledged, with a shrug.

'Then can you be sure of resisting him ? When you're alone together in Spain? When you've spent the evening dancing with him? When you've had a good deal of wine, and he starts making expert love to you?'

'I thought we were going there to work?'

'Most of the time—not *all* the time. J.S. can work for twelve hours and still have plenty of energy.'

Marina folded a shirt before she said, 'Perhaps, if a girl did resist him, he might give her the sack.'

'Oh, no, he's not such a rat. He's a nice man. In many ways, a good man. It's just his attitude to sex which is rather off-putting—or at least off-putting to me because I've had love at its best.'

'Were you married when you first knew him ?'

'Yes, and I'm sure he could see that as far as I was concerned there was no one to compare with Dick. Mind you, when you're a widow, any number of men seem to think you must be going mad with frustration. I've had the most obnoxious types offering to relieve my loneliness. But never J.S., thank goodness, I'm fond of him, in a sisterly way, and it would have been horribly disillusioning if he'd started making advances.'

'Maybe his instinct will tell him that I'm interested only in a career, and not in the market for a love affair,' said Marina.

'His instinct is much more likely to tell him that you're young and beautiful and uncommitted, and he should take you to bed before your friend David Leigh does,' Pat remarked dryly.

She knew about David because more than once he had come to the house before taking Marina to the theatre.

'Well, thanks for the warning. I hope you're wrong, but if you're right at least I shall have had time to strengthen the ramparts,' said Marina, trying to sound lighthearted.

But, after Pat had said goodnight, she finished her packing in a very troubled state of mind, for it seemed to her there was no more awkward situation than having to fend off the man by whom one was employed.

It was cloudy over France and northern Spain, but presently the sky cleared, and the sea looked blue and inviting as they turned in an offshore loop before touching down at the airport south of Alicante.

A Mercedes coupe was waiting for them outside the airport building, and within twenty minutes of landing they were heading north. Marina had a glimpse of the famous mosaic pavement of the palm-lined Explanada as they sped through the city and joined the *autopista*, but her first impression of Spain was of a magnificently- engineered road sweeping smoothly through an arid mountainous landscape.

At Gata de Gorgos they turned east, towards the coast, and entered a greener region of orange and tangerine trees, and scarlet-flowered poinsettias, which she knew as pot plants, growing as trees outside whitewashed farmhouses.

As Pat had surmised, the *parador* on the sea-front at Javea was a modern building with an uninteresting boxlike exterior. At the reception desk, James gave his name and said, in Spanish, that two bedrooms had been reserved for them by post.

Turning to Marina, he said, with a glint of mockery, 'Pat has observed the proprieties by asking for us to be put on different floors.'

She had also heard him check that one of the rooms had a *cama matrimonio*, which could only be a double bed. His self-confidence infuriated her, but she did not let her anger show.

He came with her to her room to see that it was satisfactory. It faced south, overlooking the hotel's palm- shaded gardens and, beyond them, a crescent beach. Further away were the steep cliffs of a headland. The hills inland were dotted with white villas.

Before he followed the porter to his room, she asked, 'What are we likely to be doing this evening?'

'We're dining with the Rutlands, the people who've bought a house they want me to decorate. It will be quite informal. Can you be ready in an hour?'

'Easily.'

'Good. We'll meet downstairs in the bar.'

Having hung up her clothes, Marina tucked her hair inside a cap and had a refreshing hot shower. She decided to wear an outfit bought at Monsoon in Beauchamp Place. It consisted of a full-sleeved blouse, a gathered skirt with a band of quilting at the hem, and a quilted waistcoat. All three were of soft Indian cotton, printed with different but related small patterns in blues and greens. She had bought herself a fine gilt chain with groups of green beads spaced along it, and with that she wore a gold muff chain given to her by her grandfather on her eighteenth birthday. Her ear-rings were her favourite gold hoops, and she wore a selection of rings collected before antique rings became expensive.

James was before her, chatting in Spanish to the barman, when she went downstairs. He appraised her approvingly. He was drinking a chilled sparkling wine, not unlike champagne, and having filled a glass for her, he said, 'To a successful trip.'

Touching her glass to his, Marina thought that if his definition of a successful trip included persuading her to vacate her room and share his, he was going to be disappointed.

'Dammit, I thought it was to be a quiet dinner for four, and they've obviously laid on a party,' he said, when they reached the Rutlands' villa and found several cars parked outside. The door was opened by a small Spaniard in a white jacket. It led directly into a large living-room where half a dozen earlier arrivals were drinking and chatting. They were mostly in late middle-age, or elderly, and James murmured in her ear, 'You see why this is sometimes called the Costa Geriatrica.'

'Mr Sebastian! How delightful to see you again.' Their hostess, her hands flashing with diamonds, swept forward to greet him.

It was not, for Marina, a particularly enjoyable evening, although the food was good. As he had been at the Wroxleys' party, James was lionised by the women and some of the men, and she was left to converse with the others, most of whom seemed to have retired to Spain after a lifetime in Africa. After two hours she began to look forward to leaving. It seemed to her safe to assume that James was unlikely to fulfil Pat's prophecy on their first night.

'Sorry about that. You must have been extremely bored by all those old boys rambling on about their exploits in the bush,' he said, as they drove away. 'Oh, no, they were interesting,' she answered, not altogether truthfully.

'You're a good listener, aren't you ? It's a rare quality. Most people are too full of themselves to listen attentively to others.'

The compliment pleased her. Then, like a dash of cold water, came the thought that it might be the beginning of his softening-up technique.

As they passed the fairy-lit forecourt of what appeared to be a night-club, he said, 'I won't suggest making a night of it because I want to be up early tomorrow. The Rutlands aren't early risers, but he's drawn me a sketch map of how to find their country place, and we'll get there at nine and have a good look round before they join us. Tomorrow, we'll take the night off and go somewhere Spanish.'

Back at the *parador* he asked if she would join him for coffee and brandy.

Marina shook her head. 'If you don't mind, I think I'll turn in.'

'Have you something to read if you need it ?'

'Yes, thank you. Goodnight.'

In her room, Marina found her curtains drawn and the bed turned down. Before she undressed, she stepped out on to the balcony. The night was not cold. The calm sea shimmered like black lame under the moon, frothing into

white lace where it washed against the beach. In contrast to the silvery foreground, the hills of the hinterland were spangled with the golden lights of the many villas. It was hard to believe it was January.

She was woken the following morning by the telephone ringing and James's voice saying, 'I thought you might not have a travelling clock to wake you up. It's seven-fifteen. I'll meet you for breakfast at eight.'

She found it was still dark outside, and only half light at eight, but by the time they had finished breakfast, the sky held the promise of a fine day.

The previous afternoon she had seen the great pink-cliffed mountain which loomed over the port and town of Javea. James had told her it was called Montgo, and from its summit, not far from the sea, a gradually diminishing sierra of less formidable heights curved inland. With the sunlight growing stronger and warmer, they drove by a minor road into a quiet, fertile region of olive and orange groves, and almond trees starting to blossom. After a while James swung the car off the tarred road and drove at a more cautious speed up a rutted and rocky track which led by a roundabout route to a rambling old house set snugly into the hillside.

When he switched off the engine, Marina climbed out of the car and stood for a moment enjoying the blue sky, the sun, and the faint sweet scent of white jasmine. Both she and James were wearing jeans, he with a navy and white cotton shirt under a guernsey, and she with a cobweb-knit sweater over a cream cotton polo.

At the front of the house was a large veranda with five stone arches half concealed by masses of bougainvillea, dark crimson and purple. When they stood together on the *naya*, surveying the wonderful view of near and far mountains, she saw on his face a look of intense preoccupation and she knew that, although they were alone in a secluded place, for the time being his mind was concentrated on his work, and she was merely his assistant.

Mr Rutland had given him the key which unlocked the arched double doors leading into the dark, dank living-room.



'Typical local ceiling,' said James, indicating the concave curves of the plasterwork between the rafters. 'All the windows need to be opened. You do this floor, I'll go upstairs.'

They went through the house, throwing open the heavy wooden shutters and the windows, and letting the sunlight spill on to dusty brick floors and into dark corners.

Opening some shutters at the side of the house, Marina exclaimed with delight. Outside the wrought iron *reja* was the bright yellow cloud of a mimosa tree in bloom.

'What a heavenly place!' she said to James, when they returned to the sitting-room.

He was less enthusiastic. 'The setting is superb, but a lot of money needs to be spent here to make the place habitable by the Rutlands' standards.'

'They can afford it, can't they?'

'Yes, but probably they want it to be ready for occupation-by June, and that calls for constant supervision and chivvyng. However, we'll do our best. Hold this for me, will you?' He handed her the end of an expanding twenty-five-metre metal measure.

They measured each room in turn, and James made quick clever sketches of the fall of light through the windows.

'Never make decisions about a room until you've checked the light in the morning, at noon, and late in the afternoon,' he told her. 'Here, we also have to consider that in July and August coolness will be as important as warmth in the winter.'

The Rutlands arrived, and Marina had to admire the way, without damping their pleasure, he made them aware of the problems which had to be surmounted.

While he and Henry Rutland were discussing the possibility of installing a range of solar panels on the hill at the back of the building, Mrs Rutland beckoned Marina upstairs to the largest of the three bedrooms.

'This will be my room. I can't wait to see what James does with it. I have a rather superb bed—the headboard is ivory inlaid with mother-of-pearl—which Henry bought for me in Libya many years ago, and I want that to be the centrepiece. The rest I leave entirely to James. Have you been with him long, my dear?'

'I joined the firm last year.' Suspecting that Mrs Rutland had brought her upstairs to pump her, Marina deflected her by saying, 'This house has tremendous possibilities, but your present villa seems perfect. Why are you moving?'

'Yes, our place in Javea is nice, but most of the villas around us belong to rich Madrilenos—people from Madrid, you understand—and they come down only in summer. So in winter we're rather isolated, and in summer every night is party night. Here, we have no near neighbours, but a country house on its own is not like being surrounded by empty houses. Even in the height of the season we shall have peace here, except when *we* give a party.'

She walked through the door giving on to a *mirador* with a parapet and arches of cream-coloured stone like those on the *naya*. Marina could hear the two men coming upstairs.

'Isn't this balcony charming? I shall be able to sunbathe here without my bikini. The parapet makes it quite private,' said Mrs Rutland.

'Not from the *pastor*,' James remarked, in an amused tone.

She turned to him, looking startled. 'Who is the *pastor*?' He stepped out on to the balcony and scanned the crags of the hill which sheltered the house.

'There's a shepherd up there somewhere. I can hear the sheep-bells. Yes, there he is—look.'

Shading her eyes from the sun which now, at mid- morning, made the January day as hot as an English July, Marina made out a herd of sheep cropping the scrub as they climbed slowly upwards.

'I shouldn't worry, my dear,' said Henry Rutland jovially. 'I don't suppose the shepherd has a pair of field-glasses through which to admire you in your nudity.'

At noon the Rutlands left to have drinks with friends, and James gave Marina the task of measuring the size and position of all windows, doors and other structural features.

This kept her busy till one when he reappeared, and said, 'Lunch-time.'

'I thought in Spain lunch was later.' 'It is, but as our stomachs are accustomed to English hours, and we're having a picnic today, we may as well break now. There's a mule track going up the hill. I thought we'd climb up there to eat.'

As they passed the car, James unlocked the boot and took out a small light rucksack. They had both discarded their sweaters before the arrival of the Rutlands, and Marina wished now that, like him, she had put on a thin cotton shirt instead of her close-fitting polo. 'The mule-track was not hard going. It wound its way up the hill, passing innumerable terraces banked up by drystone walls built long ago, perhaps as far back as the centuries when the Moors had dominated Spain. The breeze smelt of herbs and, here and there, gorse was in flower.

James led the way, moving upwards with slow strides which reminded Marina of something Robert Logan had once told her. A keen walker and hill-climber, Robert had said that the pace to go up a hill was no faster than that at which it was possible to carry on a conversation without being the least bit puffed.

'Do you do a lot of walking ?' she asked.

He stopped and turned to face her. 'Yes, when I get the time. But--' He stopped, his eye caught by something higher up. 'A pair of eagles. D'you see them?'

She turned and gazed upwards towards a sheer cliff of rock coloured apricot by the sun. 'No—where?'

James came two paces down the track and stood close behind her, one hand resting on her left shoulder, the other stretched, pointing, over her right shoulder. Following the line of his arm, she saw the birds soaring and swooping close to the rock face.

'Yes, I see them now.'

He withdrew his right arm, and rested the hand on her other shoulder. Perhaps, intent on the eagles, he was unaware of touching her, but she was sharply aware of it and glad when the eagles disappeared from view and he dropped his hands and resumed his trudge up the track.

They lunched sitting on two flat-topped rocks at a height which made the Rutlands' house look like a toy house nestling in a fold of counterpane. From here they could see the sweep of the *autopista* as it bypassed Gata de Gorgos, and the wide open plain behind Javea. They ate cold chicken salad with a small crusty loaf apiece, and drank a bottle of red wine.

'Lucky us. In London, it's probably pouring,' said Marina, as they finished lunch.

'It must rain heavily here at times, or the landscapewouldn't be so green. Do you mind if I take off my shirt?'

'Of course not. If I'd known how hot it was going to be, I'd have worn a sun-top instead of this.'

'Yes, you look rather warm. Would you like to borrow my shirt? It would be cooler than your thing, and I shan't need it until we go back to town.'

'Oh, yes, please—if you don't mind.'

He tossed it across to her, and she retreated behind a clump of bushes to put it on. The fact that it was several sizes too large for her added to its coolness.

When she returned to her rock, James had wandered off and, thinking he might also want a few minutes privacy, Marina did not follow but sat down to finish her wine.

For a while he was out of sight and she lapsed into a state of post-prandial somnolence from which she aroused, some time later, to see him standing on a ledge of rock, his bare back as brown as if he lived in this benign climate. When he raised his arms to shade his eyes, the movement of muscle under the sunburned skin was as swift and fluid as the ripple of water over stones. Although he spent much of his life at a drawing-board, in aeroplanes, and at the tables of expensive restaurants, he was obviously a fit man, and a strong one.

When he returned to their picnic place, she must have had a faraway expression which he misinterpreted.

'Missing your boy-friend already?'

'My boy-friend ?' she echoed blankly.

'Leigh, I think his name was.'

'He's a friend. He isn't my boy-friend.'

'I seem to have noticed him several times waiting to collect you from Brook Street.'

'Once or twice, yes,' she agreed. 'Going to the theatre with someone doesn't constitute an involvement.'

'You could do worse. I checked him out, and he's a well-heeled young man who stands a good chance of inheriting one of the smaller and more manageable of the stately homes.'

'Yes, I know. His godmother knows Jane Logan's mother. But I'm not looking for a rich husband. I've only just started my career.'

He glanced at his watch. 'And on that note we had better get back to work. Tell me your thoughts about the living-room.'

'To begin with I'd take off the shutters. They may be traditional, but they're also extremely gloom-making.'

All the way back to the house, they discussed the decorative problems.

The heat of noonday had cooled, and Marina had put on her polo, when they closed the shutters and locked up. On the way back, they stopped at a bar for *tapas*, the titbits which bridged the hours between a late Spanish lunch and even later dinner.

'People like the Rutlands live here for years and hardly scratch the surface of Spanish life,' said James.

'Yes, I was surprised at the party last night when a man said he didn't speak Spanish, and later it emerged that he'd been here for five years.' Marina followed his example and used a toothpick to spear a ring of something white and slightly rubbery in texture, fried in crisp golden batter. 'What are these ?'

'*Calamares alia romana*. Pieces of squid.'

'They're delicious. What I'm looking forward to is trying a *paella*.'

'We can have one tonight, if you like. But don't dressup too much. The best *paellas* aren't found in the tourist hotels, but in the small restaurants and bars used by the locals.'

Some hours later he took her to a place near the port where the bar was crowded with fishermen talking at the tops of their voices. The floor at their feet was littered with cigarette ends and sugar papers. There were no cloths on the tables, and the kitchen was a tiny room screened by a beaded fly-curtain.

First the barman brought them a bottle of wine and two tumblers; then two crusty bread rolls and a salad dotted with olives, the crisp lettuce glistening with oil. Finally came the *paella*, decorated with mussels and prawns on a bed of rice fragrant with garlic. It was as delicious a supper as any Marina had tasted.

They had come on foot as the port was only about a mile along the road bordered on one side by rocks and the sea, and on the other by closed-up holiday villas and one or two restaurants.

Walking back, they continued to discuss the problems of the Rutlands' house but, as they neared the *parador*, she could not help wondering if, soon, James would steer the conversation into a more personal channel. However, he did not do so, nor did he suggest a nightcap. When the lift reached her floor, he bade her goodnight and continued upwards.

Next morning he did not wake her up by telephoning, and she slept until half past eight and had to wash and dress in a hurry. However, he was not at the table when she went down to breakfast, nor had he been and gone, so it seemed he also must have overslept. Somehow it seemed unlike him, and when by the time she had finished breakfast there was still no sign of him, her puzzlement became tinged with concern.

Could he have been taken ill? Could one of the mussels in his share of the *paella* have been a bad one and poisoned him? She seemed to remember hearing or reading that, with certain severe forms of food poisoning, people become seriously ill so quickly that, without medical aid, they could die in a matter of hours.

On this alarming thought she hastened upstairs and tapped on the door of James's room. There was no reply. After some seconds of indecision, she turned the handle and opened the door a couple of inches. The curtains were drawn. The room was in darkness. There was no sound. She opened the door a little wider, and saw on the bed his spreadeagled, motionless form. Convinced now that her theory must be right—what other reason could there be for a young, fit man to be in bed at this hour?—she hurried to the bedside and switched on the reading light.

He was lying face-down, the lower part of his body covered by a sheet and light blanket, the upper part bare. When she laid her hand on his shoulder, to her relief he felt warm. She had feared his skin might be clammy and unnaturally cold. But her touch did not cause him to stir.

'James.' She gave him a gentle shake. 'James—are you all right?'

He made a sound so much like a groan that her alarm reanimated. Knowing she could never lift him single-handed, she was about to ring for a chambermaid to help her when James rolled over, blinked at her, and said drowsily, 'Hello, what are you doing here?'

'I thought you were ill.'

'Ill? Why should I be ill?'

'It's so late. Nearly half past nine. I thought you might have been poisoned by one of those mussels.'

Holding the bedclothes to his stomach, a gesture from which she deduced that he wasn't wearing pyjama trousers, he hoisted himself into a sitting position.

'I must have forgotten to set my alarm. I didn't get to bed until three.'

'Oh ... you went out again?'

'No, I was working. Have a look.' He indicated the table by the curtained windows.

With astonishment, she saw that the measurements she had taken the day before had been translated into twenty or thirty beautifully drawn colour perspectives.

'Open the curtains, will you.'

Marina obeyed, letting in a flood of light.



'Don't turn round for a minute. I'm going to get out of bed, and I sleep in the raw,' he said.

As he spoke it occurred to her that, now she knew he wasn't ill, she ought not to linger in his bedroom. As soon as he was safely in the bathroom, she would leave. Meanwhile she had no choice but to concentrate on the drawings.

'This isn't right. There isn't an opening in the wall below the staircase,' she said.

'Not at present, but there will be. You can turn round.'

She glanced in the direction of his voice and saw he had put on a terry towelling bathrobe.

She said, 'I'll leave you to get dressed.'

'No, don't run away. Look through those while I'm having a shave, and tell me what you think of them. If it's half past nine we have only half an hour before we're due to meet the Rutlands.' He disappeared into the bathroom.

Somewhat uncertainly, Marina perched on a chair and began to leaf through the drawings. In some of them he had drawn and watercoloured pieces of furniture from the Rutlands' present villa. She recognised a pair of table lamps, a brass and plate-glass coffee table, and a Persian rug used as a wall-hanging. She had never seen finer draughtsmanship, but what was even more impressive was the way, by closing existing doorways and making others elsewhere, he had greatly improved the basic design of the house. She had seen the problems. He had seen the solutions.

'I wonder how long it will be before I can look at a house and know at once how to correct the things which are wrong with it?' she said, raising her voice for him to hear it in the bathroom.

'Not long. It's largely a matter of experience. For instance--'

At this point there was a light tattoo on the door and a man walked in. Seeing Marina standing by the window he looked disconcerted, said something in Spanish, and seemed on the point of retreating when James appeared in the bathroom doorway.

The man beamed and, to her astonishment, he and James not only embraced but kissed each other on both cheeks.

Catching sight of her expression, James grinned and said, 'The custom of the country. Let me introduce my cousin, Jose-Maria. Miss Marina Linwood.'

The Spaniard bowed. *'Encantado, senorita.'*

'Jose-Maria lives near here, but he's been in Barcelona and only got back late last night,' explained James. He turned to his cousin and switched to fluent Spanish. As whatever he was saying included a reference to Senor Rutland, she gathered that he was telling the shorter man that they had an appointment to keep.

His cousin nodded, shook hands with Marina for the second time in a few minutes, and went away.

'He's asked us to lunch,' said James, when they were alone. 'His wife Lolita doesn't speak English, but I daresay you'll manage some communication. Women are good at understanding each other.'

'Oh, but I don't want to intrude in a family reunion. I can have lunch here, and afterwards do a little sunbathing,' she suggested.

'You won't be intruding, and it won't be a family occasion because the German with whom Jose-Maria is in partnership, and who's putting up most of the money for the restaurant, will also be there. I must dress. I shan't be long. Wait in the car, if you like.' He picked up the keys from his night-table and handed them to her.

Marina went down to the forecourt and unlocked the Mercedes. She wondered if her presence in his cousin's room, and the double bed, had given Jose-Maria a false impression.

But she couldn't very well say to James, Please make it clear to your cousin that ours is a strictly business relationship. She could imagine what he would make of that!

'I see there's an antique shop across the road. We'll have a look when we've time to spare,' said James, as he slid behind the wheel.

It was another beautiful morning and, confident that for some hours she was safe from any further embarrassment, Marina relaxed and surrendered to the pleasure of being in the sun.

Approaching the Rutlands' villa by daylight, she saw what Mrs Rutland had meant about their isolation. Nearly all the other houses seemed to be closed up, although in several gardens straw-hatted Spaniards were watering plants and keeping the grounds in order during the absence of the owners.

They found the Rutlands sunbathing on the terrace surrounding their free-form, blue-tiled swimming pool.

'Do you swim all the year round ?' Marina asked.

'No, no—only from May to November. But we keep the pool full of water. An empty pool looks so depressing.'

James went to the edge and reached down to check the temperature registered by the floating thermometer.

'Care for a dip ? I can lend you some trunks,' said Mr Rutland jokingly.

James looked at Marina. 'Shall we try a couple of lengths?'

Mrs Rutland answered for her. 'Certainly not! Far too cold. The poor girl would be frozen. But while you're here, why not have a sunbathe, my dear? My daughter has left several swimsuits which will fit you. It seems a pity not to go back to London with a tan.'

Marina demurred, but Mrs Rutland was so insistent that, rather than argue, she gave way and allowed herself to be taken into the house to change.

When she saw the choice of swimsuits open to her, she wished she had resisted more firmly. They were all the briefest of brief bikinis, and although she would not have minded their brevity had she been as brown as Mrs Rutland, lacking a tan she would have preferred more cover.

'I'll leave you to change,' said the older woman, when Marina had chosen the cornflower blue bikini as being the least unflattering to her paleness.

When it was on, she felt strongly inclined to take it off. If Pat was right, and James had dishonourable intentions, to appear before him in this was to hasten the very situation she wished to avoid.

When, reluctantly, she returned to the terrace, James was in the water. 'Now if you did that every day, you wouldn't have your paunch, Henry,' remarked Mrs Rutland, watching James leave the water by the ladder at the far end of the pool.

Considering that she herself had a good deal of flab round her middle, Marina felt it was not a tactful thing to say to him, especially in front of someone else.

'I'm thirty years older than James, my dear. One might say that if you didn't have a weakness for *papas* and toasted almonds, you would still be as slim as Marina here.'

Mrs Rutland compressed her lips, and flashed him a look which made Marina cringe with embarrassment at being witness to a moment of disharmony which, later, made her wonder if, for all their worldly goods, the Rutlands were really happy. Forgetting her earlier self-consciousness, she was relieved when James rejoined them.

It was while they were studying his portfolio of drawings that he threw her into confusion. She had adjusted her lounge in order to lie on her tummy with her chin propped in her cupped palms and the sun on her back and the backs of her legs. Suddenly James, who had dried himself and now had on another pair of borrowed trunks, rose from his lounge and, picking up a tube of sun-cream belonging to Mrs Rutland, came over to sit on the edge of

Marina's lounge. Before she could think of any evasive action, he was smoothing cream on her shoulders.

'Lie flat for a minute.'

Largely to hide her hot cheeks from the Rutlands, she obeyed, and instantly regretted it. For, with a dexterity which could only come from considerable practice, he undid the clip of the halter-top of her bikini and squeezed several large blobs of cream in a line down her spine.

Marina had never been more furious. She felt like sitting up and hitting him, but trapped by her unfastened bra and the presence of the Rutlands, there was nothing she could do but lie, fuming, while he stroked her back from her shoulder-blades to her hips. What made her doubly incensed was that while her mind resented his effrontery, her treacherous body received his caresses with pleasure.

Mrs Rutland interrupted her comments on the drawings to say, 'Why not have a short nap, Marina ? I expect you two were out late last night, and will be again tonight. A cat-nap will do you good.'

'Yes, but ten minutes only, Marina. We don't want this pretty back to burn,' said James, and he had the nerve to give her an admonitory pat on the bottom before he got up and strolled away.

She lay with her teeth tightly clenched/hating him and despising herself for not being able to control the *frissons* induced by his fingertips on her spine.

About five minutes later, when the others were discussing the siting and shape of the swimming pool at the new house, she managed to refasten her top, and went swiftly indoors to dress.

By the time they left the Rutlands to drive to their luncheon engagement, her mood was calmer, and she saw that the only way to handle him was to keep very- cool.

Jose-Maria and Lolita lived with her parents in a large town house with marble floors and formal furniture. In summer, the closed shutters and lofty

rooms must make for coolness, thought Marina, but in winter the effect, to English eyes, was reminiscent of a Victorian house in deep mourning. This impression of gloom was counterbalanced by the lively presence of three small children, the twin girls wearing dresses with beautiful smocking across the chest. Their young mother was dressed in the height of fashion, and looked as if she had spent the morning at the hairdresser.

Her up-to-the-minute elegance contrasted oddly with the plain black dresses and black shoes and stockings worn by her mother and another elderly woman who was present. Marina was struck by the frequent kisses and caresses bestowed on the children not only by the women but by their father and grandfather. No attempt was made to restrain them from running about the room where the adults were sitting, and they seemed far more cosseted than northern European children, yet not spoiled by all the petting they received.

It was half past two when lunch was served by two maids. Lolita put Marina next to Herr Schmidt, who spoke excellent English and with whom she had some conversation.

Afterwards they went to look at the restaurant, Jose- Maria leading the way in his car with his wife and the German, and James and Marina following.

'I'm afraid I shall have to leave you on your own this evening. Schmidt's wife isn't with him, and he wants to go to a night-club which isn't a suitable place for you. I don't want to go myself, but Jose-Maria seems to feel it would be politic, and I'm involved in this project chiefly to help him.'

'Don't you like night-clubs?' asked Marina.

'Does any intelligent person over the age of twenty- one?'

'I've never been to one.'

'You haven't missed anything. In general they're sleazy places serving bad food and worse liquor at extortionate prices. The hostesses look like Gorgons to anyone who isn't half-drunk, and the floor-show is aimed at people who have never matured beyond prurient adolescence. According to

Jose-Maria, the star attraction at the place we're going tonight is a lady on the wrong side of forty who does her act in two sequins and a feather boa. Not your scene, I think.'

'No, not at all,' she agreed. 'Poor Frau Schmidt! It must be dismal having a husband who sneaks off to night-clubs whenever she isn't around. I suppose she has no idea. I thought at lunch he wasn't a good advertisement for his countrymen.'

'Why? Was he nudging your leg?'

'No, I think--' She bit back 'he thought I was your girl-friend', and substituted, 'He was more interested in Lolita. She's very attractive with those huge dark eyes and black hair.'

'Yes, she's a good-looking girl, but totally immersed in her children and her own appearance. I think you'd quickly be bored if you could chat freely to her.'

The new restaurant was on the site of a much smaller one. Its location seemed to Marina to be rather remote from the coast and the summer tourists, but apparently it was on the road to a beauty spot which every year attracted hundreds of visitors, and the restaurant itself had splendid views of the surrounding sierras.

It was dark when they drove back to Javea. Jose-Maria was picking up James about nine, so he and Marina had dinner together, and then she went upstairs to read. It was their third night in Spain, and with only three more nights left, it seemed probable that tomorrow would be the day she dreaded. Recalling their conversation in the car that afternoon, she found it ironic that James should jib at taking her to a night-club where the entertainment was a strip-show, but had apparently no scruples about seducing her.

Shortly before eleven there was a tap on her door. She got up and pulled on her dressing gown, and unlocked the door, expecting to see the chambermaid because the bed had not been turned down when she came upstairs. But it was James who was standing in the corridor.

'Oh, I see you've already turned in. I thought you might still be up and bored with being on your own.'

'No, I have an excellent book to read. Why are you back so early ? I thought you'd be out until all hours.'

'So did I, but fortunately Schmidt took a fancy to one of the Gorgons, and Jose-Maria and I became *de trop*. I can't persuade you to dress and come for a walk?'

'At this time of night?'

'Why not? It's warm. There's a beautiful moon.'

'I think I'll be more alert tomorrow if I go to sleep rather than for a walk.'

'As you wish, but after an hour and a half in a place where everyone was smoking their heads off, my lungs need refreshing with sea air before I turn in.'

'Yes, I'm sure they must.'

He didn't move and, after a pause, Marina said, 'Well ... goodnight,' and closed the door.

Back in bed, she didn't pick up her book but sat staring absently at the wardrobe, wondering what would have happened if she had gone for a walk with him. Almost certainly he would have kissed her, but whether, when they returned to the hotel, he would have pressed the button for his floor rather than hers was harder to judge. She had no experience of how men like James went about such things. Did they try to take girls by storm?

Or did they take time to achieve their objective? She had no idea. All she knew was that, judging by the effect he had had on her that morning by the Rutlands' pool, it would be madness ever to allow him to kiss her.



She thought about David Leigh who had kissed her once, but only lightly, after taking her to the theatre. Was his attitude to her basically the same as James's ? Or was he looking for someone to love, to marry ?

What do I myself really want ? she pondered. Freedom and a career? Or freedom for a year or two, then marriage ?

Next morning, going down to breakfast and finding James already at the table, she said, 'Did you enjoy your walk?'

'Yes, you missed an interesting experience.'

'Really? What was that?'

'I met a couple who are here for the winter, and went back to their villa which is like a magpie's nest, full of interesting things arranged by her, with great taste. He's a Frenchman who has turned his chateau into a holiday centre. She's like me, a mixture of nationalities. They've asked us to supper this evening, and I've accepted. I felt sure you'd be interested in her collections. I don't know their surname. They introduced themselves as Victor and Cleone.'

'Are they married ?'

'Probably not in the legal sense. They appear to be married in all the important ways.'

'What do you mean ?'

'Unlike the Rutlands who take jabs at each other from time to time, these people advertise each other's best qualities. She's a beautiful woman. Her face made me wish I had my father's talent for portraiture.'

'Did they recognise your name?' she asked.

'She did. More coffee?'

'Please. What's the programme for today?'

'Today Mrs Rutland will have second thoughts about the ideas she thought perfect yesterday,' he said dryly. 'Before we meet the Rutlands, Jose-Maria is going to introduce us to a couple of local builders' merchants. If they can't supply all the materials I want, we shall have to hunt about in Alicante. There'll be no point in driving back here for our last night. We'll find an hotel there.'

He was right in thinking that Mrs Rutland would no longer be satisfied with the perspectives over which she had waxed effusive the day before. She had discovered the absence of a bar in the sitting-room, and said they had always had a bar and could not entertain without one.

James, so diplomatic on their first visit to the house, now startled Marina by stating bluntly that a bar was not appropriate in a private house and, if Mrs Rutland insisted on having one, he would have to withdraw his services. The house, when finished, was likely to be featured in *House & Garden* and the American glossies, and therefore he could not allow features which were anathematic to his style as a designer.

Far from being put out by this dictatorial attitude, Mrs Rutland gave way at once.

'But there's nothing to prevent her installing a bar when the place is finished, is there?' said Marina later, while she and James were having lunch in the sun outside a small restaurant close to the rocks of the Cala Blanca.

'No, but she won't,' he replied. 'She'll even take pleasure in telling her bar-owning friends that I refused to let her have one. If her husband put his foot down sometimes, instead of merely grumbling, they'd both be a good deal happier.' He slanted a quizzical look at her. 'I don't expect you to agree, but I think twentieth-century women have an atavistic need to be mastered now and then.'

'I wouldn't argue with that.'

He lifted an eyebrow. 'You wouldn't?'

'No, because the reverse of the medal is that twentieth- century men have an atavistic need to be lord and master sometimes. Sensible women cater to that need rather than resent it.'

To Marina's surprise, the woman who opened the door of her villa to them that night was not in her thirties or forties, as she had expected. Cleone was probably sixty, with thick white hair drawn back from a centre parting and caught in a coil at the nape of her neck. Her face was brown and, in certain lights, deeply lined by much laughter and sunbathing. Only her eyes were made up with a skilful combination of blue and green shadows. Her clothes would have struck some people as eccentric, but Marina thought them most attractive. Under a long red silk coat which, later, she said was a *paranji* made and embroidered by a Turcoman nomad woman, Cleone was wearing a white cashmere polo and black zouave trousers of a length to show elegant ankles in fine black tights.

When James had introduced Marina, Cleone said, 'It's cooler tonight. Come to the fire. Victor is busy in the kitchen. We both love to cook, so we have to take it in turns, and tonight is his turn.'

She led them into a room where a log fire blazed on a raised hearth. 'Let me give you a glass of our favourite wine.'

Within moments of their arrival, Marina found herself sitting in a chair over which was flung a colourful piece of Indian tenting, with a glass of *tinto* and a little dish of almonds at her elbow.

Cleone said, 'We buy our wine "loose", that is from a- cask in a Spanish *bodega*. This wine, which is *viejo*— five years old—comes from the bodega at Jalon, a village in one of the valleys a few kilometres inland. The almonds are from a stall in the Monday market at Denia, a town on the far side of Montgo. Unfortunately the markets of the world are becoming more and more alike, and consequently less and less interesting.' Her regretful shrug changed to a brilliant smile. 'Ah, here is Victor.'

The man who had entered the room by a door behind Marina's chair was as tall as James, but very thin with iron grey hair and dark eyes. He was wearing a plastic apron over a navy blue sweater and trousers.

He shook hands with James, who had risen, then turned to Marina and, as James introduced her, kissed her hand. She could tell that he liked the look of her, and had noticed what she was wearing. She could also tell,, from the smile he turned on Cleone, that for him no young girl could compare with the white-haired woman who was pouring a glass of wine for him.

'You wouldn't think it to look at her, but Marina is an *antiquaire* with many years' experience,' said James, when they were having dinner at a table in a corner of the room. The centrepiece was a low arrangement of mimosa and silver-grey leaves, flanked by two green glass carafes with lemons in place of stoppers.

'Oh, fortunate girl!' said Cleone. 'I can't tell you how often I've longed to own a little antique shop, but there's never time in one life for all the things one longs to try.' She began to question Marina with genuine interest.

After the *pate*, eaten with pieces of bread hot from the oven, Victor produced chicken in a rich gravy with rice, fried bananas, and salad. To conclude the meal, he brought in a beautiful dish of green glazed earthenware piled high with tangerines, the freshness of their leaves indicating how recently they had left the tree. With the fruit, there were French and Spanish cheeses.

After dinner he and James began to discuss oceangoing yachts, and Cleone took Marina on a tour of the sitting-room. She explained that the villa was rented, and furnished with objects of unacceptable ugliness. Lifting the tenting on the chair where Marina had sat before dinner, she revealed a glimpse of pea-green plastic.

'But wherever we go for the winter, always I take my two trunks, and with what they contain I can change the most horrible house into somewhere quite civilised,' she said. 'In the summer, at Champfleuri, we live in two lovely rooms with all that is left of Victor's family things. I should be happy there all year, but now that his health prevents him from sailing his boat, he becomes very restless and needs a change of place and people. Now, while he and James are absorbed in the subject of catamarans, I must quickly sketch James's face to add to my file of interesting faces. Would you care to see it?'

'Very much.'

Cleone produced a ring-file containing thirty or forty sketches of faces of many nationalities. While Marina studied them, her hostess drew James with quick, sure strokes of black ink.

'Obviously you're a professional artist,' said Marina.

Cleone smiled and shook her head. 'No, my only profession has been to make a place of peace and comfort for the men I've loved. I first married in 1939, when I was nineteen, and since then the whole of my life has been spent thinking about my own appearance, the arrangement of my various homes, the presentation of food and so on. Had I been of your generation, I should have been discouraged from marrying so young, but then it was different, and anyway I always knew that, for me, the only things which matter are love and beauty. Do you know what you need to be happy ? Travel, perhaps, and independence? There are so many formulae for happiness. The difficult thing is to know the right one for one.'

'I don't think I do know,' said Marina. 'I'm taking life as it comes. Is that a mistake, do you think?'

Cleone considered. 'Not if what comes is agreeable. It must be a mistake not to resist situations which make one unhappy.'

'Not always.' Marina explained the situation which had made her postpone her own plans for a time.

'Ah, but in that case you were accepting your responsibility. But if, for example, you were now in an uncongenial job, it would surely be wrong to put up with it in the hope that eventually marriage would provide an escape ? Except in special conditions, I feel one should always try to live in a positive way.'

'What are you two discussing so earnestly?' Victor enquired.

Cleone closed her sketchpad. 'The pursuit of happy- ] ness.'

He said gallantly, 'Ah, for me that pursuit ended the day Mnet you, *mi vida*.'

With a sudden tightness in her throat, Marina watched them exchange a look of profound understanding and love.

Then Cleone turned to the younger man. 'And you, James ? You must find a great deal of joy in your work. To be born with a creative talent is a wonderful advantage.'

James said, 'I agree with Rousseau's definition of happiness.'

'Oh, what was that?'

""A good bank account, a good cook and a good digestion".'

The others laughed, and Marina mustered a smile, but inwardly she thought he had succeeded in spoiling Victor's compliment and the interchange of loving looks which had followed it. Perhaps James didn't like to be reminded that there were heights of love far beyond his own transient relationships.

Yet on the way back to the *parador*, after talking till one in the morning, he said, 'They're a delightful pair, aren't they?' and continued to discuss them so warmly that she found it hard to understand why, if he admired them and their life-style, he didn't wish to emulate them.

The next day was their last in Javea. At breakfast Marina said, 'What is the address of Cleone and Victor's villa?'

James told her. 'Why do you ask?'

'I've written her a note of thanks for last night.'

'It may as well go in the same envelope as my Collins. The porter will stamp and post it for us.'

It was a tiring day, spent in a succession of consultations with contractors and suppliers, and apart from taking a few notes when James requested it, Marina felt herself to be a superfluous onlooker. Indeed, except when she had helped him to measure the Rutlands' house, and, done some measuring herself, she had done nothing to justify the expense of bringing her to Spain : a reflection which increased her misgivings about his intentions towards her.

Thus it was with mingled relief and dismay that she learned the Rutlands had insisted on taking them out to dinner that night.

'A long skirt, I should think, if you have one with you,' said James, driving back to the *parador*. 'They're picking us up at eight-thirty, so we have forty-five minutes to change.'

She spent the first ten minutes lying in a scented bath, thinking it was absurd to feel so tired when all she had done all day was to shake hands, and smile, and stand by trying not to look bored by discussions in a language of which she knew twenty words.

The bath revived her. She brushed her hair and applied fresh eye make-up from a palette of four different greens. Then she put on a long black wool skirt, slit to the knee on one side, and a blouse of apple-green silk with a large, finely pleated collar and pleated cuffs. By twenty past eight she was ready.

Downstairs she handed in her key for which there was not enough room in her small black evening bag.

'*Momento, sehorita.*' The porter handed her an envelope on which was written *Miss Marina Linwood*.

Puzzled, she opened it and drew out a single sheet of cartridge paper. On one side was Cleone's pen and ink sketch of James. On the other, she had written—*I thought you might like to have this, so I made a copy. I hope we meet again some day. C.*

'Good evening, Marina. You look very pretty tonight.' Mrs Jutland, in a blond mink coat, bore down upon her from the entrance to the hotel. 'Isn't that a Gina Fratini?' —eyeing the apple-green blouse.

'Good evening. Only a copy, I'm afraid. Would you excuse me for a moment? I—I've left something in my room.'

Marina hastened towards the staircase just as James stepped out of the lift. Upstairs, she realised she had no key. Luckily a passing chambermaid admitted her to her bedroom with a pass-key, and she put the sketch in a drawer and hurried down to join the others.

Why Cleone should think she would want to have a sketch of James she could not imagine.



## CHAPTER THREE

It was half past one in the morning when the Rutlands delivered them back to the *parador*. For the past hour Marina had been clenching her teeth to stop herself yawning. James showed no sign of being tired, and her spirits sank at the thought that he might have the energy to be amorous.

But as his clients drove away and he and Marina turned up the steps to the entrance, he said, 'I don't know about you, but I shan't be sorry to get my head down. It's been a heavy day, particularly the last couple of hours.'

'Yes, the Rutlands are not nearly as interesting as Cleone and Victor, are they?'

He grinned at her. 'That's a masterpiece of understatement! But you hid your ennui very well. Never mind, tomorrow we'll take the night off and do as we please.'

They shared the lift with an elderly man and had no other conversation beyond exchanging goodnights when it stopped at her floor.

It was not until she had undressed and creamed her face that Marina remembered the sketch she had thrust in a drawer. She took it out and propped it on her dressing-table while she brushed her hair. While Cleone was sketching James, Victor must have been telling him something amusing. She had caught him with the characteristic quirk at the corner of his well-shaped mouth, a glint of laughter in his eyes.

Studying his features at length, Marina found herself thinking that it was a strong face as well as an attractive one. The face of a man who would know what to do in an emergency. If I were an old lady in difficulties, or a child who was lost, I would trust that face, she reflected. I'm sure it's only "with girls that he isn't to be trusted."

The following morning, after an early breakfast, they set out for Alicante. When they arrived James parked the car on the waterfront, and told Marina she could have the morning off to look round the shops.

'We'll meet in one of these cafes about one,' he said, indicating several awning-shaded pavement cafes on the Explanada. 'Have you enough Spanish money to buy yourself a pair of shoes if you see some you like?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Until later, then.'

Watching him striding away from her, his tall figure dwarfing the average Spaniard, it struck her that whereas in England he looked noticeably foreign, here he was unmistakably part-English. Perhaps it was not true of all Spain, but in this region it seemed to her that there were many lovely Spanish women but few good-looking men, and none with the air of toughness and virility which distinguished James.

Presently, strolling along one of the main thoroughfares at right angles to the waterfront, she glanced down a side-street and was startled to see a Woolworths. Curious to see how it compared with its English counterpart, she had a look round and discovered that although most of the stock was different, the store had the same smell as the Woolworths she had known from childhood.

The streets of the city were full of immaculately-coiffed women, many of them walking arm in arm, and most of them wearing elegant winter coats and boots. Perhaps, compared with the broiling heat of a Spanish summer, the sunny day seemed cool to them. To Marina it was still hard to believe this was January, for she was more than warm enough in a sweater and skirt.

After buying leather gloves for Pat and Jane, a leather belt for Robert Logan, and presents for Pat's mother and son, she spent half an hour looking round the covered market at stalls hung with hams and a dozen different kinds of sausage; marble slabs ranged with unfamiliar fish and shellfish of every hue from mother-of-pearl to dark red; and trestles laden with oranges, artichokes, giant red and green peppers and other fine vegetables.

By noon she had bought herself a pair of classic Gucci-style black leather shoes with medium heels and gilt links on the instep. She would have liked to explore the ancient Moorish castle on the crest of the hill which

dominated the northern side of the city. But as she wasn't sure there would be time before her rendezvous with James, she decided not to risk keeping him waiting.

When, after more window-shopping, she returned to the Explanada, he was there before her, sitting at a table for two. When Marina spotted him, he was casting an appreciative eye at the tightly-trousered behind of a girl who was passing his table by the aisle which enabled pedestrians to walk through the pavement cafe rather than having to skirt it.

His eyes were still following the girl when Marina reached his table and said, 'Have you been waiting long?'

He rose. 'No, less than five minutes. You appear to have had a successful morning'—relieving her of her parcels.

'Yes, I have. And you ?'

During lunch, a number of eye-catching girls passed by, but James had the good manners not to ogle them while she was with him.

He had booked rooms at an hotel further along the Explanada, and given his car key to the porter who would have arranged for their bags to be fetched from the car.

'I thought after lunch we'd change and drive out to the beach at Playa de San Juan,' he said. 'An afternoon of sun and ozone will invigorate us for tonight.'

'What are we doing tonight?' she asked.

James smiled at her over the rim of his wine-glass. 'Let's play it by ear, shall we?'

Was it only her imagination, or was there a predatory gleam in the tawny eyes ?

An hour later they were walking along a miles-long beach of golden sand lapped by an aquamarine sea so inviting that she was tempted to take off her

shoes and socks and paddle. At first the water felt icy, but very soon she was splashing through the shallows, urging James to join her.

He shook his head. 'I'm the all or nothing type.'

That evening she wore again the Indian cotton outfit from Monsoon. Their hotel had only a snack bar, so they dined elsewhere and then went to a *discoteca* catering to couples who wanted to hold each other rather than to dance.

As they sat down at a dimly-lit table, and James ordered sparkling wine, Marina knew that this was precisely the situation Pat had visualised and warned her against.

'Shall we dance ?' he suggested presently.

Mentally arming herself against him, she rose and went with him on to the tiny dance floor where everyone else seemed locked in an intimate embrace.

He drew her against him,, close but not as close as she had feared.

'I like your scent. What is it?'

'Dior-Dior.'

'Mm ... nice.'

He smelt rather good himself, she thought. Not of the strong cologne which emanated from many of the Spanish men who had passed her in the streets that morning, but of some more discreet after-shave which she could smell only while she was in his arms, and which reminded her of a pine forest.

They returned to their table where she was careful to drink her wine slowly, in sips.

The next time they danced, it seemed to her that he held her a little closer to him.

Back at the table, he said, 'You're not drinking much. Is this wine too dry for you ? Or would you rather have a soft drink?'

'Could I?'

'Why not?' He beckoned a waiter.

To her surprise when the man brought a long drink for her, he brought as well a bottle of water and another glass for James.

'One of the reasons why people who come here on holiday often get upset stomachs is because they neglect to drink enough water,' he said. 'If you ever make a long flight, make sure you drink plenty of water while you're in the air and you won't suffer from jet-lag, which is partly the result of dehydration.'

'Really?'

'So I'm told by a friend who's a transatlantic pilot.'

Calling for soft drinks and talking about jet-lag seemed a curious gambit if he was bent on seducing her. Marina began to relax a little.

But when they danced for the third time there was no mistaking that he was holding her much closer than the first time they had been on the floor. Admittedly it was now more crowded than before, but not yet so packed that it was necessary for him to release her hand and put both his arms round her. She was left with no choice but to rest her right hand on his chest. Knowing that he was watching her, she did her best to look as if she was listening to the music and looking at the people round them, and was not in any way disturbed by the warmth of his hands on her back and the contact of their thighs as they slowly revolved round a floor not much larger in area than two double beds.

Presently she asked, 'What time is our flight tomorrow?'

'Not until late afternoon. We can lie in bed late if we feel like it.'

Had he felt her stiffen ? she wondered.

'But perhaps you don't enjoy being lazy on Sunday morning,' he added.

Because she had not read a newspaper or looked at a calendar since leaving London, she had lost track of the week and forgotten it was Saturday night.

'Not usually. Do you?'

'It depends what I did the night before.'

Was it her own nasty mind which gave a sexual connotation to a remark which might have been innocent of any such meaning? Would she have had the same thought if Pat had not warned her about him ? Probably. One would have to be extraordinarily pure not to think about sex while pressed to his tall, strong body.

She tried to ease slightly away. 'Don't you find it's becoming rather hot in here?'

'Yes, and too smoky for my liking. Shall we call it a night?'

They had come by taxi. As they left, James looked down at her feet, and asked, 'Can you walk in those heels?'

'Yes, perfectly.' This was not strictly true, but to walk would delay the moment she dreaded.

They passed the lighted windows of an expensive jewellers and he paused to look at a display of over- decorated silver goblets and ornate candelabra. Marina had discovered that morning that Alicante was not a city where one could walk head in air. In places the pavements were in a state of disrepair which for anyone blind or unsteady must make walking a nightmare. Extrusions as well as holes had twice caused her to wrench her ankle before she had learnt to look carefully where she was going.

Presently, preoccupied with what might be in store for her, she failed to notice the protruding edge of a flagstone and, tripping on it, would have

fallen had not James caught her by the arm. His grip, and her loss of balance, made her pivot towards him, and once more she found herself clasped to his chest, only this time without the dim lights of the *discoteca* to help her to hide her reactions from him. Now the strong light from a window display illuminated her upturned face and the tawny eyes close above hers.

'Th-thank you,' she stammered.

'These pavements are very uneven. I think we should take a taxi after all.' But he made no move to release her, and his gaze shifted to her mouth.

She drew in her breath, certain he was going to kiss her, here in the street, regardless of who might be watching.

But he didn't. He let her go. 'Are you hurt? Did you wring your ankle?'

'Only slightly. Oh, dear!' This as, looking down, she saw that the fragile strap which held her shoe on her foot had broken.

James went down on his haunches to examine the damage. He removed the damaged shoe, forcing her to stand on one leg and use his shoulder as a prop.

'Hm ... pity. My fault for suggesting we should walk. I daresay it can be mended. Meanwhile ...'

Marina gasped as, slipping one arm behind her knees and the other round her waist, he rose with her in his arms.

'James, you can't possibly carry me!'

'Why not? You're only a featherweight, and you can't walk with one shoe off and one shoe on. There'll be a taxi passing shortly. It would make it easier if you put an arm round my neck.'

Reluctantly, she complied. In fact it was some time before a taxi showing the green light which replaced the daytime *Libre* sign responded to her urgent signal, and drew alongside them.

In the taxi she took off her other shoe intending, when they reached the hotel, to enter it in her stocking feet. But in fact she had hurt her ankle more than she realised, and as soon as she put her weight on it, a sharp twinge of pain made her wince. James, who had given some coins to the driver before they drew up, promptly picked her up for the second time and strode into the building, carrying her as easily as if she weighed half her one hundred and twenty-six pounds.

At the desk, he explained to the surprised-looking porter what had happened. The man gave Marina her key, and James's, and held- open the door of the lift for them.

In the corridor between the lift and her bedroom, she said, 'I can manage now, thank you.'

But when they reached her door, instead of putting her down as she hoped he would, he waited for her to unlock the door which, after some hesitation, she did.

A switch by the door operated the light in the tiny lobby and one in the bedroom. The inner door was open and James walked through it and deposited her gently on the turned-down bed. Then he switched on the bedside lamp and sat down beside her to examine her injured ankle.

After a moment he said, 'I'm going to the bathroom to soak a towel in cold water. While I'm gone, take off your tights, will you?'

'What?'

'If you want to walk on that ankle tomorrow, it needs treatment now. Take off your tights.' Upon which command, he rose and disappeared.

Looking at her left ankle, now perceptibly puffier than her right one, Marina knew he was right. To remove her tights, she had also to remove her knickers. Although she knew people who wore them the other way round, she had always worn her briefs over her tights, and tonight she was wearing French knickers.



Having taken off both, she thrust them out of sight under the pillow, and tucked her skirt closely round her.

Presently James came back with the plastic bathmat and a wet towel, well wrung out so as not to drip. Using the mat to protect the bedding from becoming damp, he bound the towel tightly round her bare ankle. Then he picked up the telephone and asked for a pot of coffee and two glasses of brandy to be brought to her room as soon as possible.

'I'm not sure that I ought not to try and get hold of some strapping,' he said, as he replaced the receiver.

'Oh, no, I'm sure that isn't necessary. It's not a bad sprain, just a wrench.'

'Maybe I can improvise something to keep the swelling down. What did you do with your tights?'

'They're under the pillow, but I don't--'

He lifted the pillow, saw the toe of one gauzy nylon leg and pulled, bringing out not only the tights but also her lace-trimmed pale blue crepe-de-chine knickers. Blushing, she watched him disentangle them and toss the knickers aside. She remembered how easily he had dealt with the snap-in plastic catch on Mrs Rutland's daughter's bikini top. Clearly women's clothes held no mysteries for him.

There was a knock at the door. James called '*Adelante*', and a waiter came in and bade them good evening. He put down the tray he was carrying, received James's tip with the usual sleight of his calling, and withdrew. Clearly his sharp black eyes had not missed the tights in James's other hand, or the discarded French knickers.

'What must he have thought?' Marina demanded furiously, when he had gone.

'Does it matter?'

'It matters to me. I don't like the staff here thinking that we ... that you ...' She broke off in confusion.

'That he caught me in the act of undressing you ? I shouldn't think he does think that. If people are bent on going to bed together, they don't usually stop to order coffee. That comes afterwards. Also if I had been making love to you, you wouldn't be looking so prim and neat, with your lipstick unsmudged.'

As he spoke he had poured out the coffee. Bringing a cup to the bedside and handing it to her, he said, with a sardonic smile, 'For the record, I should have started by taking off your blouse.'

Marina knew she was scarlet. In an attempt to disguise her discomposure, she reached for the cup with fingers not perfectly steady.

'You may not like Spanish brandy, but it will help you to sleep if your ankle throbs,' said James. 'On second thoughts, the hotel should have a first aid kit somewhere on the premises. I'll ring the porter.'

After a brief conversation, during which she seized the chance to thrust her underwear out of sight for the second time, he said, 'Yes, he'll have a bandage brought up.'

He sat down in the chair by the wardrobe, and began to drink his coffee.

The bandage was brought by the waiter who had brought the coffee.

'If he was under any misapprehension the first time, he certainly isn't now,' said James, when the man had gone.

He removed the wet towel, dried her ankle with another, and began, expertly, to strap it.

'Where did you learn how to do that ?' she asked.

'From the chap who taught me rock-climbing. He belonged to a mountain rescue team, and the rescuers need to know how to patch people up between finding them and getting them to hospital. Not too tight?'

'It feels fine, thank you.'

'Good, then I'll say goodnight. If you're wise, you won't try to hobble about too much tonight. By morning you should be okay. Goodnight, Marina.'

Later, lying in the dark, she wondered if, but for her ankle, he would have made a pass at her tonight.

From the moment she woke up next morning, and unbound her ankle to find the swelling subsided, until late afternoon when they boarded the flight back to London, the unanswered question nagged at the back of her mind. Holding her close in the *discooteca*, had James hoped for a different and less chaste end to their last night in Spain ... or hadn't he ?

For a man whose dishonourable intentions had been frustrated, and who had wasted a good deal of money on a double bed which only he had occupied, he seemed remarkably good-tempered. She was forced to the conclusion that she had the distinction of being the first girl who had come back from a trip with him without even being kissed, let alone taken to bed. Not because she had resisted more strenuously than the others, but because he had not tried as hard. It should have pleased her, but somehow it didn't. Perversely, now she regretted not being given the opportunity to establish that she had no intention of succumbing to his charm, ever.

It was drizzling when they landed.

'I'll come with you to Pat's place and hear what's been happening in our absence,' said James, taking charge of her case as well as his own.

His secretary had seen their taxi draw up, and she opened the door before Marina had time to use her latchkey. 'I needn't ask if the weather was good,' she said.

It was only when she saw her own golden face and Pat's pale one reflected in the hall mirror that Marina realised how greatly a few days in the sun had altered her appearance. Although not as tanned as James, who had been brown before he went, she now had the summery glow for which she remembered envying Lara Lester.

'You'll stay to supper?' Pat asked him.

'If there's enough to go round.'

'Plenty. Help yourselves to gin and tonic, or whatever, while I put on the sprouts.'

'Shall I run your case upstairs for you?' he suggested to Marina, as Pat went off to the kitchen.

'Thank you.' She led the way, conscious that he was looking at her legs.

'I should think you'll be glad when you've found somewhere roomier, won't you?' was his comment, when she opened the door of her tiny bedroom.

'Pat says it's stuffy in summer, but in winter it's cosy,' she answered.

As he set down the case he noticed the seventeenth- century dressing mirror standing incongruously on the cheap chest of drawers.

'That is your property, presumably?'

'Yes, it's my greatest treasure.'

He stooped to study more closely the embroidered border of animals, birds and insects which had been padded with wool to make them stand out. In the confined space of the narrow room he seemed even taller and broader of shoulder than usual.

He straightened, turning his attention from the mirror to her. After some moments his scrutiny made her uneasy.

Marina said, 'I shan't unpack now. I'll just wash my hands and then I'll join you downstairs. If you'd like to wash there's another bathroom on the first floor landing.'

'Yes, I know.' For a few seconds longer he stood there, looming over her with a quirk at the corner of his mouth, as if he recognised her uneasiness and was amused by it.

During supper, which on Saturdays and Sundays was cooked by Pat to give her mother a rest, she told James and Marina all that had happened at Brook Street while they were away.

They were having coffee in the sitting-room when the telephone rang and she went to answer it. When she came back, she said, 'For you, Marina. David Leigh.'

Marina went into the hall, closing the sitting-room door after her. 'Hello, David. How are you ?'

'Fine, thanks. And you? Enjoyed your trip?'

'Very much, thank you.'

'I wouldn't have telephoned you so soon except that I've seen a flat which I think would suit you, and the sooner you look at it the better. Is first thing tomorrow possible?'

'I should think so. Hold on a moment, would you, while I check with Pat ?'

But it was James she addressed when she put her head into the sitting-room. 'Would you mind if I took time off , tomorrow morning to look at a flat ? Only an hour or so.'

'By all means.'

Marina returned to the telephone. 'No obstacles. Where is the flat?'

'Near the Crown Jewels and awkward to find the first time. I'll pick you up about nine and run you there.'

'That's very kind of you, David. Till nine, then. Goodnight.'

On hearing the arrangement she had made, James said, 'I've no appointments before lunch tomorrow. If you like I'll come with you, and give you my professional opinion.'

To refuse the offer would have been ungracious, but she doubted if David would welcome his presence, and she wasn't sure that she did; not because she didn't value his advice, but for reasons she couldn't analyse.

Soon afterwards James went home, and Pat said, 'Can I come up while you're unpacking and hear about Spain?'

'Yes, do.'

The first thing Marina unpacked was Pat's present, with which she was delighted. 'Extravagant girl! I do love nice gloves. Thank you, my dear. Now tell me who you met, and what you ate, and what you thought of Spain.'

Although she asked many questions about the business side of the trip, Pat made no reference, even obliquely, to the personal side of it.

It was Marina who, on a sudden impulse to confide in her, said, 'By the way, you were wrong.'

'Wrong?'

'J.S. didn't make a pass.'

Pat looked surprised. 'How unlike him! Maybe he's reforming at long last.'

'I shouldn't think so. Although I was glad that nothing happened, in a way it's rather lowering to morale to be the first girl to turn him off rather than on.'

Pat looked thoughtful. 'There are two reasons for a man not to make a pass. Either he's not attracted, which is clearly not the reason in your case. You're a dish by anyone's standards, and even more so after six days in the sun.'

'What's the other reason?'

'Instead of straightforward lust, he finds himself feeling something more complex—love.'

Marina blinked at her. 'Oh, that's ridiculous, Pat! J.S. isn't in love with me.'

'Why not? It hits us all sooner or later, even the womanisers. A bout of unrequited love could be very good for him.'

'I'm sure you're miles off the mark.'

'His offer to come with you tomorrow supports my theory.'

'Not necessarily. He's just trying to be helpful.'

'Time alone will tell, as the song says. Meanwhile I expect you'd like a bath before you turn in, so I'll say goodnight, and thank you again for the gloves.'

'*De nada*, as they say in Spain. Goodnight, Pat.'

Punctually at nine two vehicles approached the house : David's car and James's taxi. While he was paying the driver, Marina explained him to David.

She sat in David's passenger seat, James behind.

'Why were you so mysterious about where the flat is?' she asked.

'Because if I'd given you the address you might have been put off. It's not a district which has a salubrious reputation.'

'How did you come to hear of it?'

'Through a friend of a friend. You'll have to make a quick decision. Once word gets around, there'll be a score of people after it. Have you heard anything from the agents about your grandparents' place?'

'No, I was hoping there might be a letter from them waiting for me. It could be on the market for months. I wonder if I can get a bridging loan?'

'That'll be no problem,' said James, from behind her. 'If the flat seems a good investment, and your bank has old-fashioned ideas about lending money to single women, we would help you.'

She glanced at him over her shoulder, not quite sure what he meant.

She had never been to the Tower of London, where the Crown Jewels were housed, and caught only a glimpse as they passed. Instead of following the stream of traffic which was crossing the Thames by Tower Bridge, David turned the car in another direction, and suddenly they were out of the surge and bustle of the central parts of London and in a much quieter locality where the buildings were mostly old and new warehouses.

They followed a long narrow street and presently David parked the car and led them towards the loading bay of a tall old warehouse. Beside it, not immediately noticeable, was a small door which he unlocked. Inside was a flight of stairs leading up to another door. This he opened before standing aside for Marina to pass through it first.

She found herself in a large, lofty, empty room, the ceiling and walls patterned with the shifting luminosities of sunlight on water. Almost the entire end wall was paned with glass, giving a grandstand view of the river. Marina knew instantly that this was where she wanted to live.

She turned a shining face to David. 'What a lovely place! How much is it?'

He told her, adding, 'But there's no bedroom other than the little gallery up there'—indicating a pine gallery reached by a circular staircase of white-painted cast-iron in a corner of the room.



'Let's have a look at the kitchen and bathroom,' said James.

The kitchen was as small and compact as a galley, the bathroom just large enough to contain the necessary fittings, with a shower over the bath.

'There are two other flats above this. One is a pied-a- terre for a chap who's abroad most of the time, and the other is occupied by a young couple with two small children. So you wouldn't be alone in the building,' David explained. 'Had it meant your being here on your own I shouldn't have suggested it.'

'It must be lovely at night—the moon on the river, the lights of the opposite bank,' said Marina dreamily.

James's thoughts were more prosaic. 'Is there a fire escape, Leigh?'

There was, and he had to agree the flat was a most desirable property, so near to the centre of London and yet, with its panoramic view, so much like a place by the sea.

'I wonder if there's a horrible stench from the mud at low tide?' he speculated. 'You'll need to have awnings fitted, Marina. At certain times of day in summer the light off the water could become an uncomfortable glare.'

'Yes, and Grandfather's most treasured pieces will have to live at the shady end of the room or the stringing will spring,' she agreed.

When they left, and David locked up, he asked her if she would dine with him. Then he gave them a lift to the Tower where they picked up a taxi to go back to Brook Street while he returned to his office in the City.

'No doubt Leigh is hoping to be invited to some cosy home-cooked suppers once you've settled in,' said James, on a note of raillery, as their taxi sped along the Embankment.

'I shall enjoy being able to have a party sometimes,' she answered lightly. 'I should think that room would take twenty people in comfort. Not that I have twenty friends yet, but I expect I shall before long.'

'Twenty acquaintances, perhaps. One is lucky to find two or three friends in a lifetime,' he said, rather cynically.

He was looking out of the window at the river and, studying his profile for a moment, it struck her that he was a man whose mind was so full of ideas that he never felt lonely in the way most people did from time to time. Self-sufficient: that was the term which summed up James Sebastian.

That night, in a quiet corner of an Indonesian restaurant, David said, 'I've been worried about you.'

'Have you? Why?'

'I know it was a business trip, but I had a feeling Sebastian might try to take an unfair advantage of you.'

Marina said, rather coolly, 'James behaved impeccably. I don't know why you should think otherwise.'

'I'm delighted to hear it. Are you likely to go abroad with him fairly frequently?'

'I don't know. I hope so. I've always wanted to see the rest of Europe, especially Italy.'

'I feel you should treat with caution his suggestion of helping you with any financial problems you may have.'

'There shouldn't be any now. The post hadn't come when I left this morning. When I got back there was a letter from the agents saying they've had a very good offer which they think I should accept.'

'That's splendid news-.'

On their previous dates David had used his car, but tonight he had collected her in a taxi. When Marina asked if the car was in dock, he shook his head

but offered no reason for not using it. She found out the reason later, on the way home, when he took her in his arms and kissed her with less restraint than he had on Pat's doorstep.

It was an embrace which she found neither unpleasant nor particularly enjoyable; which was odd considering that he was a more than usually presentable man, and her grandmother's dependence had, for a long time, cut her off from the lighthearted romances normal to her age. In fact only two men had kissed her since her time at art school. One had been an Italian dealer who came regularly to England. He was young and good company, but as she knew him to be married she had made it clear that she didn't want to play extra-marital games with him. The other man had been a master at a nearby boys' boarding school who was a collector of watches. She had liked his mind and his voice, but had found him unattractive physically, so that when one day he had followed her into the privacy of the back room, not wanting to hurt his feelings she had put him off kissing her a second time by implying that she was already involved with someone else.

'I shall be glad when you've moved to Wapping and can ask me up for a nightcap,' said David presently, leaning back against the taxi's upholstery but keeping one arm round her. 'You don't have to worry that I shall ever overstep the mark. I know you're different from most of the girls one meets nowadays.'

'How am I different?'

'To put it bluntly, there are a hell of a lot of girls who, since the Pill has ended their worries about pregnancy, are quite willing to hop into bed if one's wined and dined them in reasonable style.'

'From a man's point of view I should have thought that was all to the good,' observed Marina.

'Up to a point. It's fine in one's bachelor years, but after a time a chap wants to settle down, and then it's different. Whatever we may have done ourselves, most of us don't want a wife who's played the field.'

He kissed her again. 'I don't think you've even done a great deal of this,' he murmured in her ear.

'Not a great deal,' she agreed. 'Anyway, I'm a career- girl.'

In the light from a street lamp she saw him smile. 'You're much too feminine and sweet not to want a private life as well as a professional one. Not yet, perhaps, but eventually. We're nearly there.' He withdrew his arm and made a space between them.

A few days later Marina had stopped on her way along Sloane Street to gaze through Zarach's window at the luxurious avant-garde furniture for which the shop was famous, when someone touched her arm, and said, 'Hello, Marina. Remember me? Chris Arnold.'

She turned and saw a man standing beside her. He was about her own age, with a somewhat shaggy mop of fair hair and a Solzhenitsyn beard fringing his chin. For an instant she didn't recognise him as the idol of her art school days.

'Hello, Chris. How are you?' Her surprise was twofold. Somehow it had never crossed her mind that they might meet again. Now they had, he seemed only moderately good-looking, not the god-like being she remembered.

'I'm fine, thanks. What brings you to London? Just up for the day?'

'Oh, no, I'm living here now. I work for an interior designer in Brook Street.'

'Not James Sebastian?'

'Yes.'

'Lucky girl! I applied for a job there, but I didn't get it. I'm with *Your Home*, in the department dealing with readers' decorative problems. For twenty pounds they get a folder with snippets of carpet and fabric. It's not the job I

want, but it pays the rent until I can find something with more scope. Look, have you time for a coffee ? I'd like to hear how you landed a plum job like yours.'

They spent half an hour in a coffee bar, during which Marina asked him, 'How is Linda? What's she doing now?'

'Linda ?' he repeated, rather blankly.

'Linda Tarrant, your girl at art school.'

'Oh ... Linda.' Clearly he had to dredge his memory to recall her. 'I don't know. We went around for a while, but it wasn't serious, and she didn't finish the course. She fell for some guy who got a good job abroad, and she went with him. What about your love life? With your looks I don't suppose you're still unattached, are you?'

'I am. I'm concentrating on my career. I'm going to be England's answer to Gabriella Crespi before I've finished,' she said jokingly.

'I believe you. Everyone thought you were the girl most likely to make a name until you had to pack it in when your grandfather died.'

'Did they? *I* didn't think so. I should have voted for Linda—she had such original ideas. Oh, look at the time —I must fly, Chris. It has been fun bumping into you.'

'When can I see you again? How about tonight?'

'I'm not making dates for a while. I'm doing up my new flat and it takes every minute of my free time.'

'Maybe I could give you a hand. Drilling holes for Rawlplugs and so on.'

She laughed. 'I don't have to wait for a man to come along before I can hang a painting, Chris. I have my own drill, and I'm quite handy with it. But thanks for offering. In about a month's time I'll ring you and ask you to my flat-warming party.'

'If you don't, I'll ring you, Marina.'

He clasped her hand for rather longer than was customary, and she left him knowing that, if time had not cured her of her calf-love, she could, now, have realised the daydreams of her time at art school.

It seemed ironic that Chris, fully trained and with a diploma, should have a less interesting job. Later in the day she asked Pat if she had any information about him.

Pat checked her files, and said, 'Yes, about a year ago he applied for a job with Mrs Fox-Lennox. He didn't get it because she's the queen of snobs and although he was long on talent he was short on social graces. She likes her assistants to have a public school aura, ignoring the fact that it's much more fashionable to sound and behave as if one had been in the B stream at a secondary mod. What's your interest in Christopher Arnold?'

'Only that we were at art school together, and I met him in the street today.'

'Not a third beau to your string ?'

'No, I yearned from afar in those days, but not any more. And I have only *one* beau to my string, Pat.'

'So you say, but I've seen J.S. looking at you and he's certainly not indifferent, my dear. Besides which he's never been known not to have a popsie in tow for more than a week or two, and it's now several months since he broke it off with his last one.'

'Are you necessarily privy to all his personal relationships?' smiled Marina.

'And how! I order the flowers and organise the theatre tickets, and book the tables for two at his favourite restaurants, and the double bedrooms at his favourite country hotels. Now all that has come to an end. Why, I ask myself?'

'Not on my account, Pat. If he were interested in me, other than as an employee, he'd be doing something about it.'

'One would think so, certainly. But it could be that after years of merrily womanising with girls as hedonistic as he is himself, he doesn't know how to go on with someone like you.'

'A very improbable theory,' said Marina dryly.

'Mm, I suppose it is really. The thing is I'd like to see him happily settled down with someone nice instead of racketing around with a succession of flibbertigibbets. At rock bottom *he* is too nice for this endless rake's progress. It's high time someone reformed him, and you know what they say about reformed rakes being the best husbands.'

'Yes, but I've never believed it.'

Early in March, by which time Marina was installed in her flat but was not yet receiving visitors, James sent for her. On Sunday he was going to see a large country house which had been sold by its owners, who could no longer afford it, to a couple who owned a successful health farm and intended to turn the mansion into another.

'It's just a preliminary visit to get the feel of the place and mull over ideas before going round it with the new owners when they get back from the States. Would you like to come with me?'

'Yes, very much.'

'I'll pick you up about nine.'

Before the weekend the weather, which since their return from Spain had been mainly cold and wet, suddenly relented and produced a premature heatwave. When, at five to nine on Sunday morning, Marina locked her front door and waited for James in the street, instead of wearing a raincoat over a warm sweater, she was dressed for a hot day, with a short wool coat over her arm in case it turned cooler later.

Somehow she had assumed that James no longer owned the grey Rolls-Royce which he had been driving the first time she saw him. It was a surprise to see its imposing bonnet coming towards her.

'I keep it for country motoring,' he explained, in reply to her enquiry. 'It's easier and cheaper to use taxis for getting about London. I used to enjoy driving through France to see my mother and her family en route to my place in the south, but it's become absurdly expensive to take a car across the Channel, and anyway I rarely have time for a leisurely trip nowadays. My mother comes to London every autumn to stock up with cashmeres at Marks & Sparks.'

'Who looks after your French place ?'

'A local woman keeps it aired, and sometimes I lend it to friends. It's an investment as much as anything. How's your flat coming along? I'm looking forward to seeing what you've made of it.'

'It should be ready quite soon and then I'll organise a party.'

'You're not lonely there on your own?'

'Oh, no, I love it. Even if the other flats were both empty? I shouldn't feel lonely because of the river traffic. But the Baxters—they're the people above me— are such a nice, friendly couple. They had me to supper the night I moved in. I'm still virtually camping, with just a bed and a table and chair on the gallery, while I decorate the living-room.'

Presently, she said, 'I'm embroidering a cushion cover and I thought Y might get on with it as we go along. That's if you wouldn't mind?'

'Not at all.'

Marina delved into her shoulder bag for a piece of brown linen canvas already more than half covered with a zig-zag pattern worked in colours shading from dark to light turquoise, accented with vivid grass green.



As she threaded her needle with three strands of fine crewel wool, James glanced at the canvas and asked, 'Where did you learn to do Hungarian Point?'

For an instant his recognition of the stitch surprised her until she remembered it was part of his job to know about antique embroideries, and the pattern she had chosen for her cushion, one of the genre known as bargello or Florentine, was to be seen on chairs, stools and beds in most of the great houses in England.

'From Jane Logan and her mother. They've both done the most lovely embroideries.'

'Have you ever been to Parham Park in Sussex?'

'No.'

'There are some magnificent early seventeenth-century Florentine bed hangings, and a lot of other interesting needlework.'

'As Cleone said, life is too short for all the things one longs to do. When my flat is finished, I thought I'd spend Sundays going round all the museums, but actually it would take a year of Sundays to see everything in the Victoria and Albert.'

James said, 'Don't miss the Wallace Collection in Manchester Square. I often spend an odd hour there.'

The journey took more than two hours, but seemed much shorter not only because she had her needlework to occupy her, but because, when James was talking professionally rather than personally, she found him a marvellously interesting conversationalist.

Driving through a countryside made spring-like ahead of season by the high temperatures of the past four days, she was reminded of going to country house sales with her grandfather. She could never remember being bored in the old man's company, and it was the same with James.

Her grandfather's hands had been veined and freckled with age, his nails rather furrowed. He had always worn a gold signet ring on his left little finger. James wore no rings, and his hands, lean and brown with well-scrubbed nails, rested lightly on the wheel.

Suddenly Marina found herself wondering what it would be like to feel those long, square-tipped fingers caressing her face. The moment her conscious mind realised where her subconscious had led her, she gave herself a mental shake for falling into such an unwise reverie.

The mansion they were going to see had a lodge-house where a gardener, who was still living there, handed over the keys and opened the heavy iron gates.

They crossed a cattle-grid and drove up a winding drive through parkland where sheep were grazing, most of them with lambs nearby.

The house which came now into view was a fine seventeenth-century building with a Jacobean south front and a William and Mary west wing. As James stopped the car and Marina stepped down on to the gravelled sweep, she caught a gust of sweet scent from a drift of narcissi growing in the long grass under a Cedar of Lebanon.

Perhaps on a different day the house, denuded of all its furniture and paintings, might have had a forlorn atmosphere. Today, with sunlight slanting through the panels of mediaeval stained glass inserted into the mullion and transom windows of the Great Hall, it seemed to be tranquilly awaiting a new phase in its long history.

Beautiful rococo plasterwork designed by James Paine in the middle of the eighteenth century was a feature of the Dining-room; but the room which Marina liked best was the Library with its green marble chimneypiece and empty bookcases with brass-trellised doors.

It was half past one before they finished exploring the attics, the sculleries and the stable block.

'Time for lunch,' said James, and produced from the capacious boot a hamper, a ground-sheet and a rug. The latter he gave to Marina with an armful of cushions, while he carried the hamper and a cool bag. 'That flight of steps with the urns will be the best place, I think,' he said.

The steps were worn and mossy, and here and there crusted with golden lichen. They led from a terrace to a lawn. James spread the ground-sheet and rug so that they covered the two lowest steps against which he piled the cushions, making a backrest for her. As she sat down and stretched her legs, Marina could not help wondering how many girls had reclined on his cushions and if, with James, a picnic was usually the prelude to some *al fresco* lovemaking. However, while they ate *pdte* and salad, and drank chilled hock, his manner remained as impersonal as it had been since they set out.

'You can take a major part in this project, Marina,' he told her, while they were finishing the meal with apple pie. 'What I imagine the owners will want is for us to recreate the country house atmosphere at its most luxe. In that case I shall leave the selection of all the antique pieces entirely to you, and if you like you can handle the private suites while I deal with the public rooms and the treatment rooms.'

'I'd love to tackle the bedrooms,' she said eagerly. 'But am I up to it?'

'I believe so. You made an excellent job of the bedrooms in Signora Galli's flat.'

His praise made her glow. Presently he returned to the car for his notebook. He was absent for some time, and she began to think he must have gone into the house again. Soon she would join him for a second look at the first floor. But just at the moment it was so pleasant lolling in the hot sun, looking down towards the lake and the daffodils, that she felt reluctant to bestir herself. With a sigh of contentment, she clasped her hands behind her head and shifted into an even more recumbent position, meaning to linger only five minutes more.

She must have dozed off for a short time. When she woke, she found James had returned. He was lying on the rug close beside her, looking into her eyes

from a distance of less than a foot. Before she was fully alert his lips were on hers.

At first it seemed that he meant only to kiss her lightly, but when after twenty seconds, his mouth was still covering hers, she realised he wasn't just teasing, but determined to make her respond.

When she tried to push him away, he didn't release her but held her pinioned beneath the breadth of his shoulders while he carried on kissing until her lips softened and parted.

Some minutes later—minutes of the most blissful sensations she had ever experienced—Marina mustered her last shred of common sense and wrenched herself free of his arms.

Trembling, considerably dishevelled, her cheeks flushed, her nerves tingling, she said, forgetting discretion, 'Before we went to Spain Pat warned me you would make a pass. I'd begun to think she was wrong in calling you a wolf. Now I find she was right. What held you back on our Spanish trip?'

He lounged on one elbow, watching her tidy herself. He said lazily, 'In Spain you didn't want to be made love to.'

She widened her eyes. 'And you think now I do?'

'I know it. I've wanted you for some time and now it's mutual,' he answered. 'Why deny it, Marina? You didn't stop me just now because you disliked what I was doing. Your heart was beating with excitement, not revulsion. You stopped me for some other reason.'

'Because I like my job and don't want to have to give it up.'

'Why should you have to?'

'You must know as well as I do that one can't have a working relationship and a ... an amorous one.'

'I don't see why not. I should think it's fair to say that fifty per cent of marriages begin at work, possibly more.'

'I don't think you're looking for a wife, James.'

'On the contrary, I should like to have a wife and some children, but I'd never marry a girl without being sure we suited each other, and of that one can only be certain after living together for a time.'

'I see it differently. To me, living together proves nothing except the fact that one or both people aren't *sure* their feelings will last. I don't care what other people do, or if they think me old-fashioned. I shan't give my body to a man until I've given him my heart.'

'And then will you give yourself freely? Or will you hold out for marriage and a mortgage, and some life assurance in case he has an-early coronary?'

'What makes you so cynical?' she questioned.

'Not cynical... realistic. That's the price most men pay for a wife.'

'Not for me. All I want is to be loved, and if a man loves you he wants to say "This is my wife" not "This is my girl-friend".'

'What happens if, after you're married, you find he's a boring lover? Will you accept it philosophically?'

'I don't think any intelligent man, with a sense of humour and a reasonable degree of sensitivity, could be boring as a lover. Love isn't some special skill which only a few people have. It's a ... a primeval instinct we all have.'

'At least that's your theory.' His eyes were narrowed and mocking.

Marina flushed, and her chin lifted. 'Whereas you have infinite experience. But none of it very satisfactory apparently, or you wouldn't still be unmarried,' she retorted.

'The reason I'm a bachelor has nothing to do with sex,' he said dryly. 'Providing the girl is attractive and willing, my enjoyment is guaranteed. But a girl who pleases me in bed is not necessarily a satisfactory companion out of bed. When a man has an excellent housekeeper, plenty of friends, and no shortage of bedfellows, he can afford to be exacting in his choice of a wife.'

As she opened her mouth to castigate his arrogance, he smiled and added, 'As you can yourself when it comes to choosing a husband. Any woman who can support herself comfortably can look very critically at men.'

'You make it all sound so cold-blooded!'

He sat up and reached out a hand to catch one of hers.

'But when my blood was hot, and yours too, you panicked,' he reminded her. Then he pressed his lips into her palm, and she saw in his eyes a fierce gleam which made her shiver and quickly pull free her fingers.

'You see ? You're afraid,' he said softly. 'Your primeval instincts are urging you to come into my arms, but your mind is full of inhibitions.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

SHE sprang to her feet and shook out her green cotton skirt. 'If there's nothing more to be done here, I'd like to go back to London.'

'And waste this lovely afternoon?'

'It's you who've spoilt it!'

'You shouldn't have tempted me by lying on the rug in an attitude of abandon.'

'It wasn't intentional,' she assured him.

'Or if it was, only subconsciously,' he teased her.

Marina ignored this, and began to gather together the picnic things.

'I'll tell you what,' said James, 'we won't go back to London yet, but I'll promise not to mention the subject again, and we'll go for a walk and fill our lungs with country air. How would that be?'

Marina hesitated. It did seem a pity to waste the glorious afternoon sitting in a car.

'You really promise?'

'Solemnly.'

He didn't look very solemn, she thought uncertainly. But at least she could make sure he didn't catch her unawares a second time.

'Alright, but hadn't we better take the hamper back to the car first?'

Somewhat to her surprise he kept his word, and for the rest of the afternoon his manner was friendly but impersonal. As they strolled about the sunlit parkland, he talked of the great landscape gardeners with whose work he seemed as familiar as with the history of architecture. But they did not talk

all the time, and during their silences, Marina could not keep her mind from reverting to what had happened earlier. That James would be a thrilling lover she could not doubt, in view of the pitch of excitement to which he had swept her in those few tumultuous moments on the rug. Indeed the mere thought of his lips and his hands caressing her made a rosy stain creep up her throat. She had to stoop to examine an unknown wild flower in case he should notice the colour, and guess where her thoughts lay.

On the drive home he asked her if she would mind if he played some taped music.

'Not in the least,' she said, wondering what kind of music he liked, and hoping that it wouldn't be too modern and, to her ears, discordant.

The familiar opening notes of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 reassured her, and she threaded her needle with wool and worked on her cushion to the accompaniment of that and other music, all very much to her own taste.

'If I tell you my promise still stands, will you come and have supper at my flat?' James asked, as they drove down Park Lane, with the trees in the park very green in the golden light of early evening.

The temptation to see in reality the rooms she had studied so eagerly in the pages of *House & Garden* was very strong. But was it stupidly naive to believe he would keep his word after supper *d deux* ?

'My housekeeper spends Sunday with her sister in Sevenoaks, and she won't be back until later, but I asked her to leave something in the oven for us,' he added.

'All right, but I don't want to be too late tonight,' she said cautiously.

Clearly he knew what was on her mind. His eyes were quizzical as he said, 'Home on the dot of nine-thirty, and in bed—alone—by ten. Will that suit you?'



His flat was in a modern block with an underground car park, and a porter to keep an eye on everyone who came and went. James lived on the topmost floor.

Marina was prepared for his hall where the walls were hung with grey flannel on which was superimposed a collection of early nineteenth-century gouache paintings of Italy, the picture postcards of the period.

But when they entered the sitting-room she found that where, before, there had been a complex exercise in pattern on pattern, most of them Oriental, there was now an exercise in textures and only one colour, cream. All that remained of the previous scheme was a graceful gilded Indian goddess in a corner under a downlighter. Two large Spanish giltwood mirrors gave the room sparkle, and another touch of gold was the thread used to smock the cream wool cushions of the sofa of knobbly cream tweed.

'So this is where you used my cushions,' she said, deeply pleased to find that he had adapted her idea for use in his own apartment.

For Jane Logan's drawing-room she had made the cushions from the same material as the curtains, and smocked them with apricot silk to pick up the colour of the walls.

'Yes. They look well, don't you think? Would you like to go to the bathroom and freshen up?'

The bathroom had black lacquer walls with the white marble heads of Apollo and Aphrodite in lighted recesses. The towels were white, bordered with a Greek key pattern in black. In another recess there was a music deck with a record still on the turntable. Evidently this was not a visitors' bathroom but the one which James himself used.

Marina found him laying a table in a corner of the sitting-room.

'When I'm alone, or with only one guest, I eat in here,' he explained.

'Can I do anything to help?'

'There's not much to do. Have a look round,' he suggested.

It was an invitation which she was glad to accept for, although the room gave an impression of uncluttered spaciousness, here and there were assembled groups of objects which she longed to look at in detail.

From her earliest years in his care, her grandfather had encouraged her to spend her pocket money on pictures at a time when good drawings and watercolours could often be picked up for pence. So it was with particular interest that she studied the collection of pictures massed on one wall.

Presently James brought her a glass of wine, and told her the history of some of them, including a fine naval battle scene which he had bought as a schoolboy.

Talking about pictures carried them through a supper of casseroled chicken and salad, followed by Scots oatmeal biscuits and various cheeses.

'Just time for coffee, and then we must be off,' said James, checking the time by his watch.

So far he had kept his word so scrupulously that Marina could almost believe she had dreamt the interlude on the rug. It was only when he delivered her to her door, and said goodnight, that she knew by the glint in his eyes that in spite of his decorous manner for the past hour or two, he did not consider his promise binding indefinitely.

Later, lying under the weightless warmth of her new duvet, she thought that, if he had not kissed her, it would have been a perfect day. Or if he had not been her boss. Or if she hadn't known he made a habit of it. Or if he had not made it clear that with him a kiss was always a prelude to bed.

Too many ifs, she thought drowsily.

One morning she found on her desk an airmail letter with a French stamp. The address was written in a handwriting she did not recognise, yet which she felt she had seen before.

Inside was a single sheet of expensive white paper with the address of a *chateau* die-stamped on it. Above this, written by hand, was *from Vicomtesse Daubray*. The letter began *My dear Marina* and, even more puzzled, she turned it over to see the signature. *Cleone*.

*We returned to Champfleuri last week, the Frenchwoman had written, where we shall have two months of comparative peace before the tourists descend on our Camping in droves. We shall remain here until late October, and if you should find yourself in this part of France, do come to spend a few days with us. The campers do not occupy my attention. It would give me the greatest pleasure to show you the treasures which I cannot take with me on our winter expeditions.*

The rest of the letter described various amusing incidents during the latter part of their time in Javea, and ended, *Of all the people we met there, you and James y/ere by far the most stimulating.*

Later in the day Marina went up to James's office to tell him she had heard from Cleone.

'So have I,' he said.

'Apparently we were wrong in surmising they might not be married. It seems they're one couple who *have* lived happily ever after.'

'Or it may be their second or third marriage, and there hasn't been time for the gilt to wear off the gingerbread yet.'

Chilled by his cynicism, she changed the subject to a problem she was having with her part of the health farm project.

That night, curled on her window seat, she answered Cleone's letter, thanking her for the invitation to visit Champfleuri and expressing the hope

that if Cleone and Victor came to London they would dine with her at Wapping.

*I can't tell you how much I love my little flat here by the river, she wrote. I feel so lucky to have a fascinating job, and a place of my own where I can do exactly as I please. I couldn't be happier.*

Having written this last sentence, she paused. Perhaps it wasn't *quite* true. There were times when it would have intensified her happiness to have someone with whom to discuss the events of the day. Someone who, if a bad dream or a strange noise woke her in the night, would be there, warm and reassuring. Someone to share her breakfast grapefruit, and *The Times*, and the lovely first movement of Tchaikovsky's only violin concerto which she liked to play every morning while her coffee was percolating.

She turned her thoughts back to her letter, and had written *Cooking, which used to be a problem because of my grandmother's delicate digestion, is now great fun* when the telephone rang.

'Marina Linwood.'

'James here. It's just occurred to me, Marina, that you'll need a day off when your flat is ready for your furniture to be delivered. If you have it delivered on a Saturday, they'll charge you overtime rates, so fix it for a weekday.'

'Thank you, I will.'

'Goodnight.'

Before she could answer, he had replaced his receiver. She wondered what had made him think of her in the middle of the evening. It was possible that he, too, was acknowledging Cleone's letter to him.

The day when her furniture came was a very happy one for her. She had already worked out where everything was to go, and such pieces as the room would not hold she was leaving in store. To sell them, unless she needed the money, would be folly in view of the continuing appreciation in the value of

antique furniture, and one day she might have a larger home where everything could be accommodated.

Meanwhile her room by the river was a perfect setting for the smaller pieces such as the single width bureau bookcase, its mirrored door indicating that it belonged to the early part of the eighteenth century before the introduction of glazed doors.

Unlike most antique dealers of his generation, Angus Merryweather had had a taste for French furniture at a time when it was not greatly sought by English customers. When a fine piece had come his way, he had kept it for himself, and had slept in a boat-shaped bed with high scrolled ends, fit for Napoleon. This, fitted with squabs and piled with cushions, Marina proposed to use as a sofa.

When the removal men had gone, she got out her dusters and a tin of her grandfather's special beeswax polish, and spent an hour or more lovingly rubbing up the fine patina which in storage had become a little dulled.

More than once, as she rubbed with an arm which needed resting more often than it had in her shopkeeping days, a reminiscent smile curved her mouth. She was remembering her grandfather's idiosyncrasies and, in particular, his detestation of too much restoration.

In the days when the fine antique furniture known as *qualite de musee* had been comparatively plentiful, many a piece from Mr Merryweather's shop had made its next public appearance at the annual mecca of all antique lovers, the Grosvenor House Fair. Often accompanying her grandfather round the Fair, Marina had heard him give a snort of irritation as he spotted a piece which had left his hands in what he considered perfect condition, and had since been over-restored for the benefit of buyers who were attracted to such furniture by its value rather than its beauty.

The last time they had been to the Fair together, his wrath at coming upon a fine sideboard which had been made to look untouched by time had led him to harangue the young man in charge of the stand.

'The last time I saw that piece it was the finest sideboard which had ever come into my keeping. Look at it now! It might have been made yesterday. Go to Hatfield, to Chatsworth, to Blickling—go to any of England's great houses and study the furniture in them. You'll never find it in this condition, any more than you'll find a woman of sixty with a face as smooth as my granddaughter's. In my opinion you've ruined it!'

With which pronouncement he had left a ruffled young man and various amused onlookers, and had stumped off to the next stand, followed by an embarrassed Marina.

As her social circle was small and her living-room spacious, she had the idea of making her house-warming party larger by asking some of her guests to bring a guest with them.

Most of her preparations were made when, shortly before lunch-time on the Saturday of the party, Jane Logan arrived by taxi. She was staying the night. Robert was abroad that weekend, and her mother was in charge of the children.

Her reaction to the decor was enthusiastic. 'It's lovely, Marina ... simply lovely!' she exclaimed, looking round the huge room which now had its ceiling and walls painted a soft olive green gradually shading in places to turquoise.

Marina had achieved this effect, so subtle as not to be noticeable immediately, with the aid of a paint spray. The ceiling was matt, but the walls she had varnished so that vague impressions of some of the objects in the room were reflected in their glossy surface. The floor was covered with a medium-toned olive carpet which, at the river end of the room, continued up the side of a range of low storage lockers. Because its horizontal surface was covered with an antique Persian *kenarah* or runner, and piled with more than twenty cushions in every shade of green, this window seat was reminiscent of an oriental divan.

'What are these trees?' asked Jane, touching the leaves of one of two slender trees which had their containers concealed by large wicker baskets.

'They're Japanese maples. I'm told they grow well indoors and I like them better than ferns or pot plants.'

Jane's eyes went up to the gallery where the finest of the Persian rugs which Marina had inherited concealed the rather unattractive balustrade while displaying their own mellow beauty safe from damage by too much sun or sharp heels. The wall at the back of the gallery was almost completely concealed by bookshelves and paintings, and by day the two single beds looked like sofas rather than beds.

After a light lunch, Jane helped Marina with the few remaining preparations, and then they relaxed by the window until it was time to dress.

'I asked James to come an hour earlier than the others because I want him to see the room before it's full of people,' Marina explained, as she put on her party dress of violet chiffon with Indian gold thread embroidery round the neck and down the outside of the sleeves.

Jane was wearing a silk skirt patterned with coral flowers on a chocolate ground, and chocolate cobweb-knit sweater with a loose cowl collar.

Punctually at the time at which Marina had asked James to come, the bell rang. Going down the narrow staircase to open the street door, she wondered whether his guest would be male or female.

She found him standing on the pavement with a man some years older than himself whom he introduced as John Lloyd. James was carrying something swathed in tissue paper which, upstairs, he presented to her.

As she took it from him she could feel it was a potted plant. She took off the protective tissue and found a particularly fine white azalea, one of the few house plants she liked. The weight of its pot had suggested that it was earthenware, but in fact it was a very pretty French-looking cache-pot, larger than the plant's own plastic pot.

'It's charming. How very kind of you!'

Jane emerged from the kitchen and, having shaken hands with both men, took John Lloyd's coat and asked him whether he preferred white or red wine. When planning the party, Marina had decided that to give people a free choice of drinks would not only strain her budget but make refills more complicated than if wine alone was available.

As she took James's raincoat, she saw him beginning to cast a critical eye at the decor. She gave him a glass of red wine, and made a place for his present by raising the side-leaves of a Sheraton butler's chest which had been one of her grandfather's favourite pieces. Then she listened to Jane's conversation with Mr Lloyd and tried not to watch James's expression as he viewed the room from different points.

It was Jane who, as he strolled back to them, said, 'Don't you think she's done a super job? I don't know how it was before, but I think all these greens upon greens are beautifully restful.'

'Yes, but I expected it to be cleverly done. Marina has great flair,' he answered, looking at Jane. Then, turning to Marina, 'May I see the gallery?'

'Of course.' She made a gesture towards the spiral staircase.

'Won't you come with me?'

She received the impression that he wanted to speak to her privately, a nuance not lost on Jane, who said tactfully, 'Come and see the view, Mr Lloyd. What part of London do you live in?' and led him away towards the window.

Presently, looking at her paintings, James said in a lowered voice, 'Lloyd is a widower—a rather dull but decent type. He and Pat might suit each other. If they seem to take to each other, do what you can to help things along will you ?'

For once it was her turn to mock him. 'Do you do much matchmaking, James?'



'That boy of Pat's will need a man around in a few years' time,' he answered seriously. 'It can be difficult for a woman to cope with a teenage son. I don't want to lose a first-class secretary, but I liked Dick Wilson and, when he knew he had no chance of recovering, he asked me to keep an eye on her.'

'Yes, of course I'll help,' she agreed.

His seriousness changed to a retaliatory gleam. 'You wouldn't have come up here, to your bedroom, with me if the others hadn't been present, would you?'

She said lightly, 'I'm an old-fashioned girl. I should think twice about asking any man here on his own, upstairs or downstairs.'

'Your parents should have given you one of those abstract-virtue names the Puritans liked. Prudence or, better still. Chastity.' He took in the clinging violet chiffon. 'Puritans should wear Puritan clothes. In that you look more like one of Krishna's favourites.'

To her relief, the bell rang and she excused herself to answer it. The arrival was Pat, accompanied by a man whom she introduced as Alex Macdonald. Soon people were arriving in rapid succession, and before long the party was going in full swing. David's guest was his godmother, and Chris brought a girl from the art department of *Your Home*.

Marina had always disliked parties at which the food consisted of an abundance of mouthful-sized snacks of conflicting flavours, and she knew that if people ate standing up they were more likely to drop bits and tread them into her new carpet. As her cooker had a double oven, she had baked a big batch of jacket potatoes in the upper oven and, in the lower, pieces of chicken in a crisp, buttery coating of crumbs and herbs. She had also prepared two large bowls of green salad, and three different sauces.

At nine she asked them all to find a seat, and while Jane distributed napkins and knives and forks, she served everyone with chicken and a potato and asked them to help themselves to salad and sauce from the table in the centre of the room. With the aid of David and James who went round refilling

glasses, the supper was quickly served, and for a time the babel of conversation subsided as people concentrated on their food.

Marina ate her own supper sitting on a Regency stool by the sofa on which the girl from *Your Home* was sandwiched between Alex Macdonald and Mary Baxter from the upstairs flat. While the two girls chatted, Marina talked to Alex and discovered that the reason why she had not encountered him during her time as Pat's lodger was because he was an engineer working in the Middle East with a long leave once a year. He and Dick Wilson had been at school together and, being unmarried and without a parental home, Alex had often spent part of his leaves with the Wilsons.

As men seemed always to enjoy the sweet puddings which women tended to shun, Marina had prepared a choice of pears cooked in wine with a low-calorie, yoghurt-based dressing, or a rich and gooey gateau with chocolate sauce.

She ate her pear on the gallery with Robert Lloyd who, predictably, was tucking into gateau. She found him lacking in humour, and far less forthcoming than Alex.

At half past eleven the Baxters, who had a baby-sitter, had to leave, and by midnight the party was breaking up.

'Where's James?' she said to Jane, when it seemed that he was the only guest to whom they had not said good night. Robert Lloyd had accepted the offer of a lift with Pat and Alex.

'In the bathroom, presumably,' said Jane.

But, to Marina's astonishment, they found him in the kitchen, wearing her plastic Martini label apron and getting on with the washing up.

'I shouldn't have suspected you of being any way domesticated,' she exclaimed.

'It doesn't call for any great skill to wash a few dishes,' he said dryly.

He stayed until one and, when he left, he kissed Jane's hand. 'It's been a pleasure to meet you again, Mrs Logan. Goodnight.'

To Marina, he said, 'Come up to my office on Monday morning. There's something I'd like you to see.'

'I'll remember. Thank you for helping.' She held out her hand to him.

He took it, and held it in his while he bent and kissed her lightly on both cheeks, Spanish-fashion.

'He's in love with you, Marina,' said Jane, when he had left them. 'He hardly took his eyes off you all night.'

'That's libido, not love,' Marina said wryly. 'He wants to take me to bed, but I don't want to be taken, and he's not used to girls saying no.'

'I don't know how you can resist him.'

'Perhaps I wouldn't if he were not my boss. Did you resist, Jane, before you met Robert? Don't tell me if you don't want to. It's just that sometimes I have the feeling that I'm the last girl in England who's hanging on to her virginity, and perhaps it's stupid of me.'

'Oh, no, I think lots of girls are, only they don't like to admit it for fear of being mocked by the trendies. A lot depends on one's parents, some of whom seem frightened of laying down *any* moral guidelines. My parents were never in the least afraid of propounding their ideas to me. Probably she's never discussed it in front of you, but my mother is violently anti-pill—not only the contraceptive pill, but tranquillisers and sleeping tablets. When someone dies, she thinks it's terribly wrong to give their husband or wife a sedative, instead of letting them vent their grief in the old way. As for *the* Pill, she thinks it's a boon to the unintelligent masses and people who drink too much, but wrong for intelligent people. I remember her saying to me, "So silly and dangerous to interfere with nature in order to make a fortune for the people who manufacture drugs, darling. Sensible people planned their children *years* before pills were invented." '

Marina smiled. Jane's mother was a woman whose tone of voice was always mild, but whose views were forthright and firm.

'However, to answer your question, yes, I did resist,' Jane went on. 'But not after Robert and I became engaged. He's been my one and only lover, but I don't think I've missed anything by not going to bed with anyone else.'

What did you think of David?' asked Marina.

'Hard to judge on one meeting. A little humourless perhaps. That's James's great charm, of course—the quick reaction to anything slightly amusing, and the way he keeps his face straight and laughs with his eyes.'

'His humour is not as attractive when he's laughing at one,' Marina said dryly.

'He teases you because he likes you. What was he saying to you when you were up on the gallery with him beforehand? I noticed you shot down the stairs to answer the door at the double.'

'He was telling me that I ought to be called Chastity, and that this dress didn't match my puritanical nature.'

'No, it covers but doesn't conceal,' Jane agreed, with a grin. 'Better not wear it to dine *cl deux* with him.' She laughed. 'In fact, better not dine *a deux* if you mean to withstand the siege.'

'It isn't likely to last long. He must meet lots of gorgeous girls, and he'll soon lose interest in me when someone more co-operative crosses his path.'

'Mm ... maybe. But men with an appetite for women may be like collectors. You know how it's always the thing which one *didn't* buy which sticks in the mind. With men of the Casanova type, perhaps it's the girl who said No who haunts them long after they've forgotten the willing ones.'

They went to bed and slept late the following morning, waking to find the river sparkling in the sun.

'If one must live in London, this is certainly the place to be,' remarked Jane, eating grilled kippers at a table by the window, and watching a launch passing in the direction of Greenwich.

She had brought only a small overnight case. At three they walked to the taxi rank on Tower Hill where they hugged goodbye, and Jane departed to catch her train back to the country.

Marina spent the rest of the afternoon writing letters of thanks for the many housewarming presents she had received. She was rather disturbed to discover that the cache-pot holding the white azalea was not, as she had assumed, a clever reproduction, but an antique piece of considerable value.

On Monday morning she asked Pat to tell her when James was free, and then she went to his office to find out what it was he wanted to show her.

'It was this,' he said, opening a drawer, and producing a colour perspective.

It was a perspective of her room, seen from the window end, and it was uncannily like the room as it was. He had given the entire drawing a wash of blue-green watercolour, and then with opaque paint had touched in the white spiral staircase and various pieces of furniture. It was not her furniture because that he had not seen until her housewarming, but it was antique furniture positioned almost exactly as she had placed her main pieces.

He came round the desk to stand beside her and look over her shoulder. 'It seemed likely that you would have some good rugs,' he said, tapping his pencil on the balustrade of the gallery which, like her, he had concealed with Persian rugs.

'When did you do this?' she asked.

'The day I came with you to see the place. It's a form of doodling with me.'

'May I keep this doodle?'

'By all means.'

'Will you sign it for me ?'

He took the drawing from her, and laid it on his desk while he signed and dated the lower left corner. As he handed it back, he said, 'An interesting example of professional rapport. It confirms my feeling that we ought to establish an equally strong personal rapport.'

She ignored this, and said, 'It took me a long time to decide on that colour scheme. You knew at once what it needed.'

'But you don't trust my judgment in any sphere other than design?'

She gave him an appealing look. 'I wish you wouldn't, especially not here at work.'

'Will you have dinner with me next Friday?'

She was about to refuse when he added, 'Not *d deux*. I'm giving a small dinner party for an American architect and his wife who are always very hospitable when I'm in the States, and I've also asked Lucia Ashton and her husband. I think you'll like her.'

'I'm sure I shall.' The Lucia boutiques in Beauchamp Place and Lower Sloane Street were two of her favourite shops, and she couldn't turn down the chance to meet the creator of a recognisable style in both clothes and furnishings. 'Thank you. What time?'

'Seven-thirty, but if you like, to save you going back to Wapping, you can bath and change at my place. I shan't be there before seven, but my housekeeper will look after you.'

'Thank you, but I think I would rather go home.'

At lunch-time, Marina went to the fabric department of John Lewis where she bought a Vogue pattern for a voluminous evening skirt, and six metres of rustling black taffeta. It took her two evenings to make the skirt which,

the following Friday night, she wore with a beautiful seventy-year-old blouse of white silk chiffon and lace. Her shoes were emerald satin court shoes to which she had added a pair of antique paste buckles, and she wore stockings to match. Her jewellery was her mother's emerald engagement ring, and her grandmother's pearls and pearl-drop ear-rings. Over the blouse she wore a black wool jacket she had made herself, with fox cuffs from furs which her grandmother had worn in the 1930s.

Because there had been nowhere to park a car at Pat's house, and because it seemed unlikely to pass many more MOT tests, Marina had sold her grandfather's shabby estate car. However, although she had no garage at Wapping, there was ample unmetered street parking and, on her way to the dinner party by taxi, she debated buying a little car to use in the evenings and at weekends. But as most of her dates were with David who fetched and returned her, and she was not living in a place which, in summer, would make her long to escape into the country, a car seemed an unnecessary expense for the time being.

James opened the door, and hung her coat in a concealed cupboard in the hall. Then he took her hand and led her into his sitting-room where his four other guests, one of whom Marina would have recognised by her dress even if she had not seen photographs of her in magazines, were standing in a group by the fire.

Had she been of a shy disposition, Marina would have appreciated his gesture of taking her hand as they entered a room where everyone there was a stranger to her. But as she had never found meeting people an ordeal, she felt that their clasped hands might give a false impression of their relationship, and the possibility that she might be taken for his latest girl-friend *did* embarrass her.

'Marina', this is Kay and Jake Michener, and Lucia and Bill Ashton.'

She shook hands. They were drinking champagne and as James turned away to fill a glass for her, Lucia Ashton said, 'Just before you arrived James was telling us about your lovely river room at Wapping, Miss Linwood. This is the first time Bill and I have dined here since James redecorated, and those clever smocked cushions were the first thing I noticed when we came in.'

They are your idea, I understand. I wish I'd found you before James did. I used to do all the designing myself, but now that our business is expanding into the provinces I'm looking out for other designers who are on my wavelength. However, James saw you first, and I won't spoil a beautiful friendship by trying to lure you away from Brook Street!

They had dinner at the table which was one of their host's most famous designs; an octagon with a hinged centre leaf which folded down out of sight, reducing the table to a hexagon for small parties. Marina sat between Bill and Jake and opposite James who had Kay on his right and Lucia on his left.

The Americans appeared to be in their fifties, and Kay had her iron-grey hair cut very close to her small, shapely head. She was wearing a caftan of fine white tweed with a dramatic necklace of silver-fringed silver plaques.

Lucia was wearing one of her inimitable designs, a billowing dress of pale grey silk crepe-de-chine patterned with lines of poetry written in lipstick colours, the last letter of each line becoming a swirl of colour ending with an applique gold or silver lipstick case. At the neck the soft material was gathered into a ruffle narrowly bound with scarlet silk, and the full sleeves had similar ruffles. It was typical of the easy to wear, undating dress with a touch of nonsense about it, which had made her clothes so popular with women who could afford them.

During dinner the shape of the table encouraged group conversation, but afterwards they broke into pairs, Kay with Bill, James with Jake, and Marina with Lucia, who talked about the change in women's attitude to their clothes since the days when to go to a party and find someone else in an identical dress was a disaster.

'Now, as long as everybody recognises the dress as a Zandra Rhodes or a Gina Fratini or a Lucia Ashton, and knows that it must have cost a lot, that's all that matters.'

Presently Kay, having caught sight of Marina's shoe buckles, came over to ask where she might be able to buy a pair like them, and the talk turned to London's antique markets.



As they all had a number of common interests the evening passed swiftly, and it was not until the Ashtons said they must go that Marina realised how late it was.

'Could you ring for a taxi for me, please?' she asked James.

'I'll run you home after I've dropped Kay and Jake at their hotel.'

'Oh, no, please. I'm so out of the way, and it really isn't necessary.'

'They're at the Savoy. Your place is not so much further. I shouldn't dream of letting you go in a taxi at this time of night.'

He had made it impossible to argue. She realised she should have foreseen this eventuality and kept a close eye on the time. Had she left at half past eleven, with the excuse of having to get up early tomorrow, he would have had to call a taxi or break up the party.

Although determined to resist his attempts to come in for a nightcap, she had no choice but to accept the offered lift.

On the way to the Savoy, Jake sat in front next to James, and Kay talked about her three grown-up children. Marina tried to listen attentively, and to ignore her mounting trepidation, but afterwards she could remember little of what the older woman had told her.

'Come in for a nightcap,' Jake invited, when they reached the Savoy Hotel.

Marina saw Kay give him a glance of wifely amusement. Clearly she sensed, if he did not, that their host had other fish to fry.

'No, I think we'll be on our way, thanks. It's after one, and I like to be in bed by two if possible,' said James.

Marina felt sure Kay was thinking: In whose bed, I wonder ?

They exchanged goodnights and while the American couple entered the hotel, James put her into the passenger seat, careful to see that her skirt was not caught by the door.

'You and Lucia seemed to hit it off very well,' he remarked, as they emerged from the hotel's forecourt into, the Strand. 'She wasn't joking, you know, when she said she would offer you a job if it didn't mean poaching from me.'

'I wonder if she might give Chris a trial,' Marina said thoughtfully.

'Chris being the boy with the beard whom I met very briefly at your party?'

'Yes, he's working on Your *Home*, but there isn't much scope for his talent there.'

'He'd be wise to shave off that damned-fool beard before seeking an interview with Lucia,' James answered dryly.

She could tell that Chris had not made a favourable impression on him, and said, rather defensively, 'As you say, he's young. Did you never grow a beard at his age?'

'No, my youthful follies were not sartorial.'

There was something in his tone which made her wonder if perhaps as a boy he had made a fool of himself over a woman, and that was the reason for his present attitude to the opposite sex.

Soon they were passing the Tower. Her tension increased. At half past one in the morning, the shadowy streets of Wapping had an eerie atmosphere. In a way, she was glad she was not being set down by a cab which might drive away before she had unlocked her door. Since moving in, she had studied the history of the district and discovered that, before the building of the first inshore dock in 1800, gangs of thugs had stolen the cargoes from ships moored on the river. Near Tunnel Pier there had been an execution dock where the corpses of seamen who had been hanged for indiscipline were fastened by chains to dangle over the mud until tide and wind rotted their remains. Once safely inside her river room it was easy to forget the

neighbourhood's macabre past. But even today it was not a part of London which she would have cared to walk at night without the comforting presence of a tall, fit man.

James stopped the Rolls at her door, and walked round the bonnet. As Marina stepped on to the pavement, he said, 'Would you like me to come upstairs while you switch on your lights and see that everything's in order?'

With anyone else she would have taken the offer at its face value: the courteous suggestion of any mannerly man when seeing a woman home to an empty flat in a capital city where burglaries were not uncommon.

With James it seemed best to be blunt. 'No, thank you,' she said, politely but firmly.

She had left on the light over her door, and had already found her key. He held out his hand to take it from her, and somewhat reluctantly she surrendered it; although once again it was a courtesy she would have accepted without misgiving had David or Chris been with her.

James unlocked the door and pushed it open. As he stood back for her to pass, she held out her hand for the key, and said, 'Thank you ... and thank you for a delightful evening. I enjoyed it immensely.'

'As we all enjoyed looking at you.' As the key changed hands, he pulled her to him. 'Are you really more afraid of me than of an intruder who might be lurking upstairs?'

'I'm quite sure there isn't one. Please let me go.'

'Don't tell me you don't allow Leigh to kiss you goodnight.' As he spoke, he stretched his free arm to switch off the light over the lintel. With his lips close to hers, he said softly, 'If I'd been intending to stay, I should have turned off my lights.' And then she was crushed to his chest, and his mouth was on hers in a kiss altogether more demanding than David's kisses ever were. When he let her go, he said, 'Now stay there while I nip upstairs to assure myself that all's well.' He switched on the light over the stairs and went up them two at a time.

Marina leaned limply against the wall, her heart thudding wildly.

He was gone for only a few moments. Watching him come down the stairs, she braced herself for another shattering embrace.

This time James didn't touch her. Smiling, he said, 'Everything shipshape. Up you go. Sleep tight!' He moved the catch on her lock to the locked-fast position. Then he stepped into the street and closed the door.

Marina spent all the next morning thinking about the night before. She had meant to go for a browse in the Portobello Market, but instead stayed at home dusting and polishing her furniture, and brooding about James to whom, after lunch, she wrote a letter of thanks for the dinner party.

On Monday she collected from the framer the signed perspective which, that night, she hung on the wall below a Holderman design for a room in the apartments of the Grand Duchess Stephanie in the Mannheim Palace in 1860.

James was away for the first three days of the week, and she was grateful for the respite from his disturbing presence.

On Wednesday night David took her to the theatre. The following weekend he was spending a night with his parents, and asked if she would come with him.

'My mother's been asked to take a party to a fund- raising dance, and she wants me to bring a partner,' he explained.

On Thursday and Friday James was at Brook Street, but Marina was never alone with him. On Saturday she packed her black taffeta skirt and a different top, and at mid-morning David fetched her.

They had lunch at a riverside pub, and arrived at his home about tea-time. It was a Queen Anne manor house.

Marina had expected his mother and sister to be not unlike Jane Logan and her mother, and was taken aback when she found herself being introduced to two very tall, strapping women whose make-up consisted of lipstick, and whose unvarnished, neglected nails suggested that they took little interest in their appearance. She soon discovered that Mrs Leigh's greatest interest was her kitchen garden and freezer, while Penelope was mad about horses.

However, they seemed to accept her without reserve, and although she was given a bedroom with some of the most hideous wallpaper she had ever seen, at least the bathwater was hot and plentiful.

Brigadier Leigh, whom she met when she went down to dinner, surprised her by being a rotund figure, inches shorter than his son, and dwarfed by his Amazon wife whom he had met when she was an officer in the women's services during the second world war.

Rather to her surprise, Marina found herself placed next to him at dinner and, even more surprisingly, he turned out to be a knowledgeable collector of military portrait miniatures and regimental histories.

'Tomorrow I'll show them to you, m'dear,' he promised.

In David's car, on the twelve-mile drive to the dance, he said, 'You seemed to be making a great hit with my father during dinner. I suppose you were talking about his miniatures.'

'Yes. In the morning, he's going to show them to me.'

'Don't let him monopolise you completely. I want some time with you, too. You've made another conquest with Penelope.'

'Really? I should have thought she'd despise me for not being able to ride.'

'No, under the horsey exterior, Penny's rather a vulnerable creature. She's always been a great beanstalk, which narrows the field where men are concerned, and as you can see neither she nor Ma have much fashion sense.' He glanced sideways at her. 'You always look terrific. Those big fur cuffs make your hands look even more small and delicate. They remind me of a

song one of my ancient great-aunts used to sing when I was a small boy.' He paused. 'It was called "Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar".'

As Marina knew that her hands were capable-looking rather than fragile, she was rather disconcerted by this uncharacteristic piece of romanticism on his part. It made her wonder suddenly if she had been brought to his home not merely as a partner for the dance but for his parents to inspect a prospective life partner.

She said, 'I think your sister could look stunning if she dramatised her height instead of trying to camouflage it. Her dress tonight is very pretty, but those pastel flowers don't do as much for her as a striking plain colour would. Her figure is very well proportioned.'

'I wish you would tell her that, and give her some hints about how to make the best of herself. I'd be sorry to see her on the shelf, being browbeaten by Ma for the rest of her life. Don't misunderstand me. My mother's a dear, but one needs to stand up to her and, except where her horses are concerned, Penelope isn't assertive.'

The dance was being held in a beautiful Greek Revival house which, Marina discovered during the evening, was the small stately home which James had once said that David was likely to inherit. In fact the owner of the house was his mother's brother whose son had been drowned in a sailing accident. When David introduced her to his uncle and his aunt by marriage, she no longer doubted that she was being viewed as the possible bride of their heir. Otherwise why should they question her about her parents ?

Most of the time she danced with David, but because nearly all the people there seemed to know each other, there were several occasions when other young men asked to be introduced and were allowed to carry her off for one dance.

It was her conversations with them which made her begin to suspect that there had been an element of masquerade in David's relationship with her. She had thought of him as a London person, but now it seemed that in spite of his job in the City he was very much a countryman whose chief pleasures were not, as she had supposed, going to the theatre and dining at gourmet

restaurants, but shooting, and riding with the local harriers. Seen through the eyes of friends who had known him all his life, he was not the David Leigh she knew but someone quite different.

The dance went into the small hours, and once or twice she caught herself wondering how James was spending the weekend, and thinking how much more she had enjoyed the dinner party at his flat. *That* was her natural milieu; the world of people like the Ashtons, not here where even the women discussed field sports.

Penelope, having no partner, had arrived and gone home with her parents, and the house was in darkness when David and Marina returned. He insisted she must have a hot drink and took her into the kitchen, which she thought the nicest room in the house. In the drawing- room and dining-room the furniture was good, but the soft furnishings were an object lesson in how not to combine pattern with pattern.

Are you tired ?' he asked, as he lifted the cover from one of the hotplates of the Aga, and put a pan of milk on it.

'Not now. I expect I shall be tomorrow. What time is breakfast?'

'About nine usually. Ma has a widow woman from the village who comes in to help in the mornings. She could bring you up a tray at nine-thirty or ten.'

'Goodness, no! I shouldn't dream of being so lazy. I'll be down at nine with the rest of you.'

While they were talking he had found two mugs and a tin of drinking chocolate. Now, waiting for the milk to heat, he put his arms round her and said, 'There's something I've been wanting to ask you, but I felt I shouldn't until you'd been down here and met my people. They think you're a darling. You like them, don't you?'

'Yes, very much,' Marina replied, but she knew it was a white lie. She had something in common with his father, but she knew she would never enjoy the society of his mother and sister as she did that of Jane and her mother.

He looked pleased. 'I expect you can guess what I'm leading up to. I want you to marry me. You wouldn't have to give up your job, at least not for a year or two. My place in town is pretty basic, so I thought I'd move in with you and buy a cottage near here for weekends.'

Without giving her time to reply, he began to kiss her.

She realised then that she should never have allowed their relationship to reach this point. She did not and could never love him. At first she had thought that she might, but that was largely because he had gone out of his way to be a pleasant companion, and before this weekend she had not seen the gulf between his interests and inclinations and hers.

However, it was not necessary for her to put an end to his embrace. Clearly David had a strong strain of his practical, no-nonsense mother in him. He had not forgotten the milk he had left on the hotplate.

Watching him pour it into the mugs, Marina thought that even if she had loved him, the very act of breaking off a kiss with the girl to whom he had just proposed would have seeded a doubt-in her mind that they could- live happily together.

James, kissing a girl he truly loved, would have forgotten the milk, forgotten everything, as would the girl in his arms.

*James!* With a sudden flash of self-knowledge, Marina recognised a fact which had been known to her subconscious for some time, but which only now came clearly to the surface of her conscious mind. Not only did she not love David: she had fallen in love with James.

'You look rather dazed, darling,' David said, smiling. 'Surely you knew I was in love with you?. I thought I'd made it pretty clear for some time past.'

'Not really. It was only this evening that I wondered if I were being inspected, so to speak.'

'Not inspected. No doubt it seems silly to you, but Uncle Ivo is a bit of a martinet and, as head of the family, he might have been a good deal put out if



I'd announced my engagement before he had met you. Luckily he and Aunt Freddy thought you were charming. Who wouldn't?' He attempted to take her in his arms again.

This time she held him away. 'And if they hadn't? Would you still have proposed to me?'

The question caught him off guard. His 'Of course' was a fraction delayed. He added, 'But it's always best to pander to the whims of the older generation, don't you think ? No point in putting their backs up needlessly.'

'No point at all,' she agreed. 'I'm sorry, David, I'm not ready to marry anyone yet. I did tell you I was a career-girl, but you wouldn't believe me.'

'But, my darling, you can be a career-girl and my wife at the same time. If the fogeys don't approve, that's too bad,' he added, in a tone which made her wonder if he had already discussed the matter with them.

'No, I can't. When James gave me my job, he more or less said that he didn't expect me to marry for some time to come because, inevitably, it creates a strain which is reflected in one's work.'

'I never heard such tosh,' said David angrily. 'The fact is he wants you himself. I saw the way he kept leering at you at your party, and I felt like blacking his eye.'

'And you don't think your animosity towards my boss would create a strain on me?' she asked incredulously.

'You could easily get another job. You told me yourself that Lucia Somebody had virtually offered one to you.'

'And desert the man who gave me a chance to prove myself before I've given him a proper return for the confidence he invested in me? Really, David, you don't seem to take very seriously one's obligation to one's employer.'

He was silent for a little. Then he said, 'It's very late and you're tired ... we both are. Take your drink up to bed with you, my sweet. We've all tomorrow to talk things over.'

In her room Marina creamed off her make-up. As she ran the tap to clean her teeth, she hoped the gurgling of the plumbing would not wake the rest of the household. Although she was tired, she wasn't sleepy. She sat in a chair by the empty hearth, drinking the cooling chocolate, not thinking about the man who had asked her to marry him, but about the one who made no secret of the fact that his intentions were dishonourable.

She had resisted him so far because it had seemed to her that the response he aroused in her was a purely physical thing which could never last. But now she was certain that, on her side, physical attraction had developed into love. And, loving him, how much longer could she resist him ?

## CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN Marina woke up the next morning, after a restless night, her spirits sank at the thought of the hours ahead. Could anything be more embarrassing than having to spend the day with the family of a man whose proposal one had refused ? Surely the fact that David had kissed her goodnight after their evenings together did not justify his assumption that she had been waiting eagerly for him to ask her to marry him ? Neither of them had ever been at all carried away by those goodnight embraces, nor had they discussed any of the subjects—children, religion, politics—which, to her, were a necessary prelude to any agreement to marry.

It seemed unlikely that David could be anything but C. of E. and Conservative, and probably he would want to have at least two children and possibly four. No doubt he assumed her outlook was the same as his. It was not. She had no religious beliefs, and none of the major or minor political parties represented her view of how to achieve a just and contented society. As for children, at present she felt that one child would be enough for her. Perhaps she might change her mind about that since it was obviously a matter on which, failing accord, there must be compromise.

When she went down to breakfast, a few minutes before nine o'clock, she found David's parents and sister already at the table, but he was not present.

Marina mustered a smile. 'Good morning.'

The Brigadier had risen to pull out a chair for her. 'Good morning, m'dear. I gather you and David danced until dawn, as the saying goes. Run up and knock on his door, will you, Penelope ? In case he's not awake yet.'

As Penelope left the room, and Marina spread her napkin across her lap, it seemed to her that his parents were looking expectantly at her. Perhaps it was only her imagination, but she felt that they knew their son had proposed to her last night and were expecting her to look effulgent with joy.

'I hope you slept well,' said Mrs Leigh.

'Yes, very well, thank you. Actually we were not too late coming back. I think it was just before two when we got in. David made some hot chocolate. I went up to bed before he did, and I forgot to remind him to fill the milk pan with cold water. But I expect he remembered,' she added, with an irony which would be lost on his parents.

'Yes, one can always rely on David to leave things in order. Penelope is the scatterbrain of the family,' said her mother.

At that moment Penelope returned and, overhearing this remark, gave Mrs Leigh a reproachful look, but said only, 'David's just coming.'

The Leighs had breakfast at a table by the large bay window of their morning-room, a sunny room with a view of a brick-walled herb garden.

'Will you have cornflakes before your bacon and eggs, Marina ?' her hostess enquired.

'No, thank you.'

The door opened and David came in. Giving him time only to say a general good morning, his mother said, 'Would you tell Mrs Warren we're ready for the bacon, please, David,' and he disappeared again.

The breakfast table was arranged so that his parents sat at either end, Penelope had her back to the window, and there was a chair for David next to Marina. As he took his place beside her, he gave her another more personal 'Good morning', with a confident smile which made her fear that her refusal last night had made little impression on him.

However, no immediate denouement was possible because after breakfast Brigadier Leigh took her to his study to see his miniatures. Ordinarily Marina would have enjoyed the time she spent with him. His collection was a fine one over which she could have pored for an hour had there been nothing else on her mind. In the circumstances it was a relief when he took out his watch and said it was nearly time for matins.

When they returned to the morning-room, where Mrs Warren had cleared the table, and the others were sharing the pages of the *Sunday Telegraph*—thereby making Marina feel that taking two papers, as she did, was wanton extravagance—she felt it was politic to say, 'You won't mind if I don't come to church with you, I hope?'

Mrs Leigh raised her eyebrows. 'You're not an Anglican?'

'No.'

With inward amusement Marina watched her hostess show her prejudices by flicking a glance of dismay at her husband, who said, 'I have to admit that our Vicar is no preacher, but at least he doesn't drone on for forty minutes as they did when I was a boy, and Margaret and I feel it's right to set an example.' Prompted by another look from his wife, he said, 'You're an R.C., perhaps?'

'No, my grandfather was an atheist, and so am I.'

The Leighs were palpably relieved.

'To be frank with you,' said David's father, 'I'm inclined to think that a great deal of orthodox religion is mumbo-jumbo. The important thing is that it exerts a discipline which is what most people need to make them toe the line. I attribute many of our present troubles to the fact that the Church has lost much of its hold.'

He drew breath for what, judging by Penelope's expression, was an often repeated diatribe, but was prevented by his son, who said, 'While you're at church I'll take Marina for a walk, Father.'

As soon as he was alone with her, he said, 'I'll take you to see a cottage I think might do for us. It's coming up for auction next month with the rest of the estate of an old boy who died recently. The place is in a pretty bad state of repair at present, but it could be made very snug.'

'But, David, I told you last night that I couldn't marry you. I'm sorry that I seem to have misled you into thinking I felt more than friendship. But

people who are thinking in terms of marriage usually have far more serious discussions than we've ever done before they get to the point which you reached last night.'

'Do they ? What about ? There are no skeletons in my closet, and I'm sure there are none in yours. As for what I said last night about you changing your job, I take that back, darling. If you can keep James Sebastian at arm's length now, I'm sure it won't be a problem when you're my wife. I'm not really the jealous type, you know. It was late and I was tired and a bit shaken by your not saying Yes right away.'

'David, please, I don't want to be cruel, but you force me to put it bluntly. I'm *never* going to say Yes to you.'

To her consternation, he put an arm round her and hugged her to him. 'You will, one day,' he asserted. 'I don't mind waiting, if I must.'

His obstinacy amazed her. 'But I don't love you,' she protested, pulling away from him.

He smiled. 'All right: you don't see sparks when I kiss you, or feel weak at the knees, or any of that sort of nonsense. A lot of people who do feel that way at the beginning end up in the divorce courts. You've always enjoyed yourself with me, haven't you?'

'Yes, but--'

'That's what really counts. Getting on well. Being in harmony. Seeing life from the same point of view.'

His mother said much the same thing when, after lunch, she asked if Marina would advise her on a new colour scheme for her bedroom.

'David tells me you have turned him down,' she said, as soon as they were alone.

Marina was appalled. It was bad enough having to cope with his refusal to take No for an answer. To find his mother ranged against her was the end.

'Yes, I'm afraid so, Mrs Leigh,' she answered uncomfortably. 'I—I've enjoyed his friendship, but I'm not ready to marry yet, and anyway, I don't think I'm the right person for him.'

Margaret Leigh sat down on her dressing stool and, seeing no way to escape this awkward tete-a-tete, Marina sat on the daybed.

'You are very pretty and elegant, and I daresay you've had and will have a great many proposals,' said her hostess. 'I had only two offers of marriage, one from a man with whom I thought myself in love. He was an American. We met at the beginning of the war. He was very tall, six feet and three or four inches. In civilian life he was a mining engineer and, had I married him, our life would have been very unsettled, and I should have had to live in many uncomfortable and unhealthy places. My parents opposed it. Mother told me that it was always a mistake for girls to marry for emotional reasons. The strongest feelings must always die down in time. One should marry a man who would give one a pleasant way of life. As you know, my husband is shorter than I and, when I was younger, the difference in our heights was sometimes an embarrassment to me. However, I've never regretted marrying for sensible reasons; and I'm certain I have been much happier living here as we do than if I had married the other man.'

She paused, turning aside to adjust the alignment of the old-fashioned silver-backed brushes and hand-mirror on the dressing-table.

'Before you come to any definite decision, do bear in mind that with David you will have a very agreeable mode of life, and that eventually he will inherit my brother's lovely house which would give you great scope for your talents. I know that his godmother, whom I think you've met, is leaving him all her property, including some very fine jewels. Sadly, she has no children and David has always been the apple of her eye.'

When Marina received these inducements in silence, Mrs Leigh went on, 'Perhaps you think all this very down to earth, but I can assure you that when you are my age you will see life from a different perspective.'

'But don't you think that, from David's point of view, there are girls who would suit him much better than I should?' Marina suggested.

'No, I don't think so. All we ask of our daughter-in-law is that she should be a girl of good breeding with domesticated interests and the ability, later on, to manage a large household. At one time he was involved with a young woman who worked in television, I forget in precisely what capacity. A most unsuitable person—very ambitious, and with quite unacceptable manners. Fortunately David came to his senses in time. He was younger then, and more susceptible.'

Marina felt the time had come to bring the conversation firmly to an end. She stood up, and said, 'I'm flattered that you approve of me, Mrs Leigh, and I accept that, for some girls, to marry a way of life may turn out better than a love match. But I'm afraid I'm a dyed-in-the-wool romantic, and love is at the top of the list of my priorities in life. I could be happy anywhere with the right man, and it's only while I've been staying with you that I've realised the right man for me is someone in my profession. So please don't encourage David to hope that I may change my mind. I know I shan't.'

Her last hour in the Leighs' home was one of the most discomfiting experiences of her life, and the drive back to London with David was hardly less so. However, by the time he delivered her to her door, she felt that, without admitting her love for James, she had managed to convince him that she knew her own mind. But he refused to accept that they should not see each other again.

'I'll call you in a few days,' he said.

Aching to be on her own, Marina submitted to this arrangement. Her river room had never seemed a more welcoming haven than it did that Sunday afternoon when, leaving her unpacking until later, she made a pot of tea and kicked off her shoes to curl on a corner of the windowseat.

She knew it was partly physical tiredness which made her feel depressed. After an early night, she woke up on Monday feeling better, although she continued to blame herself for not realising sooner that her relationship with David was heading for a debacle.



In the weeks that followed it was necessary for her to do a good deal of to-ing and fro-ing from London to the health farm, and during this time James laid siege to her in a way which, had she intended eventually to surrender, would have been a very pleasant phase in their relationship. There were times when it was tempting to believe that he had fallen in love with her, and that this was not a siege but a courtship.

He sent her small, charming, anonymous presents; a magnetised scarlet mouse with a note 'For your fridge'; a stapler disguised as a gilt grasshopper; a pretty bath pillow; a box of honey on the comb. Sometimes the postman would bring an unsigned card which she knew could only come from him. One morning it was a Large Copper butterfly with push-out wings, published by the Natural History department of the British Museum. Another morning she received a card showing some of Queen Victoria's childhood collection of peg dolls. Sometimes the cards were Victorian, containing sentimental messages.

When she taxed him about this bombardment, he said, 'What makes you think they're from me? Perhaps they're from Leigh.'

'I know they are not.'

'You have other admirers, I expect. That boy with the beard.'

'We were fellow pupils at art school, and now we're just friends.'

'Perhaps you have an admirer who hasn't yet declared himself,' suggested James. But the amusement lurking in his eyes gave him away.

Matters came to a head the day after she returned to the office after lunch to find on her desk a florist's box of white lilac. On the card was written—*Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove.*

As usual there was no signature, but the handwriting was his and unmistakable.

He was not in the office that day, but he had arranged to pick her up early the following morning for another trip to the health farm.

All that evening and night, the lilac pervaded her room with its sweet summer scent, and the two lines from Christopher Marlowe's poem echoed and re-echoed in her mind, quashing any faint hope that James's intentions towards her might have changed.

She slept badly, tossing and turning for hours until, at three in the morning, she got up to make a pot of tea which she took back to the gallery on a tray. She took from a drawer Cleone's sketch, and gazed at it while she drank the tea. Now that she had fallen in love with James her dilemma was even more complex.

Before, there had been only one question to ask herself. Was it wrong to have a liaison? To which her answer had been, not necessarily wrong but usually unwise and, with one's employer, invariably. Now she had to ask herself whether, since clearly her job at Brook Street was going to become untenable anyway, she should grasp as much happiness as she could while she had the chance. Either way, she could see unhappiness looming ahead of her.

When James came to fetch her next morning, his opening remarks made it clear that for the time being his mind was on his work. They lunched with the owners of the health farm, and it was early evening when they set out for London. Half way there, he turned the car into the driveway of a country house hotel.

'People come from miles around to eat here, but I think at this stage of the week we should be able to get a table.' He glanced sideways at her. 'You didn't have a date with Leigh this evening I hope?'

'No.'

'He seems to have been less in evidence recently.'

Marina said nothing, and a moment later they reached the house.

'You go in and powder your nose while I'm parking the car,' James suggested.

A grey and rather chilly day had turned into a drizzling evening, making the log fire in the entrance lounge a welcome sight. Three or four groups of people were chatting over their pre-dinner drinks. A discreet sign on the dark oak staircase indicated the way to the Ladies, and Marina went up to refresh her make-up.

As she came downstairs she saw James sitting on a sofa in a secluded alcove. He was drinking pale dry sherry, and a glass of cream sherry was waiting for her. As she crossed the room to join him, he stood up and gave her an appraising smile.

It was the kind of caressing, undressing look which David would have considered bad form in a public place. But Marina, although her colour rose, could not have said truthfully that she disliked being looked at in that way by James. She wished she did.

As they sat down, he said, 'Aren't you going to thank me for the lilac?—Or are you allergic to lilac?'

'No, I love it. It's one of my favourite flowers. But how was I to know you sent it? The card wasn't signed,' she answered lightly.

He grinned. '*Bien touche!* However, I think you've seen my handwriting often enough to recognise it. I'm glad to hear the lilac pleased you. What about my invitation?'

Marina forced herself to meet his eyes. 'I'm not a staunch liberationism but if I were and I asked you to live with me, what would you say?'

'I should say "What an excellent suggestion. You should have made it much sooner." '

'It wouldn't trouble you, having to give up your apartment and put most of your belongings into store?' She saw that for once she had startled him, and she pressed home her attack. 'You know you wouldn't consider it, but

presumably you expect me to give up my lovely river room. And if I did, and after a while we broke up, where should I be then ? Homeless.'

James had recovered himself. He took her left hand in his. 'If that's your principle objection, I'm sure we can get round it. Why not compromise by spending a week at your place and a week at mine?'

'You can't be serious!'

'Entirely serious, I assure you. I'm convinced we can be very happy together. If sharing your bed at Wapping is the price of having you in my bed every other week, I shall pay it willingly.'

'It would never work—or, if it worked for a while, it would never last.'

'It might. I believe it might.'

'If you really thought that you would ask me to marry you,' she said lightly.

'If it worked, and we wanted to have children, I should ask you to marry me.'

'That's not good enough for me, James. I want to be loved by a man who *knows* that he'll never get tired of me, and I want to feel the same way. Shall we go in to dinner?'

As they rose, he said dryly, 'Never is a long time, Marina,' and for the rest of the evening he said nothing more on that subject.

Later, as they entered London, she wondered if he would kiss her goodnight. Since the time he had driven her home after his dinner party, he had always made sure her flat had not been disturbed, but had never repeated the kiss at the foot of the stairs. Tonight she had a feeling he might.

On her doorstep she gave him her key and he unlocked the door and reached for the staircase light switch before standing back so that she could precede him up the stairs. She had left her curtains open, and the room was alight with silvery gleams and reflections from the moonlit river. There was still a strong scent of lilac.

She lighted a table lamp. The room was in perfect order. Even so James checked the kitchen, bathroom and gallery while Marina took off her coat and waited rather tensely for him to finish his inspection.

He came down the spiral staircase and walked to where she was standing, pretending to be studying the electricity bill which had come through the door in her absence.

'I see you've had my drawing framed,' he remarked.

'In a hundred years' time it may be as valuable as a page from one of Humphrey Repton's Red Books.'

'And the hand which drew it will be a little heap of bones, and your lovely face will be a grinning skull, or ashes scattered on the wind. "Then worms shall try that long-preserved virginity, and your quaint honour turn to dust and into ashes all my lust. The grave's a fine and private place, but none, I think, do there embrace,"' he quoted softly.

Her heart was already beating faster than normally. She folded the bill with fingers not perfectly steady, her throat tight with apprehension.

But James did not kiss her. He said, 'Goodnight, Marina. Don't bother to see me out. I'll make sure your lower door is locked.'

As she heard him run down the stairs, and close the street door firmly behind him, perversely she felt a sharp pang of disappointment. Later she came to the conclusion that it was precisely what he had intended her to feel.

In June he told her that he had been asked to decorate a new wing of a house in France belonging to an internationally-famous actor. It was in the Dordogne, and while he was there he wanted to look at a derelict farmhouse which he thought might have possibilities.

'Would you like to come with me?' he asked her.

She hesitated, suspecting that he didn't really need to take an assistant, and that it would lead to complications. But the temptation to meet a favourite actor and to see one of the loveliest parts of France overcame her caution.

'Yes, very much.'

They flew to Limoges and picked up a hired car in which to drive south into the countryside surrounding the Dordogne river.

'You will have to brace yourself for some fairly hair- raising language, I'm afraid,' said James, on the way. 'I've stayed at the place several times since Jared bought it, and his conversation is peppered with four-letter words. He isn't as oafish as he sounds. He grew up on New York's East Side, and he's heard those words all his life and thinks nothing of them.'

'So do a lot of people who haven't the excuse of a slum background,' said Marina dryly. She glanced sideways at him. 'I notice you aren't among them. Do you never swear?'

'Not in front of women. It's my sole claim to chivalry,' he answered, meeting her glance with a smile.

It was early evening when they arrived at the fifteenth- century house which was their host's refuge from the glare of publicity in which he spent most of his life. He did not seek solitude as well as privacy. The house was full of other film and stage people. When they arrived there seemed to be a party going on in the central courtyard surrounding the large oval swimming pool but, after twenty-four hours there, Marina realised that a party atmosphere prevailed all the time. There was a good deal of hard drinking; everyone smoked king-size cigarettes, inhaling as if they had never heard of lung diseases; and there were generally one or two couples dancing to the background music which played from early morning to midnight, although fortunately it couldn't be heard in the bedrooms.

Even without the toupe he wore on screen, Jared Scott was still, at fifty, a ruggedly attractive man. James had prepared Marina for the coarseness of his vocabulary, but not for his jokes. On the second night, in her hearing, he told a story of such lewdness that she turned scarlet. While everyone else

who had heard it was rocking with laughter, she caught his eye and, for some seconds, could not disguise her disgust.

The next day, shortly before lunch, she was dangling her legs in the pool, watching James swimming the length, when someone dived in from the other side and she saw a man coming towards her under the water. He surfaced close by her, and hauled himself into a sitting position. It was Jared Scott, his blue eyes arrestingly vivid in his teak-coloured face.

He said, 'Hi. I get the impression you don't think much of me, Miss Linwood.'

For an instant she was taken aback. Then she said steadily, 'On the contrary, I'm one of your fans. It's only your jokes I don't like, Mr Scott.'

'Is that so?'

For a nasty moment she thought he might punish her outspokenness by choosing the foulest words he knew to tell her how little he cared for her opinion. Instead his gaze shifted to the diving board at the far end of the pool where, turning her head, she saw James about to dive.

'How long have you been running around with James ?' he asked.

'I'm not running around with him, Mr Scott. I work for him, as a designer.'

'You're not sleeping with him?'

'Certainly not!'

'Is that so?' he repeated. 'James must be slipping.'

From then on, to her astonishment, Jared Scott exerted himself to be charming to her. He made sure she sat next to him at meals. In the evening he asked her to dance with him. He showed her his paintings and sculptures and made her realise that, as James had said, he was not a crude oaf but an extremely intelligent man. Had she not been in love with James, and had

Jared not been old enough to be her father, she might have had her head turned by his attentions.

On their fourth evening-there, about an hour before dinner, she was in her bedroom, reading, when there was a tap on the door.

Marina called '*Entrez*', expecting to see the French maid who turned down the beds. When Jared Scott walked in, a bottle of champagne in his hand, at first her only reaction was surprise.

Each one of the many guest rooms was equipped with a built-in refrigerator stocked with orange and tomato juice, bottles of tonic, mineral water and beer, cartons of yoghurt, butter and cheeses. In a cupboard above were bottles of wines and spirits, various types of glasses, and an airtight canister of biscuits. Presumably these were replenished as they were used, but so far Marina had sampled only the carton of orange juice.

'Hi, honey.' Jared went to the cupboard and took out two glasses. He uncorked the champagne and filled them.

She had had her pre-dinner shower and, her bathroom being provided with many towels, was wrapped in a pale yellow bath sheet. On her feet were the terry mules which were also part of the comprehensive provisions for guests' comfort.

As he came to the sofa where she was sitting, a glass of champagne in each hand, she said, 'What's this in aid of, Mr Scott?'

'I told you to call me Jared, honey. You could call this a libation to Venus. Most of the women around here wouldn't know what I was talking about, but you're an intelligent girl and I don't have to explain to you.'

Marina began to feel alarmed. At the back of her mind she had feared this eventuality, but had dismissed as absurd the possibility that a famous film star, well supplied with glamorous popsies only too willing to share his bed, should make a set at her.

She said, 'I was just going to dress--'



'There's an hour before you need do that. What I had in mind was to undress.'

A light tap on the door heralded James, who strolled in and said, 'What are your thoughts on the bathroom for that end bedroom, Marina? Oh, hello, Jared. I thought I heard voices in here, but as Marina isn't a girl who entertains in her bedroom I felt I must be mistaken.'

'She entertains you, it seems,' his host retorted, somewhat acidly.

'Only to confer about professional matters. Marina is the kind of girl who featured in your films about twenty years ago, before the Emmanuelle type became fashionable.'

'Is that so? I guess if Marina can keep you in line, she won't have any trouble with me. Have your conferences some other time, huh ? Right now you're *de trop*, as the French say.'

Marina gave James a look which begged him to stay. It crossed her mind that, in view of the times she had repulsed him, he might feel it served her right to be left to cope with Jared Scott. Also, Jared was one of his most extravagant clients whom he might not wish to offend.

To her relief, he smiled at her, and sat down, making it clear he had no intention of deserting her.

'Say, what's with you two?' demanded Jared. He looked at her. 'You told me it was strictly business.'

'It is, but James is kind enough to keep an eye on me when I'm out of my depth. I've led a rather sheltered life,' she said lightly. Protected by James's presence, she could afford to smile at Jared; to treat with amusement an interlude which, but for James's intervention, might have become most unpleasant.

'Is that so? Knowing James, I find it a little difficult to cast him as the good guy where girls are concerned,' said Jared. 'He may be saving you from the attentions of other guys, but it could be he's saving you for himself. Watch him, honey. You watch him.' He patted her cheek and walked out.

'No point in wasting champagne,' said James, taking Jared's place beside her on the sofa, and picking up the American's untouched champagne. 'Thank you. That could have been awkward,' Marina said gratefully.

'It shouldn't have come as a surprise. He's been casting a predatory eye in your direction for a day or two.'

'I can't think why, considering the competition, and that I told him off for telling a blue joke.'

'Maybe that's why. Jared is used to girls who don't mind blue jokes.'

'It was lucky you arrived when you did. Did you really come to discuss the bathroom in the end suite?'

'No. Although you seem unaware of it, I happen to be occupying the next door bedroom. I heard Jared's voice, guessed he was up to no good, and came in here to frustrate him. His surmise about my motives was entirely correct,' he added mockingly.

'In that case I'd better get dressed.' Her evening clothes were already laid out on the bed. She scooped them up and whisked into the bathroom.

When she reappeared, wearing a shirt of apricot silk crepe-de-chine and trousers of heavy matt crepe, two shades deeper in colour, James had gone.

Marina rinsed out his empty champagne glass, put the half empty bottle in the fridge, and sipped the wine in the other glass.

Thinking about Jared's conversation with her by the pool, and the fact that James had been put in the bedroom next door, she felt slightly sick at these people's attitude to sex. To them, it was as habitual and trivial a pastime as smoking or drinking. She felt she would rather be a nun—an existence which she had always regarded as a negation of all life's best gifts to women—than fall into the casual promiscuity of Jared Scott's world. She couldn't bear to think that James was no better than Jared.

After breakfast the following day, they set out for the high tablelands, known as the Causses, surrounding the gorges of the Tarn. Up there on the heights of central France it was bleak, wild and windy sheep country, but with an atmosphere of its own which made her understand James's interest. However, the farmhouse about which an agent in London had given him details was far too remote, and too far gone in neglect, to be a worthwhile investment.

They lunched in the sun on French bread and butter spread with slices of onion and soft tangy Roquefort cheese made in the caves of a village in that region, and washed it down with red wine. Marina was glad to have shaken off the curiously corrupt ambience of Jared Scott's luxurious house.

Late in the afternoon, miles from anywhere, the car broke down. James spent a long time with his head and shoulders under the bonnet. Obviously he knew a good deal about the causes of breakdowns, and there was in the glove box a booklet of helpful instructions. But after the best part of an hour, he had to admit to being defeated.

'I'm afraid we've no choice but to walk until we pick up a lift or come to a village with a garage,' he said, wiping the oil from his well-shaped hands.

Fortunately Marina had a pair of low-heeled shoes in her luggage. By the time they reached the nearest village they must have walked eight or nine miles without seeing any traffic or people until they came near to the cluster of houses at a crossroads. Like all towns and hamlets in France, the village had its name on a sign on the right-hand side of the road, and another sign with the name crossed out facing motorists who were leaving the place. It was called St Etienne Les Cascades, and although it was small it had a roadside auberge which looked clean and comfortable.

'What if they're full up?' said Marina, looking at the rows of cars parked in the forecourt.

'I don't suppose they will be.' James looked down at her tired face, and gave her an encouraging smile. 'You're a brick to have trudged all this way without a word of complaint. You'll feel better after a good meal and a bottle of wine.'

They entered the inn and James pressed the bell on the reception desk. Presently a middle-aged Frenchwoman appeared and bade them both a pleasant good evening.

While James was talking to her in his fluent French, Marina glanced round and noticed a glass door which gave a glimpse of a red-walled dining-room where a number of men were eating, each at his own table. This, and their city suits, suggested that they were reps, in which case they probably knew all the best hostelrys in the region. Marina realised the long walk had given her a raging appetite. She was glad when James turned to her and said, 'I'm going to wash my hands downstairs and get my knees under a table as fast as possible. Whatever the accommodation is like, it will do very well for one night.'

'Oh, yes, I agree. All I want is to sit down and eat. What luck they're not full.'

'No, they're not full.' He headed for the washroom marked by the silhouette of a man smoking a pipe.

A few minutes later Marina joined him at a table with a red linen cloth overlaid with one of crimped white paper. It was lit by a red-shaded lamp which made the glasses gleam and the cutlery sparkle. She thought she had never tasted anything more delicious than her first sip of wine, her first mouthful of bread torn from a fresh crusty roll.

'Tramping all that way without seeing a soul makes one realise how large France is compared with England,' she said presently, when they had chosen their meal.

'Are you very footsore ? Never mind: after dinner you can relax in a hot bath.'

By the time she had drunk her soup, and eaten a *paupiette* of veal with beans and finely cut *pommes allumettes* fried crisply in oil, her weariness was almost forgotten. They finished the meal with cheeses, and coffee and cognac.

It was then, while she was smiling at a joke he had told her, that James said, 'Now I've got to tell you something which will probably throw you into a panic. By the time we arrived there was only one vacant bedroom. But fortunately it has two beds in it.'

'You took it?' she exclaimed, aghast.

'I should have taken the hay-loft if they'd had nothing else,' he said dryly.

'There must be another room *somewhere* ... perhaps in one of the cottages.'

'I asked about that, but Madame said no. The next inn is fifteen miles away and very likely full up as well, even if we could get there, which we can't. This village hasn't a taxi.'

'But there must be some other alternative. We can't share a room. How can we?' Marina expostulated.

'I don't see why not. Madame doesn't seem to object.'

'She may not, but I do!'

'Oh, come, be reasonable, Marina. After a breakdown in this benighted stretch of country, we can count ourselves lucky not to be sleeping under a hedge.'

'That would be different,' she argued.

'Yes, "it would," he replied sardonically. 'After a very short time you'd be only too glad to snuggle up to me simply to keep yourself warm. Here, that won't be necessary.'

She said suspiciously, 'If you really did enquire about other rooms, it seems very odd to me that, knowing we aren't husband and wife, Madame is prepared to put us up:

'As you don't speak French, you'll have to accept my assurance that I did enquire. As for the nature of our relationship, hoteliers can't afford to be

prudish. Anyway, the English are known to be the most permissive nation in Europe,' he said, with the ghost of a grin.

'So they may be, but not all of them.'

'Look,' he said gently, 'you have my word that I won't touch you, unless you wish it.'

'You might think I wished it when I didn't. You have before.'

'Have I?' His expression was quizzical. Then, as she flushed and bit her lip, he stretched his hand across the table to cover hers. 'Don't look so upset—I'm only teasing you. I realise this is an unfortunate situation from your point of view. However, if you knew rather more about men, you'd realise that, with the exception of eager teenagers whose energy is inexhaustible, a long day with a ten-mile hike at the end of it isn't, for someone of my age, the ideal prelude to a night of love. Now why don't you go up and have your bath, and in about forty-five minutes, when you're modestly tucked under the bedclothes, I'll follow you.'

He didn't look tired to Marina. She said, 'If you explained the situation, perhaps one of these men would let you share his room.'

James cast an eye over the Frenchmen at the other tables. 'They might, but I don't intend to find out. I want to sleep tonight, not lie awake listening to French snores.'

'For all you know, I may snore.'

'Do you?'

She shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

'If you do I can stop you by nipping the end of your nose, which I can't do to one of those chaps.' He finished his coffee, and said briskly, 'If you're going to dither, I'll go up and have my bath first.'

Marina wished very much that her schoolgirl French had not rusted. With a better command of the language, she felt she could have persuaded Madame to find somewhere else for her to sleep. In her heart she was almost certain that James would not take an unfair advantage of the situation, but not *quite* certain, and if he did try to make love to her, she was not at all sure of her power to resist.

However, as there seemed no help for it, she said, 'Very well, I'll go up.'

The bedroom which they had been given had a double bed and a single bed, both with upholstered headboards and covers to match the long curtains. The room was carpeted and furnished with a wardrobe, chest of drawers and writing table, and there was an adjoining pink-tiled bathroom.

There were two complimentary sachets of bath gel by the taps. While her bath was running, Marina took off her make-up and rinsed out her bra, briefs and tights which she rolled in a towel before draping them over the radiator. Then she stepped into the green-tinted water and lay down for ten minutes, timing herself by her watch which she had propped against a towel on the bathroom stool.

In her grandmother's day this situation would have been unthinkable, she reflected. For an unmarried girl to share a bedroom with a man would have been scandalous. Even now there were people who would be shocked by it, and few, if any, who would believe she had not slept with James in the usual sense of that term.

She found herself thinking how different her feelings would have been had this been the beginning of their honeymoon. Then, instead of waiting with trepidation for him to come upstairs, she would have been impatient and eager. Probably he wouldn't have stayed downstairs while she bathed, but would have been lounging on the bed, drinking wine and chatting to her through the open door. Or, even more likely, he would have been in the bathroom with her, watching her as she lay half- submerged in the scented green water, or possibly sharing it with her, although this bath was not really large enough for two people, especially when one of them was as tall and broad-shouldered as James.

As she thought of lying, not as she was now against the hard slope of the bath, but against James's shoulder and chest, she shivered and realised the folly of allowing herself to invent that kind of fantasy.

When she was dry, she put on her nightdress and hung her day clothes in the hanging compartment of the wardrobe. Having nothing else to put away, she didn't bother to look in the other compartment.

Leaving the reading light over the double bed burning, she climbed into the single bed and lay with her back to the door. When it opened, she would pretend to be asleep. The mattress was firm and well sprung, not sagging like some hotel beds. Only the bolster was rather too hard for comfort. She wondered why there were no pillows.

It seemed far more than ten minutes before she heard the door being opened and, very quietly, closed. For a few minutes James moved about the room as softly as a cat burglar. Then he went into the bathroom and she heard the water running, but slowly so that if she had been asleep it wouldn't have woken her.

He was in there for what seemed an age. At last he returned to the bedroom, and she heard him opening the wardrobe as she had done some time earlier.

'Wouldn't you be more comfortable with a pillow?'

Even though he had spoken in a low voice, the question made her jump. She opened her eyes and turned her head. He was standing between the two beds, holding a square pillow. His only clothing was a bath towel wrapped round his narrow hips.

She said, 'I didn't think there were any.'

'The French always put the pillows in the wardrobe. Lift your head for a minute and I'll get rid of that bolster for you.'

She raised herself on her elbow, and James pulled away the bolster and replaced it with the pillow. 'Now you *can* go to sleep,' he said, with slight



emphasis. 'Goodnight, Marina.' He brushed a light kiss on her cheek, and a moment later the room was in darkness and she heard him getting into bed.

For a long time she lay awake, wondering if, twenty years hence, she would remember tonight with regret that she had slept alone when she could so easily have been in the double bed, in James's arms.

When she awoke the next morning, the bathroom door was open and she could see James shaving at the hand-basin in the bathroom. He was wearing trousers but nothing else. For some moments she lay still, watching the play of muscle under the brown skin of his back. Then someone knocked on the door, and he turned and came into the bedroom and called out, '*Entrez.*'

**'Bonjour, monsieur ... madame.'**

The waiter put the tray on the writing table, pocketed his tip and departed. Marina wondered if it puzzled him that people of their age should occupy separate beds.

James had finished shaving. He took his shirt from the back of a chair and put it on.

'I thought if you'd had a poor night you might like breakfast in bed. Afterwards I'll go downstairs and you can have the room to yourself,' he said.

'Thank you. I'd just like to clean my teeth before I have breakfast.'

'I'll get my kit out of your way.' He went back to the bathroom and put his shaving things, toothbrush and toothpaste into a dark brown wet pack. 'It's all yours.' He turned his back and began to pour a cup of coffee.

Marina appreciated his tact, but in fact her nightdress was not a transparent one. It was made of apple-green and white striped cotton gathered into a band of shirring embroidered to look like smocking. It had wide shoulder

straps and a flounced hem. Worn with green sandals and a shady beach hat it could have passed for a sun-dress.

When, having cleaned her teeth and combed her hair, she returned to the bedroom, she found James piling bolsters and pillows into a mound against her headboard. She couldn't climb back into bed until he had finished. This time, instead of keeping his eyes averted, he looked at her, making her realise that although her nightie was not as revealing as a nylon one, standing where she was, between him and the window, it might show the outlines of her body. She was glad to scramble back into bed and pull the clothes up to her armpits.

He had rearranged the tray, removing the heavy coffee pot and the basket of croissants and bread, and leaving on it only what she needed. When she had settled herself he put it on her lap, and seated himself on the end of the bed where he could reach the writing table and pass things to her.

The croissants were freshly baked. 'Mm ... delicious,' she murmured, munching a mouthful of warm croissant spread with butter and peach jam.

'The coffee's good too,' said James, reaching an arm for his cup.

Marina was sitting in a shaft of sunshine and, conscious of its searching light, she wished there had been time to do her eyes.

At the same moment he said, 'Not many girls look as good without their make-up. You do.'

'Thank you,' she said uncertainly.

'I don't like kissing skin which is clammy with goo.'

'No, it must be rather unpleasant.' She didn't want to talk about kissing. 'What are you going to do about the car?'

'I've arranged for the local garage to tow it in first thing this morning. If they can't repair it by lunch-time, the hire firm will have to provide us with

another. Even now, having spent the night as chastely as a nun in her cell, you still don't feel safe with me, do you?'

'Yes, I do,- she protested. 'Of course I do.'

'You shouldn't, my dear,' he said dryly. 'People make love in the morning just as much as they do late at night, and as you obviously enjoy the pleasures of the table, I think it's high time someone introduced you to the even greater pleasures of the bed.'

Marina froze in the act of lifting the croissant to her lips to bite off another mouthful. 'Oh, James, *please*— don't spoil it now,' she begged. 'You've behaved so well, and you know I don't--'

He interrupted her. 'Do you know those lines by Walter de la Mare ? "Look thy last on all things lovely every hour." Who knows how much future we have? Perhaps fifty years, perhaps a few days or hours. Life ought to be lived as if there were not much time left.'

'Up to a point—not to that point. I don't want love to be as trivial a pleasure as this croissant: something enjoyable now but, this time next week, forgotten.'

'Have you forgotten the first time I kissed you?'

'No,' she admitted. 'And I don't think I should forget it if I let you make love to me, but you would. You would forget, and knowing that would spoil it for me. Anyway, I don't want a string of lovers. I want one man who adores me, and—who knows?—he may turn out to be a reactionary who doesn't share your permissive ideas. David told me once that whatever men had done in their bachelor days, most of them didn't want wives who had had lots of lovers.'

'From which I conclude that he's never tried to share your bed.'

'No, he hasn't.'

'Do you like him better because of it?'

'I don't like him less. I shouldn't have found staying here as embarrassing had I been with him. He would have found somewhere else to sleep.'

'Bully for David,' he said caustically. 'Better not tell him about the contretemps here. He'd never believe I shared your room but didn't lay a finger on you.'

The savagery of his sarcasm startled her. Before she could think of any reply, he had sprung up and strode from the room. Somewhat belatedly Marina realised that in fact he had behaved a good deal better than most men would have done in the same circumstances.

Some days after their return to England, when her desk was clear, James called her to his office to discuss her next project. Marina was sharply aware that a pause in her work programme, with no overlapping commitments, was something which might not recur for some time to come.

Sitting in the chair she had sat in the day he gave her a job, she said, 'I'm very sorry to have wasted the time and trouble you've invested in me during my time here, but I want to give notice. I want to leave as soon as possible.'

His dark eyebrows rose. After a short pause, he said, 'Don't tell me you're going to marry Leigh. You must be out of your mind, girl. He'll bore you stiff in six months.'

'It has nothing to do with David. As a matter of fact he did ask me to marry him some time ago, but I refused. I shouldn't have made him a good wife.'

His eyes narrowed. 'Then what is your reason for wanting to leave us?'

Marina swallowed and drew a deep breath. 'I've fallen in love with you, James. I know it's probably only an infatuation which won't last more than a few months, but while it does I'm too vulnerable to go on working here. Sooner or later you'll wear down my resistance, and I don't want that to happen. I know it isn't right for me. So the only solution is to leave.'

There was a long and, to her, painful silence before James said, 'Have you another job in view?'

'No, but I'm sure that will be no problem if you'll give me a reference.' 'I'll do more than that.' He picked up his telephone and dialled a number. 'This is James Sebastian. I'd like to speak to Mrs Ashton, please.'

In the few moments before he was put through, he stared intently at Marina, and for once his eyes held no lurking gleam of humour but were uncharacteristically sombre. She wondered if he was embarrassed by her declaration. She had thought that she would be profoundly embarrassed, but somehow she wasn't.

James said, 'Hello, Lucia. How are you? Good. Yes, fine, thanks. You remember meeting Marina Linwood the last time you dined with me? You said jokingly that if I hadn't seen her first you'd have liked to have her in your team. Are you still looking out for designers ? You are ? That's splendid, because Marina wants to find a new niche.'

There was a short pause. Marina could hear Lucia's voice but not what she was saying. However, it was easy to guess.

James hesitated a moment before he answered. 'Well, knowing me, I should think you might make a shrewd guess. Yes, that's right. But Marina doesn't believe in mixing work and pleasure, and as I can't stop being attracted to her, and she can't help not reciprocating, she feels in an awkward position. When would you like her to come and see you? Tomorrow at ten. Fine. Thanks, Lucia. Goodbye.' He replaced the receiver. 'If you want it, there's a job for you with Lucia Ashton. I don't know what she'll pay you, but it certainly won't be less than your salary here.'

'Thank you. It ... it was good of you to explain the reason as you did.'

He shrugged. 'I'm sure you don't want to advertise the real reason. You can leave as soon as you like.' He rose and came round the desk. 'As the Ashtons are old friends of mine, it's likely that we'll meet again, you know.'

She stood up and began to move towards the door. 'Yes, but not every day.'

At the door, James put his hand on the lever, but instead of pressing it he paused and, looking down at her, said, 'I was a fool that night in France. I should have made love to you then. You wanted it as much as I did— you still do. Why not admit it Marina?'

He caught her against him, crushing her to his tall, strong body, pressing his warm mouth on hers, ignoring her stifled cries of protest until her lips softened and parted under the passionate onslaught. Had they been anywhere else she would have been powerless to resist him. In his flat, or in her river room, he could have done what he pleased with her.

It was only because they were at Brook Street, with Pat on the other side of the door and likely to walk in at any moment, that she was able to cling to a vestige of sanity.

'Oh, God, I want you so much.' His voice was husky with desire. His hands slid down to her hips, holding, her painfully tight, making her even more aware of the raging hunger she aroused in him.

For the first time in her life she understood fully the cataclysmic force which, once unleashed, could overwhelm all restraints. It was like struggling for survival in a wild sea, or being engulfed by an avalanche. Her mind cried *Hold on ... Don't give in*, while every tissue and nerve clamoured for her to let go, to be swept away on this tidal wave of erotic delight.

'No, James ... *no!*' With her last ounce of resistance, she wrenched herself free and fumbled frantically at the door.

There was no way she could have hidden the breathless, trembling condition to which he had reduced her, but mercifully Pat was not at her desk at that moment, and Marina fled down the stairs to the sanctuary of the women's washroom.

## CHAPTER SIX

IN the weeks that followed her departure from Brook Street, Marina was unutterably miserable—far more so than when her grandfather's death had obliged her to give up her art training. But no one would have suspected the despair which she hid with a manner outwardly carefree.

She had put away, in the top cupboard of her wardrobe, all the things which would remind her of James; the antique cache-pot, his design for the river room, Cleone's sketch of him, the card on which he had written *Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove*, and all the charming or nonsensical presents he had sent to induce her to succumb to him. But hiding from view these tangible reminders was easier than ridding her mind of a hundred insidious memories of him which, try as she would, she could not always resist.

One comfort during this time was the strength of her rapport with Lucia Ashton, who quickly became a friend as well as an employer. The work was interesting because much of it was new to her, and immersing herself in the technical problems of designing textiles and ceramics helped to keep her mind off other things. But she was not < sure that, in the long run, she would find it as congenial as interior design for individual clients. Certainly her knowledge of antiques had far less play than at Brook Street.

To her relief, David had at last passed out of her life, and the only man whom occasionally she went out with was Chris Arnold.

Lucia's public image of someone who managed to be a tycoon and a devoted wife was not an illusion created by clever publicists, Marina discovered. Although she had, of necessity, to employ some domestic help she really was a domesticated woman who loved to cook and keep house.

'Nobody infuriates me more than the type of person who announces apologetically that she's "only a housewife",' she remarked to Marina.

They were in the kitchen of her flat which, although in the heart of London, had the cosy atmosphere of a farmhouse kitchen. They had left work

together, and Marina was watching Lucia put the finishing touches to the pudding for a dinner party due to begin at eight o'clock.

'If she doesn't like being a housewife,' Lucia went on, 'she should do something else; and if she does like it, she should be proud of it, and not be brainwashed into believing that *any* job, however dull, must be better than staying at home. Hello, darling'—as Bill came into the kitchen. 'What sort of day?'

He put his arm round her pinafores waist, and kissed her cheek. 'Trying,' he said, rather wearily.

'What you need is a leisurely bath and two strong gin-and-tonics, one here,' removing the cat from the Thonet rocker, 'and one in the tub. Marina will get you the first, and I'll bring you the second. What went wrong?'

Ten minutes later, after telling Lucia his problems while she calmly went on with her cooking, some of which was already producing appetising aromas, Bill's fatigued look had gone.

There had been other occasions when Marina had seen him soothe and reassure Lucia and, as always when she was with them, she thought what a wonderfully sustaining and rewarding relationship a happy marriage, could be.

That night, not for the first time, she found herself sitting next to an attractive, unmarried man who, a few days later, rang her up and suggested a date. Whether these were deliberate attempts at matchmaking on Lucia's part, she was never certain. Lucia had never referred to Marina's reasons for leaving Brook Street, but no doubt she suspected that the attraction had not been as one-sided as James had made out.

One evening Pat Wilson rang up to ask if she could meet her for lunch the following day. When Marina had agreed, Pat said, 'By the way, I'm leaving Brook Street myself soon. I'm going to get married. I'll tell you all about it



tomorrow. 'Bye,' and she rang off before the younger girl could ask any questions.

However, Marina had no doubt that Pat's husband-to-be was Alex Macdonald, and she felt very glad that after the misery of losing her first husband, and the loneliness of several years' widowhood, Pat had been given a second chance of happiness.

'James must have mixed feelings about losing you,' she said at lunch the next day, after Pat had confirmed that before the end of the month she would be Mrs Macdonald. 'He'll never find anyone to match your efficiency.'

'I'm sure he will. Nobody is indispensable.'

'Where are you going to be married? In church, or in a register office?'

'In church, but we want a very quiet wedding, and to avoid offending people by picking and choosing among a large circle of friends, we've decided to have no guests at all. Mother will be there, of course, and Bobby, and I'd like you to be my bridesmaid.'

'I'd be delighted, Pat, but won't that offend friends you've known much longer than me?'

'I haven't any close girl friends. You and I may not have known each other for years, but we've always seen eye to eye.'

'What are you planning to wear?'

'That's what I want to discuss with you. Your taste is surer than mine. I'm all right when it comes to buying plain, tailored clothes for the office, but with more feminine things I sometimes make ghastly mistakes—or used to. Have you time to come shopping with me?'

It took two lunch-time expeditions to find Pat's wedding dress. It was actually a summer evening dress of pale celadon green chiffon with a short jacket of matching cashmere. The jacket had a loose hood lined with chiffon and narrowly bound with silk to match the bound and silk-buttoned cuffs,

and the hood obviated the need for a hat or headdress in which, said Pat, she never looked or felt right. When she balked at the price of the dress, which was expensive, Marina pointed out that it had an undating simplicity which would make it wearable for years.

'Anyway, you needn't economise so rigorously from now on, need you ?' she asked.

'I hadn't thought of it before, but I suppose I needn't. Alex has told me his income, and it's far more than Dick used to earn. But one gets into the habit of penny- pinching, and I can't see myself ever becoming extravagant.'

Later, passing a Janet Reger shop with the window full of delectable underwear, Marina said, 'What about a super nightie for your honeymoon?'

'Oh, something from Marks & Sparks will do. Expensive nighties are wasted on men. They prefer one to sleep like Marilyn Monroe—in Chanel No. 5,' said Pat, laughingly.

Nevertheless Marina felt that, even if Alex did not appreciate it, Pat would enjoy having one luxurious nightdress in her trousseau. Another day she went to the shop on her own and bought one as a wedding present. For Pat she chose peach satin and ecru lace and, for herself, white crepe-de-chine appliqued with pale blue butterflies. What made her succumb to such a mad impulse-buy she could not imagine.

She put it away in a drawer and, as she did so, had an unbidden vision of wearing it for James's delectation. Not that it would remain on her long in his company, she thought; and had to close her mind against an image of the nightdress lying discarded on the floor in a moonlit bedroom and herself, naked and yielding, in James's arms on the bed.

Thoughts of this nature continued to catch her unawares, and with a frequency which did not seem to decrease as time passed. She had hoped that out of sight would bring about out of mind, but not only did he continue to invade her conscious mind but also her dreams. The strange thing was that even in her dreams she was bound by the inhibitions which had held her back in her waking relationship with him. Her brain would not let her forget

him, but nor would it allow her the vicarious satisfaction of surrendering to him in her sleep. Always, at the crucial moment, something would happen to prevent her from abandoning herself to his kisses. She would wake up sick with frustration and longing.

It was not until a few days before the wedding that she discovered that James was to be the best man. It seemed that all Alex's close friends were scattered in remote parts of the world.

'You don't mind, do you?' asked Pat.

'No, indeed not. Why should I?' Marina said airily.

'I've never asked you why you left Brook Street so suddenly, but I assume it had to do with J.S.'

'Yes, but it wasn't for the reason you mentioned to me when you warned me about him before that first trip to Spain.'

Pat said, 'I had hoped that you and James might end up like Alex and me. You seemed so right for him, somehow.'

'Did I?' Marina shrugged. 'I imagine by now he's pursuing another of his popsies.'

'If he is, he's keeping it dark.'

The night before the wedding, Marina slept at Pat's house. Unlike Pat she liked hats, but had seldom had the opportunity to wear one. To go with her ivory silk jersey dress she had bought a pillbox covered with primroses of pale yellow velvet.

Before she went to sleep, she lay in bed with the light on, looking at her dress which was on a hanger on a hook on the back of the door, and wondering if James would insist on doing the conventional thing, taking her out to dinner the following night. If he did, it would be difficult to refuse.

The wedding was at noon, to be followed by a luncheon party after which the bride and bridegroom were flying to Paris for a week, and Pat's mother and son were going for a seaside holiday at Deal, putting up with Pat's aunt and uncle.

It was Pat who was calm, and Marina who had the jitters the following morning. Both had appointments with a nearby hairdresser, and Marina noticed that, under the dryer, Pat read a magazine as placidly as if it were any ordinary day, whereas Marina found it impossible to concentrate on anything but the prospect of seeing James for the first time since her panic-stricken flight from his office.

It was only the second wedding she had attended, the first being that of Robert and Jane Logan when the country church had been packed with more than two hundred guests, and the surrounding lanes lined with every kind of car from impressive limousines to battered sports cars.

Today, James's pale grey Rolls-Royce was the only car outside the church when the bridal party arrived in a hired car. Pat was being given away by her mother, and they were followed up the aisle by her bridesmaid and son, hand in hand.

Marina saw Alex glance over his shoulder, but whether James did she never knew. Throughout the service she was careful to avoid looking at him. The first time their eyes met was in the vestry, during the signing of the register.

'This is a very happy circumstance in which to meet again,' he said quietly.

'Yes, isn't it?' she agreed, hoping she sounded more composed than she felt.

'How are you liking your job with Lucia ?'

'Very much, thank you.'

'Good.'

She thought, how extraordinary human beings are. The last time I was with this man we were locked in one another's arms. Now here we are exchanging platitudes like acquaintances with no common ground.

At lunch the conversation was general, and it was not until they had taken Pat and Alex to the airport and said goodbye to them that Marina's aplomb was put to the more severe test of being alone with James.

'What are you working on at the moment?' James asked, as they began the return run.

Marina told him, and enquired about his current projects. They talked shop all the way back to central London where, presently, it became clear that he was taking her home. Perhaps he assumed that she wanted to change before going out for the evening, although in fact her dress was the kind one could wear anywhere, at any time of day.

When he stopped the car at her door, he said, 'I won't suggest that we follow the custom on these occasions. I'm sure you've already had more than enough of my company today.' He opened his door and walked round the bonnet to open hers.

This time he did not, as in the past, take her latchkey from her. He fetched her small overnight bag from the boot and, having handed it over, said crisply, 'Goodbye, Marina,' and returned to the car and drove off.

She went slowly upstairs, and took off her hat and dress, and the fine gold chain with groups of tiger's-eye beads which had been the bridegroom's present to her. It was seven o'clock. The evening stretched emptily ahead of her. She thought of Pat and Alex who would soon be in Paris where, probably, they would make love before going out to dinner, and again when they returned to their hotel. Visualising their happiness made her loneliness all the Sharper.

Suddenly, after refusing for weeks to give way to her inward misery, she found it impossible to repress the tumult of confusion and despair which seeing James had stirred up. The thought that he had become indifferent to

her, while she continued to suffer acutely from love for him, was not to be borne. Flinging herself on her bed, she burst into tears.

\*

A few days after the wedding, she said to Lucia, 'I know I'm not entitled to any holiday, having only recently joined you, but do you think I could take a few days off?'

'By all means. Where are you planning to go?'

'To some friends in France—if they can have me. I don't know yet if they can.'

However, when she telephoned Cleone that night, the Frenchwoman said, 'There's nothing we should enjoy more.'

It was late in the afternoon when, a few days later, Marina's train reached the station nearest to Champ- fleuri. Cleone had come to meet it in a dark green Rancho, a vehicle not unlike a Range Rover.

Marina's first sight of the fourteenth-century chateau, given to one of Victor's ancestors by Louis XIV, was of its silver-grey turrets, clad with slates as close and neat as fish scales. In the grounds there was a ruined aqueduct, overgrown with ivy and other creepers, which served as a screen between the house and the camping ground where tents of bright blue and orange", and caravans, could be glimpsed as they drove up the drive which led to the *cour d honneur* or main entrance courtyard.

The Daubrays occupied a wing with windows overlooking a private part of the gardens. When Cleone had said, in Spain, that they lived in two lovely rooms, she had spoken the truth. But as the room in which they lived and dined was as large as a ballroom, divided into smaller areas by magnificent lacquer screens, and their bedroom only slightly smaller, they lived a good deal more spaciouly than many people in houses. Beneaththem was a staff flat, kitchen and store rooms, and above were the bedrooms for visitors.

Next morning, before the main part of the chateau was open to the public, both Victor and Cleone took Marina on a tour of the state apartments, and told her some of the problems of owning an historic house.

'You see how we must protect the curtains. People can't resist stroking the silk, and without this transparent plastic cover in a short time it would be threadbare,' explained Cleone.

Later they showed her the camping ground where Victor had built a swimming pool and several modern wash-blocks with coin-operated hot showers and washing machines.

It was on her second day at Champfleuri that Marina unburdened herself to Cleone. She said, 'Would you mind if I asked your advice about a problem in my private life?'

'Not at all, but I don't know that my opinion will be of much value, my dear. You know the saying "In much wisdom is much grief", and although my first husband was killed in the war, and my second in an air accident, I regard myself as having led a life of exceptional happiness. However, merely talking about a problem to a sympathetic listener often helps one to see a solution. What is it that troubles you?'

Marina explained. 'Perhaps I haven't given myself enough time to get James out of my system,' she ended. 'But shall I ever? And if I wait too long, he's bound to find somebody else. I can't go on wavering like this. I must make up my mind. If you were me, would you live with him?'

'I must think about it for a few minutes,' said the Frenchwoman. She laid down the *gros point* panel which she had been stitching, and looked thoughtfully into the middle distance.

At length, she said, 'It's difficult to clear one's mind of the influences of one's own youth. When I was your age, the decision to take a lover was one which came later in life, after marriage, not before it. For centuries young men have been trying to persuade girls to sleep with them, but in my day it was easier to resist because of the fear of becoming pregnant. The Pill has removed that worry, but not the fear of loving more than one is loved, of being discarded,

of being badly hurt. That's what concerns you, isn't it? The fear that James will amuse himself with you; that you won't be able to hold him and, if you can't, your self-respect will be damaged?'

'Yes,' Marina agreed.

Cleone took up her needle. 'Towards the end of one's life, it's the sins of omission which one regrets—the kindness undone, the generous impulse checked by second thoughts, the kiss withheld.'

'There's a poem by Andrew Marvell called *To His Coy Mistress* which James once quoted to me. *The grave's a fine and private place, but none I think do there embrace,*' said Marina.

'Now that is greatly in his favour. How could one love a man who knew not one line of poetry?' demanded Cleone.

'Yes, I agree: although all the poets whom James quotes seem to have been thinking of sex rather than love in the highest sense.'

'But, my dear, sex is so important. If it goes wrong, other things will not go right: if it goes well, it makes up for many deficiencies. Sex without love must be like eating nothing but cream cakes. Imagine how boring and sickening! But sex *with* love never palls, not even after many years. You know the smell in the *boulangerie* when you are travelling and you go to the bakery early to buy loaves for your lunch, and the bread is still warm and has the most heavenly fragrance? You could smell that every day of your life, and always with pleasure. Making love is the same. The thousandth time is as good as the first—indeed, for a woman, much better.'

She paused and, after some moments, said firmly, 'My advice is to let your heart win. There's no danger that you'll have a baby before you are ready to have one. Your grandparents are no longer alive to be distressed by what they would feel was an immoral relationship. No one else need be hurt but yourself, and that's a risk you would have to take in any case, as I did when I married my first love and lost him within two years.'



Again she paused before adding, 'But, if I were you, I should not sacrifice my home. Give him your heart and your body, but keep your own roof and, with it, your independence.'

That night, composing a letter to James, Marina realised that talking to Cleone had confirmed and reinforced a decision which, deep down, she had made already.

*My dear James, she wrote, I am spending a few days with Victor and Cleone at Champfleuri—a most lovely place to relax and take stock. Perhaps by now it is too late to accept the suggestion you made when you sent the white lilac to me. But, if you have not changed your mind, I have changed mine. Otherwise please ignore this note. Marina.*

Next morning, shopping with Cleone in a country town not far from Champfleuri, she posted the letter. As it disappeared into the slot of the postbox, she wondered when James would receive it.

The following day, her last at the chateau, she was astonished to receive an airmail letter from London addressed in a hand which made her heart leap with excitement.

'This is from James! But he can't have heard from me yet. How did he know I was here?' she exclaimed in bewilderment.

'Perhaps he explains that inside,' her hostess suggested.

The post arrived late at Champfleuri, and the butler who was also Victor's valet, and whose wife was the Daubrays' treasured cook, had brought several envelopes on a salver with the silver letter-opener which Cleone offered to Marina, saying, 'Here, open it quickly. My letters will keep.'

With fingers made clumsy by tension, Marina inserted the opener under the flap of the envelope, slit the top and withdrew a single sheet of paper folded into three. As her eyes took in the first words, she gave a little choked sound of joy mixed with disbelief.

*My only love, James had written, I have been ten kinds of fool. You have been on my mind continually since you left Brook Street, and I know now that you are everything I have ever wanted in a woman, and more than any reasonable man should hope to find in one person. Is it too late to start again on a new footing? Is it possible that what you told me the last time you were in my office may still be true? If it is, will you marry me?*

'My dearest child, you mustn't cry,' Cleone exclaimed, seeing two tears trickling down her guest's cheeks.

'I'm not *really* crying,' said Marina. 'It's just ... oh, well, read it, Cleone.'

'So James capitulated before you did,' the Frenchwoman said, with a twinkle. 'As for me, I knew in Javea that you two were made for each other. Come, you must telephone at once. If your letter has not yet arrived, he will be on hot coals, the poor fellow.'

She hustled Marina to the telephone, but when the Brook Street number answered, an unfamiliar voice said Mr Sebastian was not there.

'May I speak to Mrs Fox-Lennox, please? This is Marina Linwood.'

There was a short interval before a voice said, 'Good morning, Marina. Sybilla here. What can I do for you?'

'Oh, good morning. I wanted to speak to James rather urgently, but I'm told he's not in the office today. Do you happen to know where I might catch him?'

'I'm afraid he's abroad—in France. He rang me this morning from London Airport to say he was catching the first flight to Paris, and to give me a telephone number where he could be reached in an emergency. The trunk dialling number is 85, and the local number is 22.11.55. It's the home of Vicomte Daubray.'

'Thank you, Sybilla ... thank you ... goodbye.' Marina rang off and turned a radiant face to Cleone. 'He's coming! He's on his way here.'

'It doesn't surprise me. A letter is not the most satisfactory way to tell a girl you love her. To fall in love when you are seventeen is distracting enough. To fall in love for the first time at James's age is to be *bouleverse* beyond bearing.'

'Surely he must have been in love before?'

'But no, it seems not. He calls you "my only love". Y must go to tell Marie and Maurice that tonight will be a special occasion, and you will enjoy being alone to reread your letter.'

The hours which followed seemed interminable. Marina was tortured by the thought that now, on the brink of happiness, something dreadful might yet intervene. James might have an accident.

At lunch, Cleone said, 'If he's coming by road he not arrive until this evening, and you can't remain in this fever of impatience until then. What distraction can you suggest for us, Victor?'

'Why not visit your friend Madame Albigny?' suggested her husband.

'An excellent idea. Antoinette is always happy to see visitors. If James should arrive before we return, don't tell him we have been expecting him, Victor. To be in suspense for a short time longer will do him no harm.'

Normally, Marina would have enjoyed her visit to the house of the somewhat eccentric old French actress whom Cleone took her to see. Madame Albigny was a lifelong collector of lace. It meant more to her than jewels, both for its beauty and its value. The rarest pieces in her collection were worth many thousands of pounds, and had to be examined through a magnifying glass for their fineness to be appreciated. However, although it was a rare opportunity to see exquisite examples of early Valenciennes, made in dark and damp cellars because a dank atmosphere was necessary to prevent the gossamer thread from breaking, and beautiful Venetian *point de neige*, so called from its resemblance to snow crystals, Marina found it hard-to pay full attention to the old lady's tales of how she had acquired her treasures. The thought of James, now -somewhere between Paris and

Champfleuri, was impossibly distracting. She hoped he was keeping his mind on the road more successfully than she was concentrating on the lace.

When they returned to the chateau, a car which Cleone did not recognise was parked on the sweep outside the entrance to the private wing.

'He's here!' she exclaimed excitedly.

Marina began to shake with nerves. She delved in her bag for her compact and lipstick, but was restrained from putting fresh colour on her mouth by Cleone who said, 'Don't waste your lipstick, my dear. In a few minutes you are going to be kissed as you've never been kissed before! Come: I will say how do you do to him, and then I'll make an excuse to leave you together. Ah, how I envy you! I remember very clearly the wonderful moment when love is declared on both sides and for a time the world becomes paradise.'

They found Victor and James on the terrace. After expressing her surprise and pleasure at seeing him, Cleone turned to her husband, and said, 'Jean and Luc are having another of their rows, Victor. You must come and calm them before they come to blows.' To James she explained, 'They are two old men who work in the garden. They quarrel at least once a month, and once they are enraged Victor is the only person who can pacify them. I must tell Marie to prepare a room for you, James. You are en route to see your mother, I suppose, but you must spend at least one night here.' With which she seized Victor's arm and urged him to hurry before the quarrel became a battle.

When they had gone, James said, 'Lucia told me you were staying here, and I wrote to you. But perhaps you haven't received the letter yet.'

Marina moved to the balustrade at the outer edge of the terrace, and laid her hands on the ancient stone, warm from the sun.

'Yes, it came this morning.'

'As soon as I posted it, I realised I couldn't wait for you to write back. I had to see you ... even if you turned me down.' She heard him come to stand close behind her. 'Are you going to do that, Marina?'

She turned and looked up into his face. 'I've written a letter to you, James, but it isn't an answer to yours. I posted it yesterday. I wanted you to know that, if you still wanted me, I was yours—on your terms.'

His eyes blazed. He caught her close. With his lips at her temple, he said huskily, 'My terms are the same as Alex Macdonald's. I want you to be my wife.'

A small but very gay dinner party took place in the Grande Galerie at Champfleuri that evening. The gallery spanned the lake which, on summer nights, was illuminated by arc-lamps. As the four of them sat at a small candlelit table set up in the centre of the gallery, drinking champagne and eating a delicious cold supper, while outside the windows the shining dark surface of the water was occasionally rippled by a breeze, Marina felt that all her past unhappiness had been a small price to pay for this unforgettable evening.

With James hardly able to take his eyes off her, she would have felt equally euphoric in the most mundane of settings, but to celebrate their happiness in so romantic an atmosphere could only enhance the occasion.

After dinner, Cleone rose and said, 'Now Victor and I will leave you to discuss your future, and to make plans, and I shall write in my diary what happened at Champfleuri today. I record only happy events, and this has been one of the happiest. Goodnight, my friends.'

When they were alone, James moved his chair close to Marina's, and said, 'The last time we were in France together, you wouldn't have let me do this'—resting his hand on her shoulder and caressing her neck and the delicate skin behind her ear.

'You didn't love me then.'

'Didn't I? I think I must have or I should have had fewer scruples about undermining your resistance.' 'When you came upstairs; that night we shared

an hotel room, and you took the pillows out of the wardrobe, how did you know I was still awake?'

Amusement made his eyes glint. 'In view of your extreme nervousness, you would have to have been tired to exhaustion to have nodded off in those circumstances. Never mind: the next time we share a bedroom it will be in circumstances of the utmost respectability, and you'll enjoy it much more than last time. We both shall.'

He put his other hand up to her ear and she realised he was removing her ear-ring, which tonight was a malachite bead on a gold pin with a butterfly fastening at the back.

'I can't resist your ears,' he murmured, and he gave the lobe a gentle nip with his teeth before kissing her neck and her shoulder, following the line of the narrow strap of her low-cut green cotton summer evening dress.

'Darling ... isn't this rather public?' Marina suggested 'breathlessly.

His questing lips brushed the soft curves which, by lowering her zip a few inches with the hand now stroking her shoulder-blades, he had made more accessible to his kisses.

'Public?' he murmured, in a muffled voice.

He must have shaved before dinner. Earlier his cheeks and chin had been slightly rough. Now they were not.

'I think we can be seen from the paths round the lake. There-may be campers strolling about.'

James straightened. 'Perhaps we should have a stroll ourselves. Have you a shawl or something to put round your shoulders? It's a warm night, but even so you might be a little cool in that dress.' He remembered to close the zip.

'I'll run up to my room for a wrap. Can we walk in the parterre garden? The paths round the lake are grassy, and I don't want to get these shoes wet in the dew.'

He pinched out the flames on the candles, and in the light of the arc-lamps they walked along the shadowy gallery and through the silence of the empty chateau to the occupied wing.

There were campers admiring the illuminated facade from the courtyard as they passed through the state rooms. James said, 'If they see you, they'll think you're a ghost—not a lovely warm armful of living, breathing girl'—this as they came to the doorway between two apartments, and he pulled her against him to kiss her.

It was then that Marina made the decision which, after a rather brief stroll, made her say, 'I think, as you've had a long day and we're going back to England tomorrow, we ought not to have a late night.'

'Are you tired?'

'A little. It's been an exciting day.'

'Not as exciting as the day after tomorrow.'

'What's happening then?'

'If I can arrange it, it's going to be our wedding day, and after that, for some time, you'll find yourself keeping extremely early hours, my beautiful. Meanwhile ... goodnight. Sleep well. I'll take one more turn round the garden before I go up.' He kissed the palms of her hands, and let her go.

'Goodnight,' she whispered, and hurried into the house.

In her room she had a quick bath, and powdered and scented herself before going to the drawer in which she had put the expensive crepe-de-chine nightdress which, when she bought it, had seemed such a foolish impulse. She had brought it to France to show it to Cleone, never dreaming that she would wear it to go to the bedroom which-James had been given.

It was about half an hour after they had parted in the garden that she tapped on his door.

'May I come in ?' she asked, when he opened it.

He looked surprised, but he said, 'By all means,' and stood back for her to enter.

His room was not unlike hers, with a massive four- poster bed, Persian rugs on a polished wood floor, and panelled walls hung with paintings.

Marina walked to the foot of the bed, and turned to face him. 'You asked me once if I would give myself freely. Here I am, James. All yours.'

He had closed the door and was standing with his hands thrust into the pockets of a thin, dark silk dressing-gown which outlined the powerful contours of his shoulders and chest.

He said, 'Are you sure you mean that ?'

'Quite sure. You said also, if you remember, that a girl ought to test a man's prowess as a lover before committing herself.'

'I thought you were committed already.'

'I am.' She went to him and slipped her arms round his neck. 'So why must I wait to experience all the delights which you've promised me?'

James put his hands on her waist and his palms were warm through the flimsy fabric of her nightgown. She quivered, but did not draw back.

'Because I think you've had a little too much champagne, and might regret it in the morning,' he said, with a quizzical smile.

'Darling James, I could never regret anything you did to me.'

He began to kiss her, gently at first, brushing her cheeks and her eyelids, and then, as his mouth closed on hers, unleashing the passion with which he had kissed her in his office. This was how she had dreamed it would be except that, in dreams, she had never surrendered herself. Now she cast aside all



restraint, feeling with tremors of bliss his hands exploring her body while his kisses grew fiercer and more demanding.

When he picked her up in his arms, she thought he was going to carry her to his bed. But it was to her own bed he took her, striding along the moonlit corridor with her cradled against his chest as, once before, he had carried her to her room in the hotel in Alicante, after she had hurt her ankle. How nervous of him she had been then. She was nervous now, but only because she wanted so much to please him and was conscious of her inexperience.

Where the corridor was intersected by another, he paused to ask softly, 'Which is your room?'

The third on the left.'

Perhaps, she thought, he considered it good manners to make love to her in her bedroom because then it would be he and not she who would have to wake up early to leave before the rest of the household was astir.

She had drawn back her curtains, and there was plenty of light for James to see his way to her bed. But having laid her gently on it, he did not kiss her again but murmured a husky 'Goodnight.'

'James--' She clutched at his broad, hard shoulders. 'Why are you leaving me?'

'Because I love you,' he told her, in a low voice. 'One day we'll make a child together, but not tonight ... not this year.' She felt him give a stifled laugh. 'For once in my life I came with honourable intentions, and no thought of sleeping with you—at least not until we're married.'

She gave an involuntary murmur of disappointment, and with a sound like a groan James disengaged her hands and went quickly out of the room.

It was not until nearly eleven the following morning that, having waved goodbye to the Daubrays, they were once more alone together.

'Where would you like to go for our honeymoon?' he asked, as they set out for Paris.

'I don't mind, darling. Wherever you suggest.'

'Perhaps we might go back to Javea.'

Marina said, 'When we stayed at the *parador*, why did you ask for a double bed ?'

'I always do. When you're my size, a single bed is somewhat cramped.'

'I thought it was because you intended to seduce me. Pat had warned me that you'd try, and the double bed seemed to confirm it.'

'Possibly I should have tried if you'd given me any encouragement, but you didn't. It made a refreshing change.'

'Perhaps I disillusioned you by coming to your room last night,' she said uncertainly.

With a swift glance in his driving mirror, James pulled in to the side of the road and switched off the engine. Turning to her, he said, 'You made it very difficult for me to sleep. For a puritan, you wear surprisingly sexy nighties.'

'Not usually.' She explained the Janet Reger. 'Perhaps my subconscious mind knew that I couldn't hold out against you much longer, and a glamorous nightie might come in useful.'

'Only in case of fire, and for the benefit of breakfast waiters.' His expression became serious. 'You couldn't disillusion me if you tried, but I wonder if you realise how discreditable my past has been. The past may be dead, but it doesn't always lie down, Marina. Are you sure you can take it if the skeletons in my cupboard rattle their bones occasionally?'

He had already released his seat belt in order to turn sideways and rest one arm along the back of her seat.

Now Marina unlocked her belt and, turning, put her hands on his strong shoulders. 'Darling James, I don't care how many women have had a place in your past, as long as I'm the only one in your future. I don't want to ask any questions which you would prefer not to answer, but surely you must have loved someone before me?'

'No, not as I love you—never,' he told her seriously. 'There are not many women who are beautiful, and intelligent, and kind, and who share my particular tastes in as many ways as you do. So far I've found only one.'

She said, 'I don't think there are many men who, last night, would have gone away rather than risk spoiling things. That wasn't the action of an irresponsible, selfish man. I think you are much kinder and wiser, and more self-disciplined, than many people realise.'

For the first time she had the assurance to take the initiative and kiss him; but it wasn't long before James took over and returned her gentle kiss with an enthusiasm which caused a farmworker, passing on a bicycle, to shout a good-humoured and probably bawdy comment.

They drew apart, smiling at each other. Then reluctantly, James refastened his belt, and switched on the engine, and they resumed their journey.