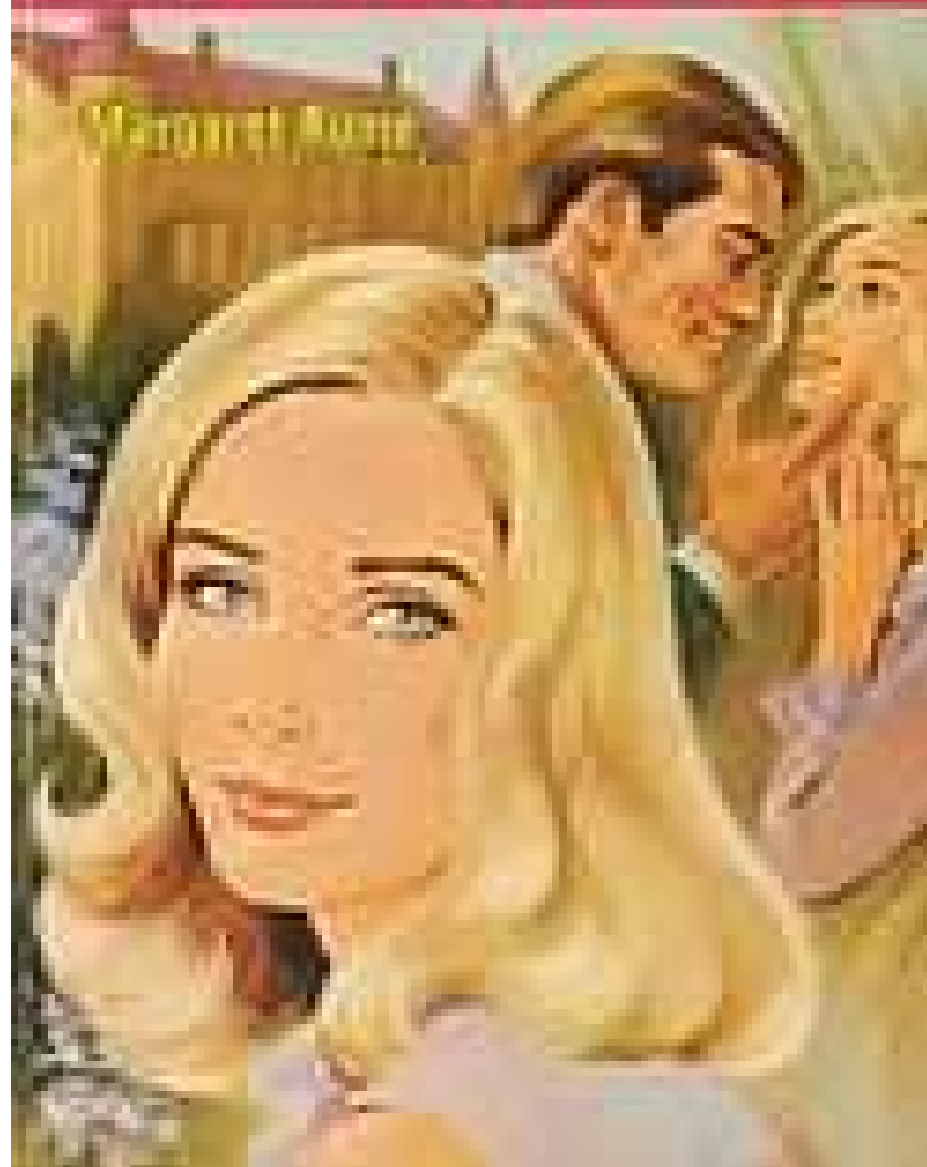




THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS

1954

CHATEAU OF FLOWERS



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Margaret Rome

Fleur had married Alain because she loved him -- not, as he thought, either because he was blind and she felt sorry for him, or because he was rich and her motives were completely mercenary.

But how could she ever convince him of the truth?

CHAPTER ONE

THE garden lay somnolent under the pressing blanket of an August heatwave. Flowers breathed out their perfume at only half strength, biding their time until a shower of rain should release the full symphony of their scent upon the senses of a waiting world. The buzz of a fat furry-coated bee was the only noise audible in the still air, and even that was forced; a tired, monotonous sound that seemed to end on a relieved sigh when the bee alighted on the petulant lip of a drooping antirrhinum.

Idly, Fleur Maynard watched it disappear into the mouth of the flower, her hands ceasing momentarily from their task of shelling peas into a bright blue basin balanced on her lap. How peaceful it all was. She leant back in her chair and pushed aside a wave of hair that had fallen across her eyes. Peace I But did she want peace? For ever, it seemed, her life had run on a placid unalterable course; no heartaches, no shattering disappointments, not even a minor tragedy had disturbed the smooth pattern of her existence— and no excitement either. A small smile curved her lips at a fleeting thought. How would her father's parishioners react to the knowledge that the girl they regarded as their minister's right hand, the quiet, unobtrusive child they had watched grow up into a serene, uncomplicated young woman content to help out at parish functions, to step into the breach when a child-minder was required or an old person needed nursing, ' did, in reality, yearn for a more turbulent course to navigate, yearned to cross the boundaries of the sleepy Surrey village where she had lived all her life into the vast world that beckoned from outside?

Her mother stirred in the adjacent deckchair and opened one sleepy eye. 'Is your father back yet, dear?' she questioned, her face a picture of dawning concern. Fleur smiled. The devotion her parents showed towards one another never failed to please and reassure her. Although they were both well past middle age their love was, if anything, stronger than it had been in their youth. Her mother could still blush

charmingly when her husband paid her a compliment and he, in turn, was not averse to being told by her how wonderful he was and how lucky were the people of the village of Gillingham in having him as their vicar. They were both such lovable innocents, Fleur had decided long ago. They saw evil in no one and the worst of villains received from them the benefit of the doubt and was never condemned. Perhaps that was why even the most hardened individual left the vicarage with a grateful smile and a renewed hope in human nature, and perhaps that was why Fleur often found herself fussing over her parents with the same concern she felt for the youngsters in her Brownie pack.

There was an unconscious note of maternal soothing in her voice when she answered. 'Now, Mother, don't worry. Father is a little late, but today is his day for visiting the hospital, remember, and you know how involved he gets with the patients, especially any new arrivals. He'll be home soon, I'm sure of it.'

When the veil of disturbance lifted from her mother's eyes, Fleur stood up, handed her the basin of shelled peas, then began to stretch long and luxuriously to rid herself of the stiffness brought about by her prolonged inactivity. 'Ah, that's better! It was lovely while it lasted, but lazing simply doesn't agree with me, Mother!'

Jean Maynard smiled and looked up at her lovely, laughing daughter, wondering again at the stroke of fortune that had brought them a child long after she and her husband had given up hope of ever having children. And such a child. They had named her well; she was as lovely as any of the flowers surrounding her in the old-fashioned garden. With maternal wonder she noted again Fleur's petal-soft skin, matt white and unblemished, her full, sensitive mouth the colour of wild roses, and the fascinating, deep pansy-blue of her eyes. Hair the colour of pale wheat fell in heavy waves on to shoulders so slim they seemed incapable of bearing its weight, but the stem of her green-clad body was supple with health and youthful curves gave promise of a

voluptuousness to come. But to Malcolm and Jean Maynard the most comforting knowledge of all was the knowledge of the beauty within. Fleur's nature was so sweet and so abundantly generous she was loved by all, even though—her mother permitted herself an impish smile—she gave at times the impression of being a thoroughly modern little madam who felt responsible for the unworldliness of her parents and who carried the troubles of the village on her own straight back.

When Fleur raised an enquiring eyebrow, her mother masked her smile and rose to her feet to turn in the direction of the house. 'I'll begin preparing dinner, dear, if you go and change. By the time it's ready your father should be home.' Fleur nodded agreement and wound her arm into her mother's while they walked together back to the house.

When the Reverend Malcolm Maynard arrived home an hour later dinner was ready to be served and his wife and daughter were waiting to welcome him. But as soon as he entered the house they were both immediately aware that something was wrong. A frown creased his usually unfurrowed brow, and the twinkle they were used to seeing in his placid eyes had been replaced by deep seriousness. Malcolm Maynard had a heart big enough to contain the troubles of all who sought his help, his calling was worn as a cloak of compassion under which every mortal was offered shelter, but he tried at all times to keep a sense of proportion so that neither he nor his family were overwhelmed by the misery he encountered in his work. But this time he was troubled—so troubled he could not even try to pretend.

'Malcolm, my dear,' his wife moved towards him, 'is something wrong? What has happened?'

Fleur did not attempt to question him. It was at such times as these she realized how superfluous she was to her parents' happiness. They loved her dearly and she knew they would have been horrified at the

thought of her feeling shut out, but they were two halves of a whole and when trouble descended upon one the burden was immediately shouldered by the other.

Malcolm shook his head and instead of moving towards the dining-room where his meal was waiting he crossed over to the small room he used as a study and sank down into his leather armchair. He waited until his wife and Fleur had joined him and when they were both seated opposite, showing art anxiety they could not hide, he began to explain.

'I've had a most distressing time at the hospital this afternoon!' With a boyish gesture of puzzlement he ran his fingers through his grey hair. 'Heaven knows, I've visited hundreds of patients in the Royal Southern Hospital, many of them blind and without a hope of ever regaining their sight—but *this* young man,' his voice deepened with distress, 'is in such utter solitude! He'll allow no one to comfort him, he rejects all offers of friendship and, or so he tells me, he has no faith whatsoever in either surgeons or priests!'

His wife leant forward to give his hand a comforting pat. 'Tell us about it from the beginning, my dear, you'll feel much better when you've got it all off your chest.'

'It isn't what I feel that matters, Jean,' he answered fiercely. 'I simply must find some way of helping this young man!'

Wisely, his wife remained silent and after drawing a deep breath he took her advice and began again. 'When I reached the hospital this afternoon there was a message waiting for me from Sir Frank Hamlin, the famous eye surgeon—no doubt you'll remember hearing me speak of him before, he sends most of his patients to the Royal Southern for treatment. Sir Frank requested that I speak with him before going up to the wards, so naturally I sought him out to discover what he wanted.' Fleur leant forward, anxious not to miss any of her

father's low-spoken words. 'Sir Frank asked my help in connection with a patient just recently admitted—a young Frenchman whose family are very close friends of his. The story he told me of the young man's accident was tragic. Two years ago he was blinded by acid. For all of those two years the doctors in France gave him hope, but very faint hope. Then, after six unsuccessful operations, his family contacted Sir Frank who immediately had him transported to England—to the Royal Southern. Just after the accident the young man had great trusts in his doctors. He never complained of the pain and discomfort, which must have been considerable, because after each operation he was convinced he would see again. But gradually his optimism faltered and was replaced by bitterness until, after the last abortive operation, he sank into such despair he vowed he would never allow himself to be operated upon again.'

'Oh, the poor dear boy,' Jean Maynard murmured, close to tears.

The vicar nodded. 'Yes, he is certainly to be pitied.'

'But what did Sir Frank want you to do, Father?' Fleur queried gravely.

'He wanted to enlist my help in reviving the young man's spirits, my dear. Sir Frank is almost certain he can operate successfully and he is most anxious to try. The young man's family have managed to persuade him to undergo just one more operation and although he was very reluctant to do so, he agreed. But it is his mental attitude that is so worrying. Sir Frank insists it would be futile to operate on any patient in such a state of mind. That is why he has asked for my help in trying to revive the young man's optimism. Sir Frank himself has tried, and so has the patient's family—but without success. I'm afraid I'm being looked upon by them as a last desperate hope.'

His head sank down upon his chest in a gesture of such defeat his wife had to remonstrate. 'But you can do it, my dear, I know you can! How

many such people have you managed to comfort, and how many of them have returned to thank you for your help?"

The vicar shook his head. 'I've tried,' he told her simply, 'and failed. Never before have I encountered such deep-bitten resentment, such cold, impenetrable indifference. For all of an hour I tried to penetrate the armour with which he has surrounded himself, but the only return for my efforts was an occasional cold smile and then finally the remark I repeated earlier: *I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have no faith whatsoever in either surgeons or priests!* Nor in any other form of humanity, I'll wager,' the vicar stated unhappily. 'The man has turned into an insensible automaton. I feel he has been hurt so often—and perhaps not merely physically—that he has determined never to allow himself to feel ever again!'

There was an aghast silence as each of them tried to imagine the extent of hurt necessary to cause such complete withdrawal. For all of five minutes no one spoke then, on a small eager breath, Jean Maynard suggested: 'Fleur might be able to help...'

Fleur's head jerked up. 'I? What on earth could I do? Really, Father...' But when she turned to appeal for his support she saw with dismay that his eyes had brightened with renewed hope.

'Of course!' His mouth relaxed into a slow smile. 'Why didn't I think of that? It's certainly worth a try!'

'No, Father, I couldn't...'

All during dinner Fleur argued. She felt petrified at the idea of even meeting the man her father had described and was appalled at the thought of the reception she might receive from him if he should decide to treat any effort on her part as the gross impertinence it surely would be. But her parents became so upset by her adamant refusals she finally felt forced to give in, and when she went up to her

room that evening she was committed to a promise to approach the fierce young Frenchman the very next day.

The following afternoon she left for the hospital early. It was her day for helping out in the wards, taking around the telephone trolley, writing and reading letters for patients in the ophthalmic wards; making lists of things asked for that could not be supplied by the W.R.V.S. trolley and making herself generally useful. But today she felt the need to talk to someone before approaching the patient she had promised to see, and who better, she thought, than her friend, Jennifer Dalton, a staff nurse at the hospital, who by happy chance was at present working on that ward.

She found her sitting in the ward sister's small office drinking a cup of tea and puzzling over some reports she had strewn across the desk. When, after a diffident knock, Fleur popped her head around the door and asked: 'Have you a spare minute, Jennifer?' she pushed aside the papers and welcomed her with enthusiasm.

'Come in, Fleur, you've turned up at exactly the right moment, I was just beginning to feel a scream coming on! Honestly, the way these juniors' . reports have been written one could be forgiven for thinking they'd been transcribed by a Chinaman using a limp feather! Can I get you a cup of tea?' she rushed on, pulling a chair forward.

'No, thanks,' Fleur sank despondently into the proffered seat. 'It's advice I want.'

Jennifer's eyes assessed Fleur's anxious face, then with a hint of exasperation she accused her, 'Must you burden yourself with the problems of every lame dog you meet, Fleur?' Fleur's mouth opened to protest, but Jennifer held up her hand and conceded, 'Oh, don't tell me, I know, this time it's different!' She leant forward to give emphasis to her next words. 'Each time it's different, and each time the results are the same. You worry yourself to a frazzle over some

individual who doesn't deserve your help and who, indeed, might benefit from being left to sort out his own affairs. When are you going to start thinking about yourself, that's what I want to know?'

Fleur was not put off by her friend's abrupt speech, she knew her too well. At first sight the two girls looked unlikely candidates for friendship, but Fleur's shy, retiring nature needed the pushing and prodding of Jennifer's ebullience and, although sometimes overwhelmed by it, was often glad to seek her positive advice.

'I haven't come here to talk about me,' Fleur stated firmly.

'All right,' Jennifer leant back in her chair with a look of resigned patience, 'tell me the worst, who is it this time?'

'Your new patient,' Fleur admitted. 'Father asked me to call on him today to try to cheer him up, and I was hoping perhaps you could give me some idea what subjects he finds interesting. I'm at a loss to know what to talk to him about.'

Jennifer jerked to attention and shrieked, '*You don't mean our French Count?*'

Fleur laughed, 'Oh, is that what you call him...'

Jennifer rushed into words without heeding the question. 'My dear, every nurse on this ward has tried to get through to him! Mean, moody, magnificent—we've run out of adjectives! Half the staff hate him and the rest are in love with him, but on one point we're all agreed—*he's impossible!*'

Fleur's heart sank. Her father's words had prepared her up to a point, but that Jennifer, forthright, unfearing Jennifer, should stand in awe of him made him sound even more formidable. She cleared her throat and censured gently, 'He *is* blind, Jennifer.'

Jennifer's face went grim. 'Yes, but so are most of the other patients in this ward, and they don't have private suites and the undivided attention of Sir Frank Hamlin to help soften the blow. The young man's spoiled, Fleur, make no mistake about that, and although he has lost his sight he's by no means incapacitated otherwise. It's extraordinary how quickly he senses pity and his arrogant rejection of it can be devastating. Don't expose yourself to the lash of his tongue, please, Fleur. Leave him to those experienced enough and hard enough to cope, because you're simply not equipped to handle him!'

Fleur blanched, but she shook her head and answered firmly, 'I must see him, I promised Father I would and I can't go back on that promise. When will be the most convenient time?'

Jennifer threw up her hands in despair. 'All right, if you've made up your mind, then on your own head be it!' She softened when Fleur's shoulders drooped. 'Look, you haven't been round the wards yet, have you?' Fleur shook her head. 'Good!' Jennifer answered. 'Then by the time you've finished doing that it should be teatime. Sir Frank will have visited his patient long before then, and I'll see to it he's left severely alone so that when you do go in he might be so sick of his own company he'll welcome any visitor. How will that do?'

'Well, thank you for nothing!' Fleur drew herself up with dignity and made towards the door. Jennifer's laughter was still ringing in her ears as she walked quickly down the corridor to collect the telephone trolley. Her lips quirked a little as her sense of humour responded to her friend's quip, but it faded fast when she began to contemplate the ordeal that loomed only a couple of short hours away.

CHAPTER TWO

FLEUR did not know whether to feel relieved or sorry when the time for her visit drew near. All afternoon while she had ministered to the patients in the main ward her eyes had been drawn to the curtained window behind which lay the private room that housed the man she had promised to visit. Her thoughts had been so chaotic she had found it quite impossible to concentrate on the tasks she had been given, and this had caused much good-natured chaffing from the patients—many of whom were now friends of long standing. But she had managed to struggle through, and now, as she pushed the telephone trolley back into its alcove and nervously smoothed down her hair, she began to feel the stirring of very real panic.

Slowly, she walked down the corridor until she was outside the room, then, bracing herself as if to do battle, she tapped lightly on the door.

'Entrez!' she was brusquely commanded.

Three hesitant steps took her inside the room. Her eyes went immediately towards the bed and found it unoccupied, its covers drawn back to reveal uncreased sheets and crisp white pillows. Along the opposite wall was a window that looked out on to the hospital grounds and standing immobile in front of it was the tall figure of a man wearing a dark jewel-coloured dressing-gown of heavy silk. Fleur's heart somersaulted, then began to pound with hard, painful throbs. Without flickering an eyelash, she traced his portrait indelibly upon her memory, so that when she was alone she might take it out and look at it again and again. He looked so attractive standing there with the light from the partially curtained window lancing down upon his dark head it was no wonder Fleur's unawakened heart responded with romantic fervour at her first sight of him. He was a cavalier in modern clothing, his face dark and brooding; his chin severely out-thrust—a sign of obstinacy—eyes screened, but exciting, his nose blade-straight but with flaring nostrils that warned he sensed

approaching danger—or interference. All he lacked was a colourful doublet, a swinging cape and a long, thin rapier to hang against the lean length of his leg. He was a hero of Cervantes—like Don Quixote who took windmills for giants and sheep for armies, he gave the impression that he would consider a friendly overture a provocation and pity or concern an insult.

'Well?' His impatient voice challenged the silent room. 'Who are you and what do you want?'

Compassion filled her at this reminder of his blindness and it was all she could do to keep her voice steady when she faltered, 'I ... I'm Fleur Maynard, the Reverend Mr. Maynard's daughter—he visited you yesterday, if you remember?'

He tilted his haughty head and without turning away from the window clamped out, unforgivably, 'You mean that fool of a priest? I thought I had made it quite plain to him that his presence was superfluous, so why, I wonder, has he sent me his daughter? Perhaps he would like you to guide me around the grounds and so dispense with my white stick,—or—ah yes, I have it—he wants you to teach me Braille, a worthy occupation for a vicar's daughter!'

If he had mocked *her* she could have forgiven him; his sarcasm could have fallen upon her own head and she would not have flinched. But to hear her kind, gentle-hearted father so maligned was more than she could bear. With the primitive instinct of a mother tiger defending her young, she rounded on him.

'I find your morbid self-pity abhorrent, *monsieur* ! Now I understand why people prefer to leave you alone with your unhealthy thoughts and childish tantrums!'

Her spurt of temper faded into an appalled silence. He did not speak, but his fist clenched tightly and hovered momentarily over the hilt of

a non-existent rapier. But although silent, his anger could be felt in the quiet room. No one, she guessed, had ever before spoken to the arrogant Frenchman in that way and he had found it most indigestible; if she had been a man she felt sure he would have struck her! Her whole body trembled as she waited, too ashamed and frightened to run towards the door. Hot colour- rushed to her cheeks, then receded, leaving her eyes enormous in her white face. Just when she thought she would crack under the strain, he relaxed his tense body and turned around to face her. With a meekness she would not have believed possible he apologized,

'You are quite right, *mademoiselle*, I have become impossible to live with. You are not the only one who thinks this. My temper gets beyond control, but I know of no way to remedy this. Perhaps,' his voice became silky, 'if you were to help me... ?' He must have heard her dismayed gasp, because his voice became charged with mocking sarcasm. 'Come now, vicar's daughter, where is your charity? You know you dare not refuse me for your father's sake, for how would he react to the knowledge that his daughter had denied help to a desperate man?'

Immediately, a picture of her father's anxious face flashed before her eyes and the refusal she was about to utter faltered into silence. He was clever, this Frenchman, unerringly he had hit upon the one thing that could influence her in his favour. If she were to refuse his request her father would be hurt far more than he would.

'In what way can I help, *monsieur*? There are people far better qualified than I just waiting for your command, why not let *them* help you?' she questioned stiffly.

He moved away from the window, and using her voice as a directive, he walked towards her. Only a step away he stopped, so close she could have reached out and touched him. It was hard to believe he could not see, so sure were his movements. His steady, unfathomable

eyes were trained upon her face as if taking in every detail of her features, so much so that a blush began to rise under her skin. It was only when she saw the faint white scars on his eyelids and brow—denoting recent plastic surgery—that she was able to believe it, then her blush deepened with an onrush of shame.

'Why you?' he queried, suddenly harsh. 'Simply because you are the first person I have spoken to since my accident who is honest enough to tell me the truth about myself I For two years I have been consistently lied to and I'm heartily sick of it! Hearing you speak so frankly was like a breath of spring air reaching me through clouds of stifling commiserations and supposedly soothing platitudes. You are the one person I would trust to speak the truth to me always and for that reason I do not intend to lose sight of you. You will have to humour me, vicar's daughter, because if you do not I shall refuse to let them operate I What is your answer to that, are you agreeable?'

'Agree to blackmail?' Fleur choked. 'Does one ever have a choice in such circumstances?'

He shrugged and turned to walk back to the window. Standing in a shaft of sunlight, he lifted his face to let the light play upon his scars, seeming to enjoy the warm, delicate touch upon his tormented eyes. Then, realizing she was waiting for an answer, he told her with sudden irritability, 'No, you have no choice! I did not ask to become the target of your over-developed sense of duty, so I cannot therefore be charged with taking advantage of it!' Suddenly he tired of her. 'Go now, I want to rest, but be back here tomorrow in time to have lunch with me.'

Rigid with anger at her ignominious dismissal, she marched out of the room, only just resisting the urge to slam the door.

Sir Frank was amazed and delighted at the change in his patient after just a couple of weeks of Fleur's company. Jennifer expressed the view that Fleur had achieved the impossible when, instead of brooding in his room, her patient began to demand more and more outings in Sir Frank's chauffeur-driven car with Fleur acting as his eyes, painting word pictures of the countryside as they journeyed through it. Malcolm Maynard was jubilant and so proud of his daughter he could not find words enough to praise her. But the strain Fleur was undergoing was visible to her mother; only she began to rejoice less as she compared the young Frenchman's restored spirits with the subdued aura of disquiet surrounding Fleur —brought on, Mrs. Maynard had no doubt, by his heavy demands upon her time.

She tried to remonstrate with Fleur about this one afternoon as she watched her getting ready for yet another outing. 'Fleur dear, you look tired, why don't you rest this afternoon and I'll telephone the hospital to tell them you don't feel up to escorting Monsieur Treville to the races?'

Fleur was in the act of pulling a pink cotton dress over her head and her reply was muffled, but audible. 'I'm not a bit tired, Mother, so please don't fuss.' When her head emerged from the dress she continued firmly, 'Besides, Alain will be most disappointed if I let him down. He's very fond of horse-racing and was quite excited when I mentioned there was a meeting to be held near by. I couldn't possibly let him down now, could I?'

Her mother sighed. 'That's all very well, Fleur, but I'm beginning to worry about you. You don't display half the energy you used to and also you look so pale. Alain Treville is a charming young man and a most considerate one otherwise, but he's so possessive! You haven't been out of his sight for more than a few hours since the first day you met him. Are you sure it isn't all becoming too much for you?'

Fleur turned away to hide the quick spurt of tears her mother's words had precipitated. It was just as well her parents thought Alain Treville charming and considerate. To them he was, but only she knew of the black depression that often overtook him when they were alone together. She had learned to keep silent while he ranted and railed against the fates that had blinded him. She had become his safety valve—his whipping boy. To everyone at the hospital he was now a model patient, easy to please and very co-operative, only she bore the brunt of the devils that roused within him a despair so violent that only by lashing out at another could he achieve relief. At first when these moods had overtaken him she had answered him back sharply, but this had tended to aggravate him still further and after flinching under his stinging tongue on half a dozen occasions she had decided to opt for the line of least resistance and to sit quietly until his spleen was spent. But there had been a few occasions when he had been sweet, so heart-stirringly charming she would have denied him nothing, and it was on the last of these occasions that she had realized she had fallen in love with him...

'Fleur!' Her mother was still waiting for an answer, so she went across and knelt at her feet.

'Mother, Sir Frank confided in me that he hopes to operate on Alain some time next week, so I won't be wanted much longer. When he regains his sight he'll go back to France and in time he'll forget all about me.' Her heart jerked painfully, but she forced herself to go on. 'In a few weeks everything will be back to normal and I'll have plenty of time to rest, but as long as he needs me I must be with him, do you understand?'

Her mother patted her hand, understanding more than Fleur intended. 'Very well, my dear, I'll say no more. Just remember,' she hesitated then went on slowly, 'your happiness is very important to us and anything you might decide to do will be accepted by your father and myself as being necessary to that happiness.'

Fleur hugged her. 'What possible decision could I be called upon to make that would affect my life with you and Father, you goose I' she laughed lightly. Her mother just smiled and stood up to go towards the door, but when she had left the room Fleur remained kneeling by the bed, reflecting upon her words.

Sir Frank's car was late arriving. Alain was already inside and through her open bedroom window Fleur heard her mother's voice pleading with him not to get out as she was sure she, Fleur, would be down in a matter of seconds. Alain's pleasantly-accented voice said something in reply but she did not wait to listen. Grabbing her handbag, she ran down the stairs and outside to the waiting car, eager to discover whether this was to be one of his good days or, heaven forbid, whether she was to endure more hours of deliberate crucifixion from his searing tongue.

But she knew at first sight of him that it was to be a happy day; his mouth relaxed into an involuntary smile of welcome when he heard her approach and, although screened by smoke-dark glasses, she sensed there were no shadows in the eyes that swung with uncanny perception to her flushed face. 'Are you ready, Fleur?' he questioned, impatient to be on his way.

'Yes, Alain,' she replied, her tongue stumbling over his name. He had insisted, on the day she had been commanded to lunch with him, that they dispense with formality and use first names, but it had taken him the better part of a week to persuade her to drop Monsieur Treville in favour of Alain.

'Good, then let us be on our way, we must not miss the first race I'

It was ideal weather for such an outing, pleasantly warm with a flirtatious breeze preventing it from becoming oppressively hot. They found a vantage point which was quiet—he did not like crowds—but which gave Fleur a comprehensive view of the race-track, and when

they were settled Alain dismissed the chauffeur, telling him he was free to enjoy himself in his own way until the time arranged for the return journey.

Although Fleur knew nothing about racing,, she had an instinctive grasp of what would interest Alain. She described everything around her in such detail that he became absorbed, and when the racing actually started her commentary was so crisp and accurate that his face glowed with enjoyment. Between races she shared out the food from the lunch basket they had brought with them—flaky sausage rolls, sandwiches of delicious pink ham, slivers of chicken breast, fruit and a bottle of sparkling wine that had been chilled, then packed in a thermos container to retain its refreshing tang. When they had finished eating Alain lay back upon the rug they had spread upon the grass and told her with a relaxed sigh,

'That was wonderful! Thank you for a most enjoyable afternoon, Fleur. When I get back home you must come to visit me and I'll take *you* to the races!'

Her heart lifted. It was the first time he had mentioned his home or, indeed, anything about himself. She would have liked to have asked, but had been too afraid of being snubbed. In his present mood, however, she decided to chance it.

'Where is your home, Alain?' she asked diffidently.

A frown flickered across his face, then was gone. 'Near Grasse,' he answered abruptly. Then as reluctant memory overtook him, he elaborated, 'Grasse, as you probably know, is the centre of the French perfume industry, a region known as the garden of France. All the year round the flowers bloom along the Mediterranean coast— from Menton to Hyeres they flower in infinite profusion. Cannes is famous for its roses, acacia and jasmine, Nimes for its thyme, rosemary and lavender. Nice for violets and mignonette. But of all of them the most

famous is Grasse, because there we grow the most flowers and it is there the perfumes are manufactured.'

She was fascinated. No wonder he revelled in the touch of the sun when he had lived his life in such a paradise! 'Flowers all the year round?' Unconsciously she had repeated the phrase that had so caught her fancy.

'But yes,' Alain nodded, 'every single month of the year. From January to March there are violets, jonquils and mimosa; during April, May and June, roses, and in June also we have the mignonette, pinks and golden broom. This month, the coast will be a riot of lavender, jasmine and tuberose, then in August, September and October we will have mint, geranium and acacia. Even at Christmas time all districts are turned into a sea of yellow when the cassia blooms, sending scent wafting for miles around.'

'Oh, stop!' Fleur laughingly admonished him. 'My mind simply cannot absorb any more! How fortunate you are to have such beauty to go back to, and how you must be dying to see it all again!'

She could have bitten out her tongue the moment the words were spoken, but it was too late. He made no physical movement, but instinctively she felt his withdrawal. Anxiously, her eyes searched his face, trying to probe behind the screen of dark glasses, but he betrayed nothing. His lithe, slim body seemed relaxed until she noticed his clenched fists, the knuckles standing out white against brown skin, betraying his tenseness. Full of remorse, she reached out and covered his fist with her hand. Earnestly, aware of his agony, she assured him,

'You will see again, Alain, I know you will! You mustn't allow despair to mar your chance of success, because it's vitally important that you are relaxed and in good spirits when Sir Frank operates next week.'

Her hand was rejected with hard fury as he hissed through clenched teeth, '*Mon Dieu! Don't humour me!* What do you know of operations? Haven't I endured six of them, six abortive, agonizing attempts to make me see again? *Don't worry,*' he mimicked, '*the scars around your eyes are healing nicely!* What do I care about scars when all I want is my sight I'

Fleur's breath caught in a hard sob. Willing herself to withstand the lash of his anger because of the relief he found in venting his frustrations upon herself, she fought desperately not to let his dejection take root in her own mind. She could not bear even to think what he might do if he were ever to be told there was no hope; that he was to be blind for the rest of his life.

Depression kept her silent as she gathered up the remains of their meal and repacked the basket. Alain had retreated once more into his shell of moody aloofness and nothing she might say would bring him out of it. She began praying inwardly that the following week would pass quickly. Physically, she was strong, but how much longer could her tortured spirit withstand the punishment she had elected to bear in order to help Alain Treville achieve his heart's desire?

CHAPTER THREE

THE operation was over. Jennifer had whisked into the waiting-room only minutes before to tell Fleur that Alain was being brought back to his room and that Sir Frank wanted to have a word with her. She was filled with foreboding. Had the operation been unsuccessful? Could it be that Sir Frank was going to ask her to break bad news?

She paced the floor in an agony of doubt as the minutes ticked by and Sir Frank did not appear. The operation had taken hours to perform and all the time she had waited, hoping her nearness would be in some way communicated to Alain that he might be comforted by it. But now she wanted to see him, to assure herself that he was not in pain.

The door opened and Sir Frank entered, his face drawn with fatigue. 'Ah, Miss Maynard, thank you for waiting, I did especially want to have a word with you I' As he pulled up a chair and waited for her to be seated she scanned his face and saw beneath the grey tiredness signs of very real worry. Her hands plucked nervously at her skirt as she waited for his next words.

'The corneal graft has been made on his right eye,' he told her gravely, 'and I intended within the next few days to do the left one. You realize, of course—as does Alain—that the operation has to be done in two parts?' When she nodded, he continued, 'After operating on the right eye I examined the left one very carefully....' She stiffened when his voice faltered into silence.

'And?' she urged.

He dropped into a seat before admitting reluctantly, 'I'm afraid the outlook is not very promising...'

'You mean the operation was not a success— that Alain will not regain his sight?'

He hesitated, searching for words to soften the blow. 'The left eye is the more badly injured of the two, but even so I had felt confident that it was not irreparably damaged. Today, however, I found signs of infection. We must reduce this infection before continuing and this will mean postponing the second operation until it is completely cleared up. That is why I asked to speak to you, my dear. You have worked such miracles with Alain these past few weeks that I wanted to be sure you'll be there when he needs you—as he surely will do when I tell him of my decision.'

As if through a fog Fleur heard his voice sounding the death-knell of Alain's hopes. Was it for this he had endured seven torturing operations? Would it not have been kinder to have left him altogether without hope than to inflict upon his volatile nature the see-saw of emotional strain which, more than anything else, was the cause of his moods of despair? Tearfully angry, she challenged Sir Frank, 'Why didn't you leave well alone? Why tantalize him with further promises that he might see when you know there's no hope?'

Gently, Sir Frank contradicted her. 'There is always hope, my dear. We doctors have to believe that or we would never operate. I'm as depressed as you are by this setback, but I implore you to believe that it *is* just a setback—and to help Alain to believe it too. In a year—even less— it will be possible for me to finish the operation, this time successfully, but I need you to help me convince Alain that things are not as hopeless as they might seem. Can I count on that help?'

'He'll never agree,' she answered through cold lips. 'With Alain it's a case of now or never, I'm certain of that.'

Sir Frank's shoulders sagged as if hearing what he feared put into words made the fact concrete. 'Then God help him and his family to endure the consequences! His mother is a very dear friend of mine, as was his late father, and I would have liked nothing better than to have succeeded in restoring their son's sight, but if what you say is true I shall never achieve that goal.'

His despondency was very moving. Fleur responded to it by promising tearfully, 'I'll do my very best to make him understand, Sir Frank, but if he refuses to listen please don't blame yourself. Later, when he's had time to overcome his disappointment, perhaps he'll consider trying again.'

He reached out to pat her hand. 'You're a sweet child, I'm not surprised my patient found com-

fort in your presence and I'm certain that if you were to be with him during the next very trying months you would be his salvation. However,' he sighed, 'as that cannot be we must hope he overcomes his bitter disappointment and manages to reach a sensible conclusion.'

Before she went home Fleur was allowed into Alain's room. Sir Frank had assured her that he would not regain consciousness for some hours and that when he did so he would need very careful nursing and therefore no visitors would be admitted. Her eyes were drawn immediately to his face that was etched darkly against the crisp smoothness of the pillows. His head was held firmly in position by supports placed on either side of it and his disturbing eyes were cloaked by a web of bandages. For once his long, sensitive fingers were at rest, no longer hovering over a sheathed rapier but resting lightly and unmoving against the white sheet—each finger outstretched as if, to her fevered imagination, out-thrust in pointing accusation.

She was present the morning Sir Frank chose to tell Alain the results of his findings. It was a week after the operation, Alain was no longer confined to bed but was sitting by the window, his, jewel-coloured dressing-gown accentuating his post-operative pallor. Against all orders he had parted the curtains slightly so that delicate rays B of the sunshine he loved so much played upon his raven-dark head and warmed his stern features with a honey-toned glint. With one irritable movement he conveyed his annoyance of the web of bandages still cloaking his eyes, and Fleur braced herself, when Sir Frank entered, for yet another rebellious argument that they should be removed.

Sir Frank, however, gave him no time to remonstrate. With a warning look towards Fleur, he strode up to Alain and delivered his own surprise attack with such hearty bonhomie that Fleur knew instinctively he was about to blunder.

'Well, Alain, I think it's time we had a little talk!'

Alain's nostrils flared with immediate antagonism. Fleur ached to tell him that nervous concern was the cause of Sir Frank's irritating tactics, but she was not given time to intervene.

'Indeed, yes.' Alain's voice was tipped with steel. 'By all means let us talk if doing so will mean an end to the play-acting I have had to endure this past week!'

'Play-acting... ?' Sir Frank was nonplussed, but Fleur was not entirely surprised when Alain's cold voice bit back,

'Do you think me such a fool I can't tell the difference between success and failure? Even if I did not have physical signs to guide me, your own excessive sympathy and the anxiety in your voice would have been ample warning! Added to that, I've had Fleur's pitiful attempts to console me in secret. Obviously she, too, is aware that the operation was a failure, because every nuance in her voice is known

to me and she has betrayed in a hundred different ways the heartfelt pity she is feeling!"

His savage resentment and acute perception rendered them both speechless. Hopelessly, with tear-filled eyes, Fleur appealed to Sir Frank, and when he gave a shrug of failure her breath caught in a half-strangled sob. Again, Alain demonstrated his amazing sensitivity by catching the barely audible sound and swinging savagely towards her.

'Don't shed tears for me, I will not tolerate pity I From now on I must resign myself to the life of a blind man—I must learn to read Braille and to walk with a white stick, I must also learn to tolerate pity and to accept expressions of sympathy from others, but not from you, Fleur— never from you I Always you must be honest with me, *do* you hear? If I were ever to discover that you had lied to me, then would be the day I should give up completely!"

Fleur found her voice. 'I wouldn't lie to you, Alain, and you must believe what I tell you now. Your case isn't hopeless! Sir Frank was trying to tell you that in another few months he'll be able to conclude the operation successfully. Only a small area of infection needs to be treated and after that all will be plain sailing. Please, Alain, listen to him, I beg of you I'

His answer was to reach up with a curse to pull., the offending bandages from his eyes. He threw them to the floor, then lifted his head high. 'Let that be the end of it!' he decreed with dreadful finality, his bitter disappointment blinding him to reason. 'I never wish to hear another word on the subject!"

* * *

Sir Frank and Fleur disregarded that wish many times during the following weeks, but Alain remained adamantly opposed to any

future operation. Finally, as he grew stronger and the time for his departure grew nearer, they had to concede defeat, although Fleur secretly cherished the hope that he might change his mind once he was back in his own surroundings; that the urge to see what he could now only sense would escalate within him. So, even though the outings they had had before his operation had recommenced and she was in his company almost every day, she gradually ceased to speak of it, because she had no wish to be hurt by the inward anger which seemed to be increasing as gradually as his returning strength.

During his convalescence he had become a frequent visitor to her home. He was now a firm favourite with her parents and he in return seemed to find pleasure and relaxation in their undemanding company. It was during one of these visits as they sat together in the garden soaking in the tranquillity of its rambling solitude, that he astounded her by asking casually, 'Fleur, will you marry me?'

He was lounging in a garden chair, negligently chewing a stalk of grass, when he tossed the startling question across to her, and although he must have sensed her amazed reaction he gave no sign of it.

'Wh ... what did you say?' she whispered, afraid to repeat his question in case she had imagined it.

Impatiently he sat up and threw away the piece of grass. 'I need you, Fleur, I can't face the thought of going back to France without you. Will you at least think about it?'

Her heartbeats quickened so much she felt the vibrations right through her body. She loved him so much she would happily have died for him, and yet he had sounded almost indifferent when he asked her to become his wife. Her lips parted, eager to tell him how much she loved him, but before the first happy words could escape he turned her heart to stone by continuing calmly,

It would be a marriage of convenience, of course. I would expect nothing more of you than I have received these past weeks—you have become my eyes, through you I can see again. I promise you,' he seemed presumptuously certain he would not be refused, 'that you, too, will benefit from the alliance.'

When the slow, hot tide of humiliation receded, she felt a gladness—a desperate shamed gladness—that he could not see the effect his words had had upon her. His cold, clinical offer of marriage was the greatest hurt she had ever suffered, her only comfort lay in the fact that he was completely unaware of the feelings she had for him. He had not moved, but sat with his head inclined slightly, in a listening attitude, trying to gauge her reaction, so she remained perfectly still until her mind was calm and her trembling body was controlled.

Sharply he questioned, 'Are you still there?'

The words underlined his need of her, a need far greater than he would admit, and her gentle heart flooded with compassion as it ignored his arbitrary demands and heeded only his subconscious cry for help.

'Yes, I'm here,' she answered, completely intent upon making her voice sound calm and unruffled.

He relaxed, a slight smile curving his lips. 'Good, I was afraid you hadn't heard. Well, what is your answer, Fleur, will you marry me and return with me to France?'

'Yes.' Her voice was a mere thread of sound, but he heard it and his smile widened, taking on a hint of cynicism.

'Thank you, I thought the idea would appeal to you.'

She had to strive hard to retain her composure, to remember how hurt and alone he was and, deep down, how very much afraid. For two years he had lived in hope; now all hope was gone and to face the future he needed to have an anchor, someone who understood all his needs but who would make no claim upon his dead emotions. She remembered Sir Frank's words: *I'm certain that if you were to be with him during the next very trying months you would be his salvation!* Perhaps she was being self-sacrificial, even criminally foolish, in allowing herself to be used in such a way, but he had asked, and her love was such she could refuse him nothing.

He, however, was under no illusions as to her motives. With one cynical black eyebrow raised, he drawled, 'You like the idea of becoming a *comtesse*?'

She looked blankly back at him, then remembering he could not see, she stammered foolishly, 'C ... *comtesse*?'

'Oh, come now,' he laughed unpleasantly, 'don't pretend you didn't know that as my wife you will become the Comtesse de Treville? My mother will then become the dowager Comtesse—and a very great relief it will be to her to hand over her duties. According to sentiments she has expressed often in the past, she is tired of organizing things at the chateau and your arrival will allow her more time for leisure.'

Fleur's bewilderment was complete. 'I simply don't understand you, Alain!' She appealed for an explanation. 'Are you telling me that *you* are the Comte de Treville and that you own a chateau? If that is so, then I could never accept your proposal—the very idea of becoming a *comtesse* terrifies me! Please say it's all a joke ... !'

'It's no joke, I assure you,' he stiffened with pride. 'Our title is one of the oldest in France and the Chateau des Fleurs was built by my ancestors in the twelfth century.'

She was appalled. 'But why didn't you tell me this before?' she gasped.

There was a small silence before he answered dryly. 'I thought you knew, it was no secret at the hospital. There were times,' he frowned at the memory, 'when some of the nurses forgot themselves far enough to call me the "*impossible Count*"—among other things,' he concluded.

Vaguely Fleur recollected a similar reference Jennifer had made. At that time she had thought it a pseudonym bestowed upon him by the nursing staff because of his arrogant manner, but now, too late, she realized the truth: he really was a count!

'Your father, also, was not unaware of the fact,' he continued pointedly. 'I told him myself days ago when I decided to ask you to become my wife. It would not have been *comme il faut* to have left your parents in any doubt of my ability to look after you.'

'Oh, Alain!' She had to smile at this piece of old-world courtesy, charming though it was. Although her life had been very secluded she was modern enough to appreciate that such practice had long fallen into disuse, and besides that, her father placed so little importance upon material things that he would never think to dwell upon that aspect of what Alain had told him. The knowledge he would seek from the man who wanted to marry his daughter would be whether or not she was loved, and Fleur doubted very much if the answer he would have received to that question would have left him satisfied.

Exercising his uncanny gift of knowing exactly what she was feeling, he sensed her bewilderment and attempted to divert her mind into different channels.

'Come, enough of this, you have accepted my proposal and I will not allow you to go back on your word. We must tell your parents what

we have decided, then begin making arrangements for our wedding. I intend that it shall take place here, in England, so that I can present you at the Chateau des Fleurs as my wife—the new Comtesse de Treville!"

This was decreed with such grim satisfaction that Fleur was immediately suspicious. With deep unease, she saw that he was smiling to himself, not a pleasant smile, rather the gloating, anticipatory smile of a man who has discovered a way to settle old scores. What little comfort she had found in the assumption that he had asked her to marry him because he needed her disappeared in an onrush of doubt. Who was waiting at the Chateau des Fleurs to receive the revenge Alain was planning? And why should it be necessary for him to take such a drastic step to secure such revenge? Her blood ran cold at the idea of being used as a weapon of spite. She loved Alain and however much she might deplore it she would always love him, but she was not blind to his faults. Bitter, intolerant, arrogantly immune from emotion, it was because he was all of these things that she did not refuse his proposal. Alain, Comte de Treville, was set *on* a crash course, heading for self-destruction, and she knew she could never desert him while there was even the faintest chance she might be able to help save him

CHAPTER FOUR

THREE weeks later they were married in the small village church where Fleur had been christened and which had since been the pivot of her existence. There was no long white dress, no fragrant bouquet, no virginal white veil to billow out behind her as she walked up the aisle towards her father, who was to conduct the service, and the dark-browed, complex man who was to be her husband. She wore a simple white suit with a matching hat and carried a small ivory-backed prayer book, but as she walked down the narrow aisle she noticed that the church was decorated with vase upon vase of sweet-smelling flowers, their colours splashing against the sombre oak-panelled walls with brave abandon. She had to smile as she recognized her mother's touch; this was her only act of unspoken rebellion against Alain's express wish that there should be no fuss. Firmly, he had quelled all her mother's enthusiastic plans to invite half the district to the ceremony, to rehearse the choir in specially chosen hymns, to engage a caterer from the nearby town—he had even managed to charm her into accepting that it was unnecessary for her daughter to wear a full bridal outfit when her future husband was unable to see. Fleur was deeply grateful to her parents for their unquestioning co-operation and for the way they had striven to hide their deep misgivings and fear for the future of their only child.

She made very little sound as she moved down the aisle on Sir Frank's arm, but she knew by the way Alain's head went up that he had heard her. He moved forward, seemingly completely at ease, and held out his hand. Any onlooker would have been amazed by his sureness of touch and calm command of all his actions, but the slight twitching of a nerve at the corner of his mouth betrayed to Fleur the agony of frustration he felt at his own limitations and she was not sorry she had forgone the customary ceremony in order to save him from a much more prolonged ordeal.

It was a short, simple service, and afterwards they went back to the vicarage for a meal. Jennifer, who together with Sir Frank had acted as witness, was the only one in high spirits, and her excited chatter carried them through what could have been a very subdued gathering. Although Alain was on edge, he managed to be charming to everyone, but when the time came for them both to leave for the airport he leant his head back against the seat of the car Sir Frank had obligingly put at their disposal and muttered thankfully: '*Mon Dieu*, I'm glad that is over, I could not have endured another minute!'

Fleur did not reply. Alone for the first time with the man who only a few hours earlier she had promised to love, honour and obey, she felt a stirring of blind panic. The heavy gold band that weighted her finger was a fetter binding her to him for a lifetime; in her desperation she could have torn it from her finger and flung it out of the window!

Perhaps the reason he began to chat so calmly was because he sensed her panic—his perception of her moods was her greatest wonder. 'Not long now until we are on our way to France,' he told her with unusual kindness. 'I think you will enjoy the flight. Did I remember to tell you we are going by executive jet?' She could only shake her head, but he carried on, 'When I telephoned my mother to tell her we would arrive home whenever flight times made it possible she told me of an offer our neighbours had made to put their plane at my disposal whenever I needed it.'

'Your neighbours have their own plane?' she choked out, not really interested but glad of any diversion to take her mind off present problems.

He laughed. 'Ah yes, but they are champagne people. They have a chateau near to ours which they occupy only a few months in the year. They have built an airstrip in their grounds so that they can reach the chateau in as short a time as possible, but the plane is really for business use and Monsieur Chesnaye, whose plane it is, finds it

invaluable for business trips, so it is not such a luxury as you might be imagining.'

'I see,' Fleur faltered, her mind boggling at the notion of owning a private jet. 'How convenient for him.' Alain lapsed into silence at her seeming sarcasm, his brooding look once more predominant, and made no more effort to entertain her.

A couple of hours later Fleur had her first taste of luxury. Sir Frank's chauffeur, who had been well instructed, saw them through the airport formalities, then handed them over to a young Frenchman who, he informed them, was the pilot of their plane. As he led the way across the tarmac Fleur could hardly believe the sleek, champagne-coloured aircraft could possibly be the property of just one man. Discreetly, a smart young hostess guided Alain towards the steps that had been lowered for the ascent, then she ushered them both into the cabin, the interior of which was unashamedly opulent. There was seating for eight people; soft padded chairs with headrests in pale green leather and a champagne-coloured carpet that flowed across the floor. Alain dropped into one of the seats with a sigh of relief and ordered the hostess: 'As soon as we are airborne fetch me a drink.'

'*Certainement, monsieur*' she replied. 'And what about Madame, would she like something?'

Madame! A shock of surprise kept Fleur silent as she assimilated the word, realizing for the first time how irretrievably far she had stepped into Alain's life. It was not the patiently waiting hostess who jolted her out of her preoccupation but Alain, his sharp, querying voice broke the silence with an insistence that called for a swift reply.

'Fleur! Why don't you answer?' It was the hidden call for reassurance of her presence that never failed to touch her and she answered from the heart.

'I'm here beside you, Alain where I'll always be.' The eyes behind the dark glasses were unreadable, but when he sat back in his seat she saw a slow smile curl his lips and at the sight of it the panic in her heart subsided.

As she, too, relaxed in her seat anxiety gave way to dawning excitement. This was her first flight, her first glimpse of a new world that seemed full of enchanting promise. All during the flight her eyes were fixed firmly upon the round window through which she watched England's coastline disappear gradually from sight until they were left suspended between motionless sky and heaving ocean. Disappointingly, because she was so looking forward to her first glimpse of France, thickening cloud began to obscure her view and for a long while she saw nothing of what lay beneath the speeding plane.

When the young hostess served them with a delicious meal she told Fleur, whose enormous eyes and flushed cheeks were ample evidence that this was her first trip, that they were now over the Mediterranean coast and as the cloud was expected to lift she would soon have her first sight of the country's most beautiful scenery. Alain contributed nothing to the conversation, but sat in morose silence, eating hardly at all and barely tasting the champagne contained in the goblet he was twisting restlessly between his long sensitive fingers. Each mile they travelled he became more and more tense until, when the pilot's voice announced over the intercom: 'We are now preparing to land, Monsieur le Comte,' his grip tightened with such tensile strength around the stem of the goblet it shattered in his hand.

'Alain! Have you cut yourself?' Fleur leant across to see for herself what damage had been done, but he swiftly dropped the offending glass and pushed his clenched fist deep into his pocket.

'It is nothing/ he bit out, his face bloodless but with sweat beading his brow. 'Please don't fuss!' She had no time to argue before the young

hostess arrived to make sure their safety belts were fastened correctly, but her heart zoomed as swiftly low as the plane that was taking them so rapidly down to earth.

Her depression was so complete that she took little notice of the grand mansion in whose grounds the plane landed. She saw its tall superstructure in the distance and thought vaguely that the owners must surely be people of substance, but then she was being helped with Alain into the back of a sumptuous limousine and driven swiftly through an unfamiliar and unbelievably beautiful landscape such as she had previously seen only in vivid technicolor films and which, even then, she had been hardly able to digest.

To her left were mountains, far away but visibly snow-capped, and to her right blue sea flashed quickly into vision, then was as swiftly gone, like the, coy glance of a blue-eyed coquette flirtatiously displayed for a second, then withdrawn so that one would be bound to be interested. The road wound through hills covered with thyme, rosemary, marjoram and broom, doubly attractive in their wild, uncultivated state. Small houses were sunk deep up to their roofs in pinewoods and interesting little streams meandered down into valleys lush with semi-tropical vegetation. And the smell—the overall sweetness of individual scents blending harmoniously together created a symphony of fragrance mere mortals could never hope to record nor manufacture. It was an Eden—a place where a chance breeze rippling restlessly through the aromatic petals could transport one unexpectedly into Paradise. Every now and again they passed handsome, unobtrusive villas standing well back in spacious gardens filled with exotic flowers and sheltering palm trees, and all around tall cypress trees stood straight as sentinels against the hot blue sky.

She longed to exclaim with wonder as each fresh aspect of beauty appeared in view, but Alain's frowning countenance discouraged such exuberance, so she sat silent, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, absorbing it all in solitary wonder.

When the car slowed down to turn into a drive flanked by massive stone pillars supporting huge wrought-iron gates, she was jolted into reality with a suddenness that caused her heart to spiral with alarm. Could this possibly be Alain's home? The towering edifice she saw in the distance reminded her of a feudal castle. Centuries of time had mellowed its thick stone walls to a warm shade of honey, but this in no way detracted from its grandeur. The rectangular, central part of the chateau was flanked by four corner towers connected by a sentry walk and in her bemused state she would not have been surprised to see uniformed guardsmen ready to present arms or to hear a ten-gun salute booming from the battlements. As they drew nearer she saw a crowd of people grouped in the main courtyard and, incredibly, the last few yards of driveway were flanked by men each holding a French horn. Even as she watched, the car was sighted and, as if at a given signal, the men raised the horns to their lips and blew a triumphant blast to welcome their Comte and his new bride. It was all so overwhelmingly feudal that Fleur felt she had been transported back into the twelfth century. No need to wonder now at the out-of-date attitudes Alain was wont to adopt; his unconscious arrogance and proud refusal to have his word questioned stemmed not from conceit but were the natural outcome of his upbringing and came as naturally to him as breathing. Here, deep in the heart of Provence, the French aristocracy were still revered and respected masters of all they surveyed.

The sound of the horns brought Alain erect, his jaw tightening as he battled for control before facing the coming ordeal. He had not been home for two years, all the time he had been in hospital he had vowed never to return until he had regained his sight, but now that proud vow had had to be discarded. Fleur's heart ached with pity for him, but she had been too much hurt in the past to risk communicating her feelings, so she subdued her own trepidation and spoke calmly.

'What a welcome, Alain! It must be very gratifying to know so many people are anxious to have you home again.' She spotted a group of

people standing a little apart at the top of the flight of stone steps leading to the chateau's main entrance. 'I think I see your mother waiting, too. How excited she looks 1'

'Who is with her?' When he grated out the question her eyes flew back to the group. Beside the slender figure of an old lady stood a young girl and a step or two behind her was a slimly built man who looked a few years younger than Alain. She was just about to pass on this information when the car slid quietly to a standstill and the chauffeur jumped down to help them out.

A full-throated roar of approval rose from the waiting crowds as she and Alain stepped from the car. Unobtrusively, she slipped her hand under his arm to guide him towards the house and to her surprise he accepted the gesture without a frown, willing for once to put up with interference rather than humble himself by stumbling in front of the watching eyes.

Chattering like excited magpies the crowd surged forward, women and girls nearly all of them dressed in black with kerchiefs protecting their heads from the sun; small boys, brown-limbed and cheeky-faced, holding on to their fathers' hands, and older men with their berets doffed in respectful homage to the young Comte they obviously all adored.

The first genuinely happy smile Fleur had ever seen from him creased Alain's face as he returned their greetings, answering by name the owner of each voice as if he were able to see and recognize all those who spoke to him. One very old lady pushed her way to the front of the crowd and grabbed hold of his sleeve as he passed. With tears streaming down her wrinkled brown face she clung to him and sobbed: *'Ah, mon pauvre petit Alain, si pitoyable!'*

Fleur's French was rusty, but the sentiment was unmistakable and she blanched inwardly, waiting for a storm to break over the old woman's

head. But Alain reached out to find the old woman's hand and when it was clasped tightly in his own he answered gently, '*Merci, Maman Rouge, pour votre sympathies*' before disengaging himself and walking swiftly on.

Fleur was choking back unshed tears when they reached the bottom of the steps where his family were gathered. Luckily, before she needed to instruct him on the ascent, the solitary man detached himself from the family group and bounded down the steps to give assistance.

'Welcome home, Alain, you have been far too long away!' he greeted him as he grasped his elbow to guide him up the stairs.

The smile faded from Alain's lips at the sound of his voice and his astringent answer left no one in &ny doubt of his displeasure. 'One would hardly expect the mouse to rejoice at the absence of the cat, Louis. Can it be that you welcome the curtailment of your pleasures, or are you perhaps hoping that my wits have been dulled as well as my sight?'

Fleur gasped, and the young man reddened under his tan. 'Come now, Alain, is that the way to return a cousin's greeting?' He bowed to Fleur, missing nothing of her wide-eyed distress and the droop of her soft, vulnerable mouth. He frowned for a second, then with a very Gallic shrug he shed his discomfiture and twinkled, 'Your wife is looking quite shocked, Alain. Please reassure her that I am not such a villain as your words suggest, for I swear she is ready to take flight!'

Alain's frown deepened and his tone was dry when he introduced her. 'Fleur, this is my cousin Louis. If you are wise you will disregard every word he says, because although he is in some ways harmless—without malice, temper or sense—he has no scruples whatsoever about idling away his time and then lying to the teeth to defend his actions,' he finished contemptuously.

Fleur's sympathetic eyes met the unrepentant Louis', but she looked quickly away after a brief nod, too embarrassed to return his impish smile. It was a relief when they reached the top of the steps and Alain's mother. She was standing quite still, watching with painful intensity each step he took, silently urging him not to stumble as he made his way towards her. Fleur was sure that if it had not been for the watching crowd she would have discarded the dignity she wore with the air of a queen and rushed to enfold him in her arms, but as it was she restrained her natural impulses and behaved in the way expected of the dowager Comtesse. Fleur suffered a chill of fear at the thought of this same aristocratic behaviour being expected of herself: she knew she was totally incapable of shouldering such a demanding burden. She dared not think what the immaculately dressed and coiffured old lady was thinking of her own unsophisticated manner and indifferent dress. Clothes interested her because she liked nice things, but there had never been sufficient money at the vicarage to allow her to indulge in luxuries and she had seen so much of other people's miseries, brought about through lack of money; she had considered herself fortunate in having enough to fulfil her everyday needs.

'My dear, dear boy I' As his mother moved towards him Alain reached out to enfold her slight figure in his arms and for a moment they stood close together in silent communication. After a few moving seconds he put her away from him and turned his head in search of Fleur. 'Maman,' he said when Fleur reacted instantly to his gesture by moving to his side and slipping her cold hand into his, 'you must be anxious to meet your daughter-in-law.' Then, opposing Fleur's shyness by drawing her further forward, he said simply, 'Fleur, this is my mother. I hope you'll come to love her as much as I do.'

The moment was poignant with feeling, but even so through her rioting senses Fleur heard the sharp angry gasp that came from the girl waiting to welcome Alain. It was evident that he had heard it too,

when his easy assurance dropped from him like a cloak and he swung round towards the sound with a sharp intake of breath, his screen of dark glasses hiding whatever message was betrayed in his eyes.

Fleur could never afterwards remember what she said to his mother, or what his mother said in return. She knew she was welcomed warmly, with tender tearfulness, and she registered the fact that the old Comtesse would be easy to love, but her whole being was centred upon the meeting between Alain and the girl whose unspoken presence had had such an uncanny effect upon him. Her beauty was so incredibly perfect that Fleur blinked. She was as dark-haired as Alain, but her skin was the soft matt whiteness of a magnolia blossom. Brilliant red lipstick coloured velvet-soft pouting lips so that the eye was immediately drawn to admire their faultless outline, and her petite, voluptuously rounded figure was dressed to perfection in a white dress so superior in style and cut it loudly proclaimed itself a product of one of the most exclusive fashion houses of Paris. She stared at Alain, not bothering to hide her angry dismay at the news she had obviously heard for the first time from his own lips, and as the silence lengthened her large brown eyes clouded with temper and mortification.

'Is that Celestine?' Fleur went rigid when she recognized sharp malice in Alain's voice, sensing that one of the many questions seething in her brain was about to be answered. She was even more convinced of it when he went on to emphasize with cruel pleasure.

'Celestine, I would like to introduce you to my wife—*the new Comtesse de Treville!*'

This, then, was the moment for which Alain had been waiting! For some reason this girl was the instigator of his determined, cold-blooded thirst for revenge!

CHAPTER FIVE

FLEUR stood contemplating an enormous built-in wardrobe that spanned the width of one bedroom wall. She had just hung up the last of her dresses, but even though she had spaced them out as much as possible the great empty void that remained emphasized the sparsity of her belongings. She shrugged, and closed the door, determining at the same time to shut from her mind the worrying thoughts that clamoured for admittance: thoughts about her own simple background and her inability to cope with the totally unexpected magnificence now surrounding her, thoughts about Alain's disturbing family, his friendly but aristocratic mother, his charmingly inconsequential cousin and lastly his friend, the beautiful Celestine Chesnaye who had made a tremendous effort to overcome her chagrin when she was introduced to the new Comtesse de Treville, but whose brilliant, angry eyes had belied the courteous words she had been forced to utter.

Fleur shivered at the memory. They were all to dine together that evening and although she had welcomed the Comtesse's suggestion that she might like to rest before dinner, she knew her too-active mind would not allow her to . do so. She wandered across yards of rose-patterned carpet towards the window, turning her back upon the sumptuous furnishings, endeavouring to recover her sense of proportion by gazing out upon the simplicity of nature. But outside, as within, the outlook was so lavishly profuse that she felt satiated, and a longing for home and for the sight of a cool English meadow overwhelmed her. Two crystal tears were on the brink of falling when a gentle knock sounded on the door. Hastily, she wiped her hand across her eyes before calling out: '*Entrez!*'

She was expecting a maid to appear and was disconcerted when the door opened to admit the tiny regal figure of Alain's mother.

'Comtesse! I didn't realize it was you...' She blushed like a schoolgirl caught out in some misdemeanour, then in a nervous rush she remembered her manners. 'Please,' she pulled forward a chair, 'won't you sit down?'

The Comtesse smiled graciously and accepted the proffered chair. Sitting straight-backed, in a grey lace gown with gems sparkling from a brooch pinned to her breast and from numerous rings upon her fingers, she epitomized the luxury which already had begun to affect Fleur with a sense of inferiority—causing her nervousness to increase.

'Sit down, child,' the Comtesse demanded kindly, 'we have many things to discuss. I am fully aware of the strain you are undergoing, and, knowing such a strain would prevent you from sleeping, I thought this a propitious time for us to talk. Do you mind, my dear, or would you rather I left you to rest?'

'Oh no,' Fleur assured her earnestly, eager to get to know her better, 'you- are most welcome, Comtesse I'

'Then to start with,' she leant forward to pat her hand, 'we shall have to agree upon what you are to call me. You are the Comtesse de Treville now, and must be addressed as such, whereas I am now the dowager Comtesse.' She seemed not one whit disturbed by this fact,, but seemed to hesitate before voicing her next request. 'If the idea does not offend you, my dear, I would like you to call me Maman as Alain does...'

Fleur's eyes widened with surprise, not at the request, but at the diffidence in the old lady's voice. She was shy! The regal old aristocrat was as afraid as any other new mother-in-law might be that she would be rebuffed. Fleur slid from her chair to kneel at her feet. Fighting tears of loneliness, she looked up into her face and told her simply, 'How nice of you, Maman, to do me. such an honour.'

For a moment the Comtesse looked as if she were about to break down, but her shaking mouth was pulled sternly into order when years of self-discipline came to her aid.

'You know,' she said shakily, 'I find many pleasing omens surrounding your arrival here as Alain's bride. For instance, has it not occurred to you how appropriately you are named?'

Fleur caught her meaning. 'Because my name is Fleur and this is the Chateau des Fleurs?'

she smiled. 'Yes, it certainly is an odd coincidence.'

'And also,' the Comtesse's hands were shaking, 'today it is two years exactly since Alain's accident. How very upsetting my dear boy would have found his homecoming if he had not had you by his side to comfort him.'

Fleur's smile faded. Alain truly was a solitary man. It hurt to discover how little he allowed her to know about himself, how thoroughly he excluded her from sharing his troubles. There was no doubt in her mind now that he intended she should remain ignorant of all past events, but there were questions she had to have answered if she was not to be thought unfeeling by his family and friends who would expect her to be informed of all the facts.

'How ... how did the accident happen, Maman?' she forced herself to ask.

The Comtesse flinched, but Fleur's anxious expression, the pain darkening her blue eyes to violet, showed plainly that the answer to the question was important to her and so, slowly mastering her distress, she answered, 'No one knows to this day what really happened. Alain was working at the distillery, experimenting with some new fragrance he had evolved and which he had become quite

excited about.' She checked before continuing to make sure Fleur understood, then, when she saw her look of bewilderment, she elaborated, 'Our family have been in the perfume business for centuries, my dear—surely you've heard of Maison Treville perfumes, it is our trade name?'Fleur remembered a tiny phial of the extravagantly expensive perfume she had received as a Christmas present from Jennifer one year. She had treasured it to the last drop and even afterwards the empty bottle had lain in a drawer so that the last whiff of scent could add fragrance to her handkerchiefs. 'But certainly,' she agreed, 'everyone has heard of Maison Treville!'

The Comtesse gave a pleased nod. 'We are well known but not, I think, without just cause. Alain is an expert on perfume, he has had years of training and a lifetime of familiarity with" the industry, of course, but then so has Louis and he is not half so good at his job. Alain has something extra, an abnormally keen sense of smell that enables him to detect the finest shade of odours and to identify every ingredient used to make the particular perfume he is dissecting. But his real art and skill lies in his ability to blend various scents and essences to produce new and exciting perfumes, so perfectly balanced and combined that even the greatest expert—and we have many amongst our neighbours—find it very difficult to detect the ingredients of which they are composed. Yes,' she sighed, 'the industry had certainly missed Alain these past two years. Louis, I'm afraid, simply does not have that, extra bit of magic that is the mark of genius. Not that he does not try,' she was quick to defend her own note of censure, 'it is simply that he is still a boy at heart and would much rather seek his pleasures outside of the business. Once,' she spoke as if to herself, 'Alain, too, was as carefree...' She broke off, shook herself free of some unhappy memory and then continued, firmly, 'You must let Louis take you around the works. Fleur. I'm sure you will be fascinated, he can be a most entertaining companion.'

'I'm sure of that, Maman,' Fleur agreed, reluctant to be forced into Louis' company in case she should incur Alain's displeasure, but unable to find sufficient excuse to refuse. 'Perhaps some day...'

'Nonsense!' The Comtesse seemed determined. 'You shall go tomorrow, I'll arrange it with Louis myself.'

Gently Fleur reminded her, 'You were about to tell me about Alain's accident...' But the Comtesse was either too tired or she found the subject too painful. With a small shrug she dismissed it. 'There is very little to add. One of the workmen rushed up to the chateau with the news that Alain's eyes had been splashed with acid while he worked in his laboratory—the acid is used to clear the utensils of all smell so that future experiments are not ruined by contamination from a previous one. Even Celestine, who was with him at the time, can give us no clear idea of what happened, and as for Alain—he has always refused to speak of it.'

Fleur's warning hackles rose at these last words,' but before she could question further the Comtesse stood up to make her departure.

'We will talk again soon,' she told her fondly, 'but now I must go if I am not to be overtired before evening.' She turned to walk towards the door, then hesitated. 'Fleur, *ma petite*, I really came to tell you how very pleased I am that you accepted Alain. Life for you might become ... difficult ... he can be very trying at times, but please never have any doubts that you have done the right thing. However unkind he might be, however hurtful or secretive, there is no doubting that you are essential to his happiness—and he to yours. Please accept a mother's blessing and gratitude.'

Long after she had left Fleur pondered upon her words. Without being disloyal, she had managed to convey her sympathy and the bewilderment she felt at the change in her son. Fleur did not find it hard to believe Alain had once been a devil-may-care rip. who could

have caused his mother some anxious moments. Had she not recognized at first sight of him the cavalier streak that ran through his blood, the swashbuckling, debonair attitude which to a woman meant excitement, racing ^pulses and a dangerous attraction? She put her hand to her throat where a pulse was throbbing rapidly. Alain could be like that again, she was certain, if only he could rid himself of the black depression that bedevilled him, but if he did would he look to her, the simple daughter of a country parson, to share his excitement or would his thoughts be more likely to turn towards Celestine who would make a fitting mate for his tempestuous wooing? Suddenly she felt suffocatingly hot. She decided she needed a cooling shower before going downstairs for dinner.

Alain and she were sharing a suite; she was in the main bedroom and he was in a smaller room with a connecting bathroom which they were obviously meant to share. There was no sound from his room as she turned on the tap and stepped under the glass-enclosed shower to enjoy the sensation of needle-sharp jets of water splashing against her skin. It was so invigorating that she prolonged her enjoyment of it until she began to feel numb with cold, then, rather than turn on the hot tap, she groped for a towel and began to rub herself vigorously to get rid of the chill. She was so engrossed that she failed to hear the door open and was only aware of Alain's presence when she looked up and saw him dressed in a bathrobe, walking slowly forward in the direction of the shower. Her hand flew to her mouth to smother a gasp, but she was not quick enough and his head jerked upright when he heard the small sound.

'Who's there?' he jerked out.

She could not answer, searing embarrassment rendered her dumb so that even though she knew he could not see her she was incapable of replying.

'Answer me, damn you!' He made an angry move forward, but caught his shin on a stray stool and would have overbalanced if she had not instinctively ran forward to catch him. He caught hold of her shoulder and with one inflammatory touch made her vividly aware that she was no longer a girl, a shy dreamer, but a woman with a husband whose touch was fire.

'Fleur!' He spoke her name in a low hiss and for a moment seemed ready to push her angrily away.

'I'm sorry, Alain,' she stuttered, crimson with distress and trying terribly hard to remember that the dark eyes blazing down at her really could not see. 'I tried, but I couldn't turn the key in your lock, I think it must be jammed...'

When she became conscious of his sudden stillness her voice trailed into silence. He still held her, and gradually, almost imperceptibly, his grasp was tightening. In his eyes, no longer hidden by smoked glasses, a tiny flame was kindling deep, deep down, and his mouth had broken from its grim lines to pucker at the corners with the beginning of a vagrant smile. Slowly he drew her forward until his breath was fanning the damp strands of hair at her temples, curling them into fine baby tendrils. His voice, whimsically teasing, was startling, coming as it did from a man who was a stranger to tenderness.

'Louis tells me you are beautiful, a lovely English rose, was his description...' She trembled under his touch, his closeness rendering her incapable of response. 'Do you mind if I find out for myself?' his tormenting continued. 'I'm at a decided disadvantage in being unable to picture a wife whose beauty, according to Louis, will make me the envy of my friends!'

She did not flinch when his hands reached out to touch her face. Lightly, his fingers traced across her" smooth brow and hesitated

momentarily against her wide sweep of eyelashes before continuing down the contours of her cheeks. 'Candid blue eyes as large and soft as purple pansies,' he murmured, repeating Louis' description. 'Hair so heavy with gold dust that specks have fallen to gild the tip of thick dark lashes. And lips,' his fingertips scorched her mouth, 'miniature petals of pink velvet.'

He raised his head at last, and she struggled with mixed feelings of alarm and excitement. She felt strangely stirred as his hands moved gently over her face, cupping her chin to kiss her again, softly, before moving down her neck and over her shoulders. The towel began to slip, and desperately Fleur pulled it more closely round her—but the movement had the opposite effect to what she had intended, and with a sharp intake of breath Alain pulled her against him, his arms closed round her and his lips met hers in a long, demanding kiss that contained all the frustration built up inside him during two long years of abstinence. Fleur responded with all her loving heart to the need she sensed within him, the need that only she at this moment could fill—though even through the sensation of drowning that filled her, a tiny part of her knew that she was being made a substitute for someone and that the longing he was demonstrating was not for her but for some shadowy person belonging to his past. But as the kiss progressed she was swept past the point of caring. He was her husband, he was here with her. With all her heart and soul she loved him and these few moments would be hers, and hers only, for ever. The past could take care of itself. The present was all that mattered.

Just when it seemed they would drown together in the depths of passion, he pushed her away. Breathing heavily and with his jaw tightly clamped, he jerked out, 'I'm sorry, terribly sorry, that should never have happened 1' His fists clenched and unclenched as he fought for control. 'I can offer no excuse for my behaviour,' he clamped out. 'I'm no celibate, I like the company of women and for two years it has been denied me, but that in no way absolves me from

blame. My actions were despicable! Fleur,' she was shocked to see how white his face had become, 'will you please forgive me?'

'Don't be sorry, Alain,' she moved to put her arms around him once more, but he fastened her wrists in a vice-like grip and refused to let go. 'Alain!' her cry held a world of bewilderment. 'There's no need for you to apologize. After all, I am your wife!'

The coldness of his answer strangled every hope she had cherished. 'I married you for a purpose, but not for that purpose! I need you beside me, but, *mon Dieu*, even I do not understand why!' He spat out the words as if confounded by his own illogicality. 'I'm beginning to realize that I cheated you by allowing you to marry half a man, but-at the time when I asked you I thought I was doing you a service.'

'Doing me a service?' she queried, suddenly cold.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then, obviously labouring under acute embarrassment, he admitted, 'I owe you complete honesty, you have always been honest with me and I must not do you less than justice in this respect.'

She stiffened, realizing that she was about to hear something upsetting. Almost subconsciously she noted the way his hands were clasping and unclasping—a sure sign of unease—and that his hair, usually strictly controlled, was rioting over his head in unruly confusion as a result of her having run her fingers through its dark mass. She forced her mind back to what he was saying. It began almost like an awkward confession.

'For various reasons, one of which you already know, I needed a wife, and you seemed an ideal choice. When I proposed marriage I was under the impression that you were a *celibataire*,' she went rigid with surprise, 'a middle-aged spinster stuck in the middle of nowhere, at the beck and call of her father and with no hope of ever escaping the

rut she had been forced to occupy.' He held up his hand for silence when his quick ears caught the sound of her incredulous gasp and continued grimly, 'No one thought to mention that you were a young and lovely girl who could probably have had the choice of half a dozen men—not, that is, until Louis told me, and by then it was too late. I thought you owed your shyness and honesty to a strict upbringing. Had I known that youth was the major factor I would never have taken advantage of you as I did. To me, you were a good companion, an unassuming, undemanding person with whom I could be myself and with whom I never needed to act a part. Believe me, I was astonished and most upset when Louis described you to me. In fact, I thought he was playing out another of his stupid jokes; and that is the reason I acted as I did just now. I *had* to know!'

Her mouth was so stiff she could hardly manage to speak, but she finally managed a harsh, dry laugh before charging him, 'If you really thought me a middle-aged spinster—no doubt with thick ankles and wearing tweeds—why did you want to marry me? *Why?*' she stressed bitterly.

Through a haze of tears she saw him shrug. 'Call me a coward if you like, but all I wanted was someone to lean on—someone to protect me from the cloying sympathy I knew -I could expect when I arrived here. I also needed eyes, eyes that could see and describe to me in detail what I need to know, and someone who, without prevarication, would speak the truth to me always. I wanted that, Fleur, and I still do, but I now realize that the luxury and the unlimited money winch are all I can offer in return don't mean half so much to you as they would have to the person I thought you were.' His forehead wrinkled into a puzzled frown. 'I simply don't understand why you agreed to my proposal. What possible reason could you have had for tying yourself to a blind man?'

Her heart took a frightened leap. He must never know of the foolish dreams she had woven around his unsuspecting head. Better by far

that he Should suspect her of mercenary motives than that he should guess the extent of her foolishness. Fighting to subdue the traitorous bottom lip that was quivering so uncontrollably it would betray her terrible hurt, she answered stonily,

'Perhaps you were not so very wrong in your judgement of me. Gillingham is a dead hole and I often longed to get away from it; I was hardly likely to ignore any offer of escape. So you've really no need to condemn yourself or your actions, Alain. You bought me, but I was willing to be bought, and only time will tell which one of us will get the better of the bargain. Let's leave it at that, shall we?'

His proud nostrils flared. He seemed so taken aback he could find no words to answer her flippancy. For a second he looked ready to protest, to point out the glaring flaws in her argument, but then his lips twisted into his usual mockery of a smile and the light faded from his eyes, leaving them dark with fathomless thoughts. Sketching a quick salute, he turned on his heel and left her, cold and shaking, to cry out her heart in the empty room.

CHAPTER SIX

THERE is a peak of suffering which, once reached, results in a blessed state of numbness. When Fleur had gone over each of Alain's brutal statements and forced herself ruthlessly to accept that she had meant so little to him that he had not stopped even to wonder about her looks or to consider her innermost feelings, she reached that peak and her resultant numbness carried her over what, in other circumstances, might have been a difficult evening.

After leaving the bathroom she had sat on the edge of her bed and willed herself to think things out, to decide upon a course of action that would do the least harm to everyone concerned. She had rejected immediately the idea of returning home to England; she was determined that her parents should not be subjected to more worry on her account. The yearning to go, to pour out her troubles into their receptive ears, was almost overwhelming, but she was too concerned for their peace of mind ever to burden them with her troubles even though she knew she could count on their wholehearted support.

And the old Comtesse—she, too, must never learn the extent of the breach between her son and his new bride. Alain had been most emphatic on this point when the question of sharing a suite had arisen. He had apologized, but explained that his mother was so ecstatically happy about his marriage that he wanted no flaw to mar that happiness. She had agreed to his request that they put on an act whenever his mother was in their vicinity and so, for the Comtesse's sake, she must keep her word even if it meant remaining at the chateau indefinitely or, at least, for as long as Alain decreed that it was necessary. However hard she sought she could reach no other conclusion, and so the decision had been taken. One thing she resolved, however, and that was that Alain would no longer find her subservient to his every whim, nor passively accepting his every brutal word without protest. She, too, had a life to live and,

unpleasant though the future promised to be, he must not be allowed to make it unbearable.

She dressed for dinner and when she was ready made her way reluctantly downstairs to meet the challenge of her new environment. Once outside her room her steps faltered; the sheer size and magnificence of it all was frightening. Wide-eyed, she took in the tremendous sweep of wood panelling that stretched high above her head until it reached a huge domed ceiling where cherubs with round cheeks and plump little bodies garlanded with flowers were painted so perfectly that she felt an impulse to reach up and cuddle them. Long slender windows let in the light, throwing into relief panels- so richly and fancifully carved they could have been the work of a metal-beater or silversmith, but in wood. Delicate statuary was positioned here and there in niches along the walls and ironwork as ethereal as a cobweb shawl supported the banister of a wide marble staircase that swept down to the great hall and merged into rose and white blocks of marble that made patterns of colour on the floor. Numerous doors lined the walls of the hall and seeing one slightly ajar, she hurried over to it, anxious to be rid of the feeling of awe that threatened to demoralize her completely.

But once inside there was no respite from her fears. The room she entered was a library in which thousands of colourful leather-bound books were ranged from floor to ceiling. Mobile steps to enable a searcher to reach the uppermost row ~ beckoned enticingly and in another few seconds she might have succumbed to the temptation were it not for the voice that sounded startlingly close to her ear.

'Ah, *la belle* Fleur I How pleased I am that you decided to come down a little early. We can now proceed to become acquainted.'

At the sight of her startled reaction Louis grinned apologetically. 'I'm sorry if I made you jump. Come, let me pour you a drink to make up for my lack of consideration.'

She, had to return his cheeky smile. However small an opinion Alain might have of him she could not resist the spontaneous charm of her new cousin.

'Thank you,' she accepted, 'that will be very nice.'

He moved towards a table stocked with an assortment of bottles. 'Will Pernod do?'

'Yes, anything,' she replied, nervous of admitting that she had no idea to what she was being committed.

As he sauntered across with her drink he appraised her lazily. In her simple blue gown— painstakingly cut out and stitched together by herself and her mother—she represented an intriguing novelty to the blasé, sophisticated young man who for years had flirted mildly and often dangerously with most of the women contained within his circle of rich friends. He was suddenly aware, as his glance lingered on her tremulous mouth and caught the nervous-fawn expression in her lovely eyes, how bored he had become by orchids and how much more interesting he might find the natural beauty of an English country flower. Hothouse plants, though delicately lovely, were inclined to wilt, but Fleur's fresh, natural appeal lacked neither character nor stamina...

She sipped her drink—its aniseed flavour was not much to her liking—and wondered when the rest of the family would appear. Louis' bold eyes were not disconcerting her half so much as he hoped, but she was on edge at the thought of another meeting with Celestine, who she knew was to dine with them that evening.

With a perception as acute as Alain's, he drawled, 'Celestine will be busy making herself look as stunning as possible. She is not slow to recognize a challenge to her so far undisputed claim to being the district's greatest female attraction. Even though,' he breathed his

next words into his glass as he tossed back his drink, 'the object of her efforts is quite unable to appreciate them...'

With a dignity that earned his quick respect, she looked him straight in the eye and stated quietly, 'You mean Alain, don't you? Why do you hint? If there is something I should know why don't you just tell me outright?'

He was taken aback by her honest simplicity and for a second he felt an uncharacteristic twinge of shame. But he quickly recovered and shrugged, a very Gallic shrug. 'Everyone around here knows Alain and Celestine were to have been married, so it's just as well that you, too, should know.' He shifted uncomfortably when he saw her bite her lip, then hastened to assure her, 'You need not feel upset, it was all over two years ago. Celestine broke off the engagement shortly after Alain had his accident. He was in hospital at the time and we all thought her action pretty mean, in fact, I don't think Maman has forgiven her even yet, but he never allows us to guess his feelings and he would never afterwards speak of Celestine. That is why I was so astonished by his actions today. We tried to persuade her to leave before you and Alain arrived, but she insisted upon staying to welcome him. She thought, of course, that he would be arriving alone because Maman, who, as I've already stated, does not feel at all disposed to be friendly, made me promise not to mention a word to her about the wedding. I think,' he smiled wickedly, 'spiteful little puss that she is, she was enjoying the prospect of seeing Celestine's humiliation when she heard the news.'

Fleur did not return his smile. 'Am I to surmise then that she was intending to try to make up her quarrel with Alain?'

His brow wrinkled. 'No one ever quite knows what Celestine is intending. We have seen very little of her here at the chateau during the past two years. I suspect she may have heard of the possible success of his last operation, then laid her plans accordingly. She

arrived here a week ago, full of helpful suggestions for getting Alain back home—it was she who arranged for her father's plane to fly him back, did you know?' When she nodded briefly he continued, 'It must have been as great a shock to her as it was to us to learn of the failure of the operation. I can only hazard a guess that the reason she stayed on here today had its basis in curiosity, and the shock of seeing you and learning of your marriage must have made her resolve to stay on. Why, I cannot imagine, unless it is that she regards Alain as her own personal property and that, even though she herself would never countenance being tied to a blind man, she resents the fact that he is now your husband.' He frowned, and concluded with uncharacteristic seriousness, 'I should be very wary of her, if I were you, Fleur, she can be a dangerous enemy and, spoilt brat that she is, she won't hesitate to try to make you pay for any imaginary wrongs.'

She blanched. Louis' words had created within her an ache which, added to the pain already inflicted by Alain, was threatening to break her gallant spirit completely. Louis had not spared her, but she did not blame him, because at last she had been made aware of the motive behind Alain's actions. It was Celestine he had wanted to hurt; she who had motivated the spite that had driven him into marriage with herself so that he could revenge the rejection he must have felt so deeply. She could have cried when she thought of the cruel blow Celestine had dealt him, a blow that would have been hurtful at any time but which, coming as it had at a time when he needed her most, must have been savage in its intensity. She went so white that Louis became alarmed. Cursing himself for his abruptness, he reached out to clutch her as she swayed and she was glad to rest against him for a second to marshall her swimming senses.

'Well, well!' As Celestine appeared in the doorway with Alain a couple of paces behind her she voiced the words with malicious enjoyment. 'So you are up to your usual tricks, Louis! You have never been slow to make acquaintance with any reasonably good-looking woman, but this time you have excelled yourself. You would feel

quite touched, Alain, if you could observe how well Fleur and Louis have taken to one another!'

Fleur's cheeks flamed as she jerked from the circle of Louis' arms. She had eyes only for Alain and her heart sank when she saw a great flood of anger darken his face. As he was standing in the semi-darkness of the hall only she was acute enough to notice it, but when he advanced farther into the room he had composed his features into a mask of polite amusement.

'Tell me more, Celestine,' his voice was light. 'I would be the most severely, handicapped of husbands were it not for your ever-ready vigilance on my behalf.'

Fleur felt almost sorry for Celestine. His words, teasingly light though they were, contained an allegation of spitefulness and were formed solely to inform her that he was aware of her baser motives. The smile faded from Celestine's lips, leaving them a tight line of crimson anger, and Fleur shuddered as a chill feathered across her skin. Louis was right, Celestine would be a dangerous adversary, and if the look she had just aimed at them from across the room was any criterion she had already declared war upon Louis and herself!

The Comtesse's arrival was a welcome relief. When she entered the library they saw immediately that her sharp instinct had warned her something was wrong and rather than face almost certain inquisition they each made an effort to disperse the pervading atmosphere of disquiet. . Surprisingly, because her entry had been noiseless, Alain was the first to greet her.

'Ah, *ma petite* Maman, so you have arrived at last. Now, perhaps, we can eat.'

Her troubled frown disappeared as she responded to his teasing. 'Tut, tut, Alain! As usual you reprimand me for being late! But as it is such a joy to have you back I shall forgive you.'

'How on earth did you know she was here, Alain?' Celestine was quite devoid of tact. 'I swear she made no sound!'

Fleur winced, but Alain smiled, quite unperturbed. 'Have you forgotten already, Celestine?' When the Comtesse and Louis exchanged smiles Fleur realized that she was the only one who was puzzled.

'Of course not,' she replied with a sulky pout, 'it had merely slipped my memory. Your mother is wearing the perfume you devised exclusively for her and its fragrance obviously reached your senses seconds before her actual presence. You always did enjoy playing that particular game, didn't you, Alain? It was your proud boast that even blindfolded you could tell immediately your mother entered the room.' Suddenly the pout disappeared, and her tone became intimate. 'But have you forgotten, Alain, that you promised to create a perfume especially for me? Will it be the one you were working on when your accident happened, or has that formula been lost for ever?'

Alain's face became so white that Fleur took an instinctive step towards him, but Louis' arm shot out to detain her and he shook his head, warning her not to interfere.

'More than a formula was lost that day,' Alain bit out, his fists knotting as he strove to contain the feelings aroused by memory. 'My loss of sight should be sufficient excuse to free me from that promise if, indeed, the promise was ever actually made!'

Unhampered by any feelings of sensitivity, she sidled up to plead with him. It was a pity, Fleur thought furiously, as she watched her pouting coquettishly up at him, he could not appreciate the pathos in

her beautiful face nor the picture she made in her long, figure-moulding gown of red silk jersey that contrasted so vividly against the muted background she appeared as vibrantly alive as a slender-stemmed poppy. 'But you *must* continue with your work, Alain,' she urged him positively. 'The delicate sense of smell which is your most valuable asset is unimpaired, and that, together with the knowledge you have gathered over the years, is the nucleus of your skill. All you lack is your sight, and I can help you there. You know you used to say I was a great help to you in the laboratory, and I could be again. You and I, Alain, could combine to bring back the magic that made Maison Treville so famous!'

'Are you implying that the magic has been lost?' the Comtesse intervened frostily, her black eyes snapping with anger.

Celestine shrugged. 'Maison Treville is resting upon its laurels and well we all know it. Whatever you might be hoping to the contrary, dear Comtesse, you must admit that Alain's absence left a gap no one else was able to fill. There has not been one outstanding perfume created by the House during the past two years, and because of this your competitors are rubbing their hands with glee. The firm needs Alain's flair, his genius because without it it cannot hope to retain its reputation of being the foremost in the industry.'

Louis' face reddened, but he did not contradict Celestine. Fleur felt terribly sorry for him as she glimpsed beneath his mask of nonchalant indifference the hurt of a boy who has endeavoured to fill an elder man's function only to fail miserably. She was glad when Alain, who was now in full control of his emotions, took charge of the conversation.

'You seem very well informed, Celestine, but I must ask you not to discuss affairs of business on my first night home. Louis and I have been constantly in touch during my absence and thanks to him there is nothing I do not know about the business.' Drawing himself upright,

he pronounced distinctly, in a tone that implied he would brook no further argument, 'As for your offer of help, it was most thoughtful of you to offer your assistance, but I hope you won't think me ungrateful if I decline to accept. I think you must have overlooked the fact that I now have a new partner, a permanent partner who will see me through all my difficulties—Fleur, my wife!'

The breath Celestine drew sounded like a hiss. Her flamboyantly dressed figure was tensely erect as she weathered the snub he had so coolly administered, and Fleur felt a surge of thankfulness that, for once she was not on the receiving end of his caustic tongue. Alain smiled into the silence no one seemed willing to break. Celestine and he were the prominent actors, the stage was set for them alone and the rest of the cast were mere puppets placed there to give character to the scene. Fascinated, they watched the emotions that chased across Celestine's proud, beautiful face: surprise, chagrin, rage, they came and went in quick succession, then finally, with the aid of tremendous effort, a sweet reasonableness that did not quite reach her eyes. She closed the gap between them and once more took hold of his sleeve. 'You are quite right to chastise me, Alain,' she sighed wistfully, 'as usual I interfere in what is none of my business. Were my father here, he would confirm that it is one of my greatest failings, this itch to dabble in affairs of business which he, too, insists are the affairs of men only. Forgive me, *mon ami*?'

Her charm was so electrifying that it would have broken through Fleur's mistrust were it not for the green danger signals she glimpsed when for a second her eyes met Celestine's. They smouldered like those of a young, untamed mountain cat which, deprived of prey, was forced to harness its frustrations until the next killing. Such primitive emotion was alien to her nature and she quickly looked away.

Alain, however, seemed completely deceived. His eyes alight with pleasure, he lifted her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers with a gallantry that would not have disgraced his cavalier ancestors. 'Do not

speak to me of forgiveness, *ma belle* Celestine, when you know full well that between us is such deep understanding the word has become meaningless.' He turned in the direction of the silent, waiting group and smiled, a boyish smile full of charm. 'I think it's time we had dinner,' he suggested, 'so if you, Louis, will lead the way...?'

Thankful at being released from their silent ordeal, Fleur, Louis and the Comtesse quickly obeyed, leaving Celestine, purring with happiness, to follow on the arm of her suave adversary.

Fleur was grateful to Louis for his attentiveness during the meal. Celestine monopolized Alain's conversation, excluding everyone to the point of rudeness and he, surprisingly, seemed happy to allow her to do so. The Comtesse, however, was not, and as the meal progressed she made a determined effort to make the conversation general. Making no attempt to hide her displeasure, she broke into a tale Celestine was recounting to Alain concerning two friends unknown to his family.

'Alain, I have arranged for Louis to take Fleur around the distilleries tomorrow, she should enjoy the visit, don't you think?'

His head lifted, and the fork with which he had been toying with his food was laid carefully down upon his plate. 'Why Louis?' he asked, 'is there some reason why I should not accompany her myself?' His tone was as cold as his mother's and she, sensitive to his every mood, flinched from his disapproval and became flustered. Not for the world would she have put into words the obvious drawback his blindness would be in the role of guide, but as he was so patently waiting for an answer she searched for one.

'There is no reason why you should not go along, too, *mon fils*, Louis could then acquaint you with the changes that have been made during

your absence and at the same time he could show Fleur around.' With flags of distressed colour high in her cheeks, she turned to Fleur and began feverishly to chatter. 'First of all, they must take you to see the flower plantations, a sight so incredibly beautiful it must not be missed. You must also meet the pickers—some are local people, but most come as seasonal workers—there are families amongst them who have served us for generations, many of them, such as Maman Rouge, for instance, were working here when I arrived as a bride and their sons have grown up with Alain and Louis so that they look upon them almost as brothers...' The shaky thread of her voice broke abruptly and Fleur felt a surge of anger against Alain when she saw how his coldness had upset her. Her fine old hands were shaking as she lifted her glass to sip a minute quantity of wine and when she put it down again she lifted her napkin to her lips to hide their quivering.

Hoping to turn her mind into happier channels, Fleur smiled across the table and said gently, 'You must have been a very lovely young bride, Maman, and I've no doubt your thoughtfulness and charm have much to do with the devotion your workers show towards your family.'

Her face cleared. 'How nice of you to say so, child. But no, I must not take the credit. My dear husband was a good, kind man who held the welfare of his people close to his heart. He was a true aristocrat, but he had more sympathy with his workers than many of our middle-class neighbours.' For one infinitesimal second her eyes flickered towards Celestine and Fleur wondered uncomfortably if the Chesnaye family fell into this last category. The suspicion became stronger when she heard a slight choking sound that might have been a half-smothered laugh coming from Louis, who sat next to her, and the suspicion was clarified when an unbecoming flush ran in an angry wave across Celestine's perfect features.

Acutely ashamed of her small breach of manners, the Comtesse glossed hurriedly over her last remark. 'As I mentioned to Alain

earlier today, my dear Fleur, you must not hesitate to change anything inside the chateau which does not please you. I remember how excited I felt when my husband gave me *carte blanche* to do as I wished with the interior decorations and the plans I conceived for each room as I wandered through them. For centuries, you see, the decor had been the same—renovated, of course, but always keeping to the same basic theme. Each room in the chateau has a flower motif, as you will see for yourself when I show you around. Your bedroom is the rose room, whereas mine is done in delicate shades of yellow and follows a mimosa motif. Other rooms are furnished in lavender, violet, white lily, red geranium—in fact, in the colours of every flower that grows around the chateau. But, strangely, when it came to the time when I actually had to make changes I could not do so, and the decor has remained the same for yet another generation.'

Fleur quickly assured her, 'And so far as I am concerned, it will always stay that way, Maman. I think it an original and lovely idea, one I wouldn't dream of spoiling.'

Attention was focused upon Celestine when she gave a high-pitched laugh. 'Original?' she mocked, still bitingly aware of the Comtesse's ethereal snub. 'How can one call an idea original when it has been copied by every bride for centuries? My definition of original is something not copied; this dress I am wearing, for instance, is the only one of its kind. Unlike Fleur's,' she finished maliciously, 'it is not a poor imitation of the real thing!'

When this attack was followed by an appalled silence Celestine knew she had gone too far. Fleur felt hot colour sweeping under her skin and her lashes descended to fan across her cheeks in two gold-tipped crescents thick enough to hide the humiliation in her tell-tale eyes. She felt grateful to Louis when he swiftly championed her.

'But, Celestine, my love,' he drawled with a mockery that infuriated her, 'it never ceases to amaze me how girls like you who patronize the

exclusive gown shops somehow always manage to look the same, whereas Fleur has a natural beauty that would show up to advantage if she wore sackcloth! That alone,' his tone changed to banter as he nodded in Alain's direction, 'is an asset which should make any husband feel grateful.'

Alain frowned, displeased at the turn the conversation had taken, while Celestine sat silently fuming, not quick-witted enough to bandy words with the worldly Louis and resentful of the fact.

The Comtesse rose to her feet and declared firmly, 'I think it is time Alain and Fleur were left to their own company. We seem to have forgotten,' she looked pointedly at Celestine, 'that this has been a long and very eventful day for both of them and they must be wanting to retire early. It is, after all, their wedding night and we ought to be grateful to them for their forbearance in allowing us to share part of it with them. But now,' she moved to tap Alain sharply on the shoulder, 'I insist that you take Fleur up to her room, the poor child is drooping with weariness.'

Fleur's eyes were haunted when she looked immediately to see Alain's reactions to the order given with such bravery by the old Comtesse, who was even now waiting, aghast at her own daring, wondering what answer to expect from this stranger who was her son. With relief, she saw his brooding features lighten. Probably to humour her, or perhaps as an apology for his harsh words, he had decided to obey his mother's command. Fleur heard Louis expel a relieved breath, then was startled into activity when Alain's voice cut across the room.

'Perhaps you are right, Maman, it has been a trying day and an extremely eventful one.' Then his eyes roved blindly around the table as he asked, 'Fleur, if you are ready, I think we should go to our rooms.'

Louis jumped to his feet. 'Let me help you, Alain.'

'No, thank you,' the answer came close to being irritable, 'Fleur will manage! *Bonne nuit*, Maman, Louis, and thank you, Celestine, for your company this evening. As you are staying with us for a while we shall perhaps meet again at breakfast.'

Her pouting bottom lip was very much in evidence when she answered shortly: 'Perhaps...' As, at that moment, they were turning to leave the room, Fleur was the only one who saw Alain smile at this peevish answer, but she was too much occupied with her task of guiding him from the room to wonder about his amusement.

Outside his bedroom door they said goodnight, but he waited until she had opened her own door before stepping inside of his. He was so courteous in some respects, Fleur mused as she undressed in solitary splendour, and yet so thoughtless in others. It was impossible to read his thoughts or to gauge his reactions because of the mercurial quality of his moods. Giving herself a mental shake, she resolved not to worry and hurried into the bathroom for a quick shower. This time she was not interrupted, and less than ten minutes later she was back in her room sliding her refreshed body between the diaphanous folds of the black nylon and lace nightdress she had chosen for her wedding night—a wicked extravagance she had bought with a catch in her throat .;. It was a sultry night. She wandered across to the window and drew back the curtains protecting the night. It was dark outside, with just a weak sickle of moon and no stars to twinkle away the melancholy in soul. She clung to the heavy drapes and dreamily absorbed the heavenly fragrances drifting up from the ocean of flowers that billowed and swayed somewhere out in the darkness. She stood, half awake, half dreaming, for uncountable minutes until gradually she became aware of a sound from Alain's room; the restless, monotonous sound of his feet marching backwards and forwards across the room. Her heart lurched at the thought that he might be ill, but she dismissed the notion when she reasoned he had

only to press a bell to summon his valet if he needed assistance. As she listened, the sound formed a pattern, three steps and then the sound of a drawer closing; five steps and a light switch clicked; six steps and his door squeaked on its hinges. Suddenly the object became clear, he was pacing himself, counting each stride and memorizing where his steps led him each time. 'Oh, my poor darling,', she whispered brokenly, 'if only you would let me help you!'

She stiffened as his footsteps halted outside the communicating door. Tears dried on her hot cheeks as she stood, hardly breathing, waiting for his next move. It was a relief to hear his light tap upon the door. 'Come in I' she called out softly, her heart racing so rapidly she felt actual pain.

She had not bothered to turn on the light so his figure, clad in a dark-hued dressing-gown, was hardly discernible when he stepped into the room.

'Am I intruding?' He sounded so tense she was made immediately aware of his unease. 'I can't sleep,' he went on, 'so I was wondering ... if you are not too tired ... if we might talk?'

Knowing the folly of allowing him to sense pity, she strove to keep her answer light. 'Of course, please come in, I can't sleep either, so we might as well keep each other company.' When he walked towards her she saw his hair was tousled —run through with impatient fingers. Under his dressing-gown the top button of his pyjama jacket was open revealing the strong brown column of his neck where a pulse was jerking rapidly. His nerves were as taut as coiled wire!

Calmly, she began to talk, speaking about everything and nothing, letting words ramble from her tongue at will until eventually she sensed an aura of tranquillity and fell silent, content to stand with him by the open window and let the peaceful night continue what she had begun.

'You are such a restful person, Fleur, so serene and calm. These qualities are the ones that first attracted me to you. Probably,' his voice harshened, 'because of their direct opposition to my own infernal moods!'

'Hush, Alain,' she soothed gently. 'If only you would allow your mind to relax your body would soon follow suit.'

'If only!' he mimicked, his fists bunching. 'How everyone about me must be echoing that wish! Tonight I hurt even my mother with my caustic tongue.' His hand jerked out and closed around the curtain, grabbing it with such impatient strength she thought it would rip from the wall. 'No one understands,' he muttered through clenched teeth, 'no one can comprehend the agony of trying to survive in a world of darkness. I hear voices, listen to words, and wonder all the time what hidden shades of meaning are lost by my inability to see the expression on the speaker's face. For two years I've been tormented by lies so now I distrust every word spoken to me. When I hear someone say, "*How pleased I am to see you* " I ask myself if the sentiment is accompanied by a genuine smile or with a grimace of displeasure. When I eat, I ask myself: are my table manners disgusting or can I believe those who tell me I have perfected the art of eating blind? I even distrust my mother's words, but they at least are bearable because I know she would never willingly deceive me. But what of you, Fleur?' She was startled out of her state of frozen pity when his hands descended with force upon her lightly clad shoulders. 'What am I to believe about you? I had imagined you a sweet, good person who thought only of others, but then you disconcerted me completely by admitting yourself corruptible—you were for sale and I bought you! *Mon Dieu!*' he shook her so hard she had to bite back a cry of pain, 'for some reason your defection torments me far more than any other's. I need you around me, *confound* you, but I will not play the part of a blind beggar! Tell me the truth, whom did I marry, the gentle daughter of a vicar, or a mercenary, scheming brat?'

She tried to shrink away, too shocked and frightened by the raw hatred that possessed him to even register that a question had been asked. The tiger she thought had been tamed, only minutes ago, had snarled back to life with a ferociousness she could neither understand nor cope with. His hands burned her shoulders with their heat and his eyes as they glittered down at her "mirrored a furious hatred mere words could never hope to dispel. Down, under the wave of horror she was feeling, compassion stirred, but it was too weak an emotion to combat the fear he had aroused—a fear that turned to panic when he pulled her close against his hard body and hissed into her ear, '*So you are too ashamed to answer!*'"

She was lifted from her feet in one swoop and carried swiftly across to the bed. She tried to gasp out a protest, but unshed tears drowned the sound in her throat. She did not attempt to struggle, but lay looking up with wide, frightened eyes at the arrogant, solitary man—blinded in mind and body—who was her lawful husband, to whom she had been joined for life that morning by her own father.

He leant forward and she saw him smile, the white-toothed smile of a hungry predator, and a second later her hair was spread in a shower of gold across his arm and her lips were being plundered of their sweetness. He was strong in anger and bitter in mind, but as his loving progressed it drew from her shy responses that chased the iron from his soul, making his caresses become suddenly considerate, thoughtful and passionately gentle.

The pungent scent of roses detached itself from the mass and drifted through the open window, so that for ever afterwards the flower was a reminder of this night when from out of raging distrust and brutal force an emotion so fragile —so ethereal it could not bear description—was conceived and born within a man too blind to see what was written on his heart.

Later, as she lay still and inwardly weeping against his steadily beating heart, she wrestled with her bewildered emotions, trying to sort out joy from pain, arid emptiness from sweet fulfilment, and conflicting feelings of love and shame. Was she loved or was she despised? Had he taken her as a wife or a courtesan—one paid for services rendered?

He stirred, murmured her name, and tightened his arm around her. She relaxed against his warmth with a smile of contentment and closed her eyes—leaving the question still unanswered.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN she awoke the next morning he was gone; only the imprint of his head against the pillow remained to convince her she had not dreamt the whole shattering experience. She tried not to dwell upon the events of the previous night, but as she fumbled with the fasteners on her dress one question kept recurring: how would he react at their next meeting?

She was sitting at her ,dressing-table wielding her hairbrush with a shaky hand when his image appeared behind her own in the mirror, so startling her that she dropped the brush with a clatter upon the glass-topped surface.

'Did I frighten you?' he asked without a trace of apology. He had been perfectly valeted, dressed in a light-coloured suit with a matching silk shirt and an impeccably knotted tie. His dark hair was still damp from the shower.

'You could have knocked,' she had striven to answer calmly, but her agitation was betrayed by a slight quaver.

Negligently he answered, 'Why? I can't see you, but even if I could, does it matter ... now?'

The coldness in his yoke was unbearable. She jumped to her feet, her face scarlet, and made to pass him, but with keen perception he reached out and caught her by the shoulders before she could escape.

'I haven't come to apologize,' he told her, his mouth grim. 'What happened last night was quite unintentional, neither planned nor desired, do you believe me?'

Somewhere deep in her heart her newly nurtured hopes died a quiet, death. It seemed hardly possible that the aloof words she had just

heard came from the same man who only hours ago had been whispering soft French endearments against her lips and whose fierce then tender passion had introduced into her life a whole new concept of feeling.

When she did not answer, he shrugged and released his hold. 'I see you doubt me. However, it hardly matters, I shall see to it you are recompensed. I cannot afford the, time to go with you to Paris, but I shall arrange with one of the fashion houses to send a selection of clothes for you to choose from. Also there are family jewels which you might like to sort through. I'll ask Maman to show them to you, she will advise whether or not they need re-setting.'

Each word stabbed her heart with the precision of a deliberately aimed rapier. She wondered if it was possible to die of shame, if a heart so badly wounded could bleed inwardly—and fatally—thus bringing eventual blessed oblivion. She swayed, fighting a dreadful nausea. It was as well he could not see the havoc his words had inflicted—her slender-stemmed body was wilting, her bright head was drooping on her slender neck, and her bruised mouth was quivering with pain and disillusionment.

'Well? Why don't you answer? If there is something you would particularly like you only have to say.'

She drew in a great gulping breath to steady herself, then trembled. 'I'd like to be left alone, please will you go now.'

His eyebrows elevated with surprise at the pain in her voice, then drew back into a straight black line as puzzlement clouded his face. His sightless eyes bored down at her, probing, questioning, seeming to strive with everything that was in him to find out the cause of her distress.

'What have I said to upset you?' he asked sharply. Then slowly, as if as an afterthought, he wondered aloud, 'Can it be that I have misunderstood?' Once more his hand clasped her shoulders and he pulled her forward with an urgency she could not combat. '*Tell me again why you married me!*'

Five minutes earlier she might have told him. Then, She had felt secure, wrapped around by the warm glow of what she had begun to hope might be love or, if not that, then at least some measure of regard. But now, stripped of all illusions, she would have died rather than let him guess how much she loved him. The anger within her, self-anger at her own weakness and stupidity, helped her to play her part with conviction. Jerking herself out of his clutches, she stepped out of his reach and with a deception that inwardly horrified her she projected teasing frivolity into her answer.

'Upset, who's upset? Really, Alain, your *penchant* for taking pleasures seriously disappoints me. The French, so I've been led to believe, have the reputation of being expert lovers, full of verve and completely devoid of inhibitions, but I must say you seem totally lacking in this respect. Relax, don't worry, I assure you that's what I intend to do. I refuse absolutely to allow anything to upset my enjoyment of what promises to be a delightful new future!'

Amazingly, her gallant words fooled him. As she watched, his features hardened into a mask of angry dislike that made her cower against the bed, weak with self-loathing. 'I'm sorry to have been such a disappointment,' his cold lips barely moved as they framed the words. 'It is just as well the error will never be repeated.'

'I don't understand... ?' There was no trace of her former frivolity when she choked out the words.

'I regret my lapse—my lack of control—but what you have just said absolves me from the need to apologize. Obviously you are not the

type of person to appreciate remorse, your need is for material things, and those I will willingly supply if only to wash my hands of a debt I freely admit is owing to you.' His fists bunched as he fought to contain his rage. For a second he looked as if he would say more, but then he compressed his lips to force back the words she could not have borne to hear. When the door banged behind his departing figure she sank back on the bed in a welter of despair, determined not to cry, but helpless to suppress the hard, dry sobs that racked her body.

Louis had just finished breakfast when she went downstairs half an hour later. She had bathed her hot face with water before leaving her room, and her trembling body was now under control, but every chivalrous instinct Louis possessed was aroused when he saw the haunted look that darkened her beautiful eyes. With unusual tact, he forbore to comment when he rose from his seat to offer her some breakfast.

'No, thank you, Louis,' she waved away his offer with such apathy he felt an immediate fury with Alain. He knew her well enough already to feel sure her loyalty would never allow her to discuss her husband, not even with his cousin, but as he poured out black coffee he was resolving to seek out Alain and to take up with him the subject of her deep unhappiness.

'Thank you, Louis.' Fleur took the proffered cup and drank from it thirstily.

'Won't you please change your mind and have some croissants?' he pleaded.

She shook her head. 'No, but I will have some more coffee.' As he refilled her cup he noticed the way her eyes kept straying nervously towards the door, as if dreading the appearance of Alain, and on impulse he asked, 'Did Alain give you a message for me?' When she again shook her head he frowned before continuing, 'I'm going down

to the factory this morning, I was supposed to wait for Alain, but as he's nowhere about and he has left me no message I won't wait any longer. How would you like to come with me?"

If he had any doubts about a breach existing between his cousin and his new bride they were dispelled immediately he saw the relief that chased across her troubled face. Without even waiting to drink the coffee he had just poured, she jumped to her feet and stammered, 'Yes, I'd love to! I'll just slip upstairs for my bag. I won't be more than a minute.'

'Hold on!' Louis laughed, amused by her impatience. 'What about your coffee...?' But she had already gone.

At any other time she would have been entranced by the scenery they drove through on the way to the factory. The landscape was vast and refreshing, far away from cities and crowds, shops and artificial entertainment. They drove through vast flower fields—a veritable sea of flowers—mainly roses and jasmine, real jasmine whose scent filled the air with perfumed pungency. Against the background of her thoughts Louis' voice impinged, giving her odd pieces of information about the industry as he drove, mercifully content to ramble on without receiving or expecting any response. A small part of her mind retained some of his words and afterwards she was to wonder at the fact that seven hundred flowers were required for one litre of perfume—ten pounds of roses for two pounds of essence.

Absently, she exchanged waves with the pickers who straightened from their back-breaking work long enough to salute the occupants of the car as they drove past, then continued like a swarm of honey-searching bees with their task of stripping the sweetness from the blossom-laden bushes.

Louis smiled wryly when, at the mention of Alain's name, she unconsciously betrayed interest. Cursing the spasm of sudden

jealousy that had speared him, and vowing not to allow himself to commit the awful folly of falling in love with his cousin's wife, he repeated the words she had missed. 'As I was saying, there are only fifteen people in the world who can distinguish between six thousand different fragrances, and at present twelve of them live in Grasse—Alain, of course, is one of them.'

'And what about you, Louis?' Her smile was so full of gentle concern that it was as much as he could do to resist from leaning across and kissing her. 'I'm sure you are good at your job, too, but for some reason you seem reluctant to admit it. Why, I wonder...?' He grinned widely, but she was not deceived.

'Alain has always bettered me in everything we have both undertaken, so I decided it was useless to compete. It was decreed years ago that I should always be regarded as a second-best Treville,' he vouchsafed a trifle bitterly. 'Alain's father and mine were twins and for the sake of a mere ten minutes in time his father inherited the chateau and the estate while mine had to be content with whatever was offered. I was still an infant when both my parents were killed in an air crash and my aunt, whom I have always called Maman, brought me to the chateau, and this is where I have lived ever since. But even during my schooldays I lived in the shadow of Alain's brilliance, just as I still do today. He is the substance and I the shadow,' he ended wryly.

The forlorn note echoing through his words distressed Fleur deeply, so much so that she leant forward to assure him earnestly, 'That's not true, Louis, and I want you to promise me you'll never think that way again.' Her deep concern and the nearness of her lips, deeply pink and parted slightly with the eager innocence of a child, was his undoing and before he himself was fully aware of the intention his mouth had descended firmly upon hers in a kiss that was, to him, full of heady sweetness.

She drew away immediately, too shocked to verbally condemn him, and he had to give all his attention to the car which had swerved momentarily out of control. When he had righted it, he sensed her disapproval and quickly apologized, 'I'm sorry, Fleur, truly sorry I did that on the spur of the moment. You were so sweet, worrying on my behalf, I simply couldn't resist you. Please, will you forgive me?'

For the first time in his life he was genuinely worried about being out of favour with a member of the opposite sex. Fleur, to him, had begun to represent all the things he had once looked for in a woman, looked for and then reluctantly abandoned after deciding he was searching for a myth, a member of a non-existent species. The agony of it was that, now he had found her, she belonged to the one man in the world whose property he dared not touch—his cousin. A cousin, moreover, who was incapable of feelings other than anger and cynical scorn and who, judging from Fleur's unhappy face, treated his wife with the same lack of concern as he did the rest of his family.

Louis' alien look of worry convinced Fleur he was feeling abjectly sorry for his lapse which, generously, she put down to youthful indiscretion, so she forgave him instantly. 'All right, I forgive you, but don't let it happen again!' she admonished, hating the misery she saw on his downcast face. It was only when she saw his lips quirk with amusement and the twinkle reappear in his eyes that she realized how prim she must have sounded—like a schoolmarm reproaching a recalcitrant child—and her mouth trembled into an answering smile. In a second, the ice was broken and they both began to chuckle. Louis' mirth overcame him to such an extent that he had to pull in at the side of the road and for several uproarious minutes they were helpless with laughter.

He was first to regain control. He wiped his streaming eyes and struggled for composure in order to tell her, 'Thank you, *ma belle* Fleur, I enjoyed that; a day without laughter is a day wasted!'

Fleur, her eyes shining and with all unhappy thoughts scattered to the four winds, smiled back serenely and agreed, 'I needed it, too, Louis, it has helped me enormously.'

'Then I am glad to have been of service,' he answered, sobering quickly at the memory of her previous unhappiness. 'I must keep it in mind to kiss you more often, especially when you are depressed.'

She laughed, secure in the conviction that he was still fooling, and settled back in her seat, prepared to enjoy the remainder of the journey.

They were still in a happy, laughing mood when they reached Grasse. He drove along the Boulevard du Jeu de Ballon, a delightful road shaded from the heat of the sun by rows of plane trees, then let the car coast gently down a slope leading to a terrace-shaped promenade where he parked in a spot that gave a splendid view of the surroundings of Cannes and the flower fields. Flinging out an arm to encompass everything in sight, he asked her with the triumph of a little boy who has saved the best treat to the last, 'Well, what do you think of the view?'

'It's awe-inspiring, magnificent ... oh, I can't find sufficient adjectives,' she admitted, much to his pleasure.

'Listen, Fleur, I don't have to go to the factory just yet. Let me show you around the old parts of the city, I'm sure you'll love it. Afterwards, we'll have lunch at an hotel I know where they make the best *bouillabaisse* in the region. What do you say, are you agreeable?'

She needed very little persuasion. The sun was hot, the sky vividly blue, and Louis was a very pleasant companion. Besides that, there was always the chance that she might run into Alain at the factory ... Bright-eyed, she nodded, and he showed his delight by raising her hand to his lips and kissing the tips of her fingers. For a moment she

felt a slight unease, for behind his innocent expression she • had glimpsed a worldliness that would not have shamed a man twice his age, but in a trice his boyish look returned and with it a renewal of the trust she placed in him. Happily, she allowed him to help her out of the car and then hand in hand they wandered along to the end of the promenade where they descended large stairs that led into the main street of the old city.

He proved himself to be an excellent guide. Speaking knowledgeably on every subject, he pointed out the eighteenth-century houses with their irregular-shaped colonnades, the memorial in the centre of old Grasse which he told her had been sculpted by Bourgeois, explored with her an incredibly old, early Gothic cathedral, then took her along a maze of quaint streets that had houses built on slopes with stone steps leading up to the front doors, each step containing boxes of flowering plants that cascaded down to the street in colourful profusion. Outside some of the houses old ladies in long black dresses covered with spotlessly-white pinafores and with starched caps of white muslin protecting their heads from the sun sat chatting to their neighbours, or watching over young children playing happily in the dusty street. Fleur was fascinated by everything she saw and would have lingered for hours amongst the legion of tiny, cluttered shops displaying everything from pots and pans to antique jewellery and paintings. She was astonished when Louis reminded her,

'Well have to make our way back if we are to have lunch before going on to the factory, but I'll bring you back here another day when we have more time and let you browse to your heart's content.'

'Gracious!' she gasped, 'are you sure we have time for lunch? Shouldn't we go straight to the factory in case you're needed there?' But he was adamantly determined not to forgo the pleasure of introducing her to his favourite meal, so she did not argue and they made their way back along the promenade to where the restaurant was situated.

The *bouillabaisse*—a delicious fish soup—was excellent and so filling that she could not attempt to eat a second course. To please Louis, she sipped a small amount of the *Pastis* he had ordered especially to tempt her appetite, but its liquorice taste did not appeal to her and she left most of it in her glass. Her enjoyment began to wane when, after an hour and a half, he was still making no move to depart. Gently, she hinted that she wanted to leave, but half of the carafe of wine he had ordered still waited to be drunk and with a sinking feeling of dread she began to realize he had no intention of leaving until it was finished.

It was late afternoon when finally she managed to coax him out of the restaurant. She bit her lip when he staggered slightly on his way to the car, but she said nothing, wary of the belligerent, argumentative mood that had overtaken him as gradually as the wine had emptied from the bottle. She was sick with worry when, after a hair-raising drive, they finally pulled up with a squeal of brakes outside of a large brick building that had '*Maison Treville*' scrawled across its front in gold letters.

In her eagerness to get out of the car, Fleur did not notice another car slide silently to a halt behind them. She spun round on her heel when Celestine's voice reached her. 'So here you both are! I've-searched over all of Grasse to find you!' She ran the tip of her tongue over her lips and smiled with such venom Fleur was repelled. 'Alain,' she stressed, raking Fleur's face with obvious enjoyment, 'is furious with you!'

They left a suddenly sober Louis to make his own way into the factory, and Fleur followed Celestine up a flight of stone steps that led, Celestine informed her, to the laboratories where Alain and herself had been working all morning.

Celestine left her in no doubt of her satisfaction with this arrangement. 'I drove Alain down from the chateau after we were told

you and Louis had left earlier. Of course, we expected to find you here when we arrived. Alain had decided to continue work on his unfinished project, but as he naturally has to have someone to measure and weigh the ingredients for him, and as you were not available, I offered my services—a better arrangement, really, because he trained me years ago to help him with his work, and you, my dear, would have been more of a hindrance than a help, if you don't mind me saying so.'

Fleur made no reply, so she carried on complacently. 'There is another reason why I want to help him finish this particular job. The creation he is working on is a masterpiece, it was almost finished when the accident happened, only small adjustments were needed before Alain would admit himself satisfied. Then,' she drew in a deep breath of satisfaction, 'the creation was to be mine, my own personal perfume devised exclusively for me by Maison Treville 1'

By this time they had reached the top of the stairs, but before opening the door leading into the laboratory Celestine halted, determined that Fleur should fully understand her importance in Alain's life. 'You will find Alain a little distraught, *ma chérie*. About lunch time he began to betray signs of annoyance at your prolonged absence— and Louis', 'she added delicately. 'But you must try not to mind his jealousy, because once before he thought he had cause to suspect someone he loved of being unfaithful to him and he has never completely trusted anyone since.'

'Someone he loved... ?' Fleur repeated gravely. 'Would that someone be you, Celestine?'

'You know!' She sounded surprised. 'Did Louis tell you?' When Fleur nodded her expression changed. Fleur was completely taken in by the sudden look of hurt vulnerability that swept over her face. Her lovely mouth was trembling with hurt when she whispered, 'It hurts even to think of it. Alain and I were to have been married only a month later.'

The day before his accident he was 'told by someone whose name I have yet to discover that I had a ... lover.' Her voice broke on the word, but she straightened as if determining to finish the tale, and carried on bravely. It was a lie, of course, from the moment we became engaged I never gave a second thought to any other man, but the damage had been done—Alain refused to believe me and he broke off our engagement.' Fleur's eyes widened with bewilderment and Celestine hurried on as if sensing that she was about to be interrupted. 'Oh, it was made to look as if I did the jilting, to spare my feelings, he said at the time, but it was he nevertheless who was responsible for ending our engagement. He refused to discuss the matter with anyone—not even his mother—and nothing I said made the slightest difference, his mind was made up. So now you understand,' her eyes raked Fleur's face, seeking to read her very mind, 'why you must be very careful what you do and say to Alain. He is very sensitive of his position and very, very jealous of his possessions.'

Fleur was shocked, appalled to think even Alain capable of such intolerance and unable to understand how he could have taken the word of a stranger against that of the girl who was to have become his wife. Celestine seemed so sincere it was impossible to disbelieve her. How could Alain, who must have loved her deeply, have refused to listen when she had attempted to explain? Why should he have become so embittered, so suspicious of everyone's motives? From out of the past her father's words echoed in her mind: The man has turned into an insensible automaton. I feel he has been hurt so often—and perhaps not merely physically—that he has determined never to allow himself to feel ever again!

Her hand went to her mouth to stifle a gasp of pain, pain for Alain whose mental torment at his believed betrayal must have scarred him deeper than the incisions inflicted upon him physically. She had suspected him of having other reasons besides the one he had mentioned for marrying her, and her suspicions had been correct. He

had wanted to hit back at Celestine for her supposed deception, to show her how little he cared about her. He had deliberately sought a wife—any wife—so that he could confront Celestine with a *fait accompli*, someone who would be a buttress against the attraction she must still hold for him, someone dependable who would fill the gap she had left in his life. She gasped as realization hit her. She had let him down! This morning he had needed her to help him with his work and he had had to fall back on Celestine's offer of help!

'Where is Alain, I must go to him?' She sounded so agitated that Celestine automatically moved out of the way to allow her to pass through the door. 'Please,' Fleur implored when she made to follow, 'I'd like to speak to him alone.'

Celestine's eyes narrowed, but the flash of stubbornness revealed by Fleur's outthrust chin warned her not to argue, so she shrugged and began descending the stairs. 'Very well, I'll be with Louis when Alain asks for me,' she warned defiantly, daring Fleur to try to dispel the growing accord between herself and Alain. But Fleur had already disappeared into the laboratory in search of him.

She found him talking to an earnest young man in a white jacket who was very carefully weighing a small amount of fluid from out of a brown glass bottle. Tiers of such bottles, each marked with a chemical formula, were ranged around the workbench within easy reach, and Fleur remembered hearing Louis describe it as a 'keyboard', a library of odours from which the perfumier selected, weighed and measured the ingredients he planned to use in his experiments. Test tubes, petri dishes and beakers were scattered around the workbench, which was covered with an opal glass top and faced a wall covered from floor to ceiling with white tiles. It was her first visit to a laboratory, and as she gazed around she felt rather disappointed by the thought of glamorous, enchanting perfumes being conceived in such clinical surroundings.

When the young man spoke to Alain and nodded in her direction she knew he was telling him of her presence. Alain stiffened, answered him without turning, and the young man gave her an apologetic look, took off his working jacket and walked out through another door, leaving them alone together.

With all the timid earnestness of a child who knows she has done wrong and is anxious to be forgiven, she stammered an apology. 'I'm sorry I'm so late. Perhaps I should have told you I was leaving with Louis this morning, then you could have explained that you needed my help, but I simply didn't think ..

He swung round, his proud head arrogantly tilted, his flaring nostrils denoting icy displeasure, and stabbed out accusingly, 'You didn't think—or you thought too much? I am well aware of my cousin's attraction for the opposite sex. He is, as you have no doubt discovered, the epitome of the ideal you cherish of dashing uninhibited young Frenchmen. Unfortunately for you, there is one commodity he lacks—money I Louis' allowance stretches no farther than his own extravagant commitments, so if you are thinking of tapping his resources I must advise you now that you'll be wasting your time!'

His words were a slap in the face, and Fleur, her eyes enormous with hurt, recoiled from them as if from a physical blow. Choking back the denial she knew would fall upon deaf ears, she stood rooted with shock watching his lips twist with a bitterness she hated. Dully, she recognized the futility of putting into words the need she had felt to reassure him of her loyalty, to make him believe how much she regretted the impulse that had driven her to seek Louis' company rather than his own. Desperation urged her almost to the brink of an explanation, but once more his words cut through her hopes. Turning impatiently back to his workbench, he groped for an object just out of reach and when his hand did not immediately alight upon it he bit out an expletive and threw savagely across his shoulder, 'I need

Celestine! Get her for me immediately, if you please, then ask someone to drive you back to the chateau. Not Louis,' he commanded sharply. 'I need him here! We have much ground to make up and I do not want you to encourage him from his work!'

Fleur fought to instil dignity into her voice, but could not entirely suppress an unsteady quaver. 'Very well, I'll do as you ask. But you have no need to warn me against becoming a nuisance. I never intended keeping Louis from his work, nor do I intend keeping you from yours. Goodbye, Alain,' she blinked away scalding tears and dared the tremor in her voice to worsen, I'll see to it that Celestine knows she is needed before I leave.'

For days afterwards she avoided him whenever possible, going down to breakfast only when she was sure the car taking himself, Louis and Celestine to the factory had driven away. In the mornings she made her way down to the plantations where the masses of flowers and the friendly pickers who greeted her vociferously were a delight. As Alain, Louis and Celestine did not return to the chateau until just before dinner, she and the Comtesse had lunch together each day, after which they sat in the garden for an hour and talked before the old lady retired to her room for her afternoon nap. They were becoming very close; the Comtesse's growing affection, which she was at pains to make obvious, was a balm to Fleur's hurt feelings and she returned the old lady's regard with an eagerness that was partly due to the Comtesse's charm and understanding and partly to the intense loneliness that caught her by the throat whenever she remembered her own parents and the abundance of love with which they had surrounded her.

It was during one of their lunchtime chats that the Comtesse revealed her awareness that all was not well between her son and his bride. They were sitting together in the garden, chatting desultorily, with a

musically tinkling fountain playing in the background, when the Comtesse leant forward to peer bright-eyed into Fleur's face.

'You are not happy, child,' she stated flatly, her mouth stern. 'I had hoped your sunny disposition would rub off on Alain, but instead the reverse is happening and his misery is penetrating your soul. Don't deny it, *ma cherie*,' she rapped out when Fleur tried to protest, 'you try very hard to appear at ease, but in repose your sweet face is troubled, far more so than a bride of two weeks has any right to be. My son is a difficult husband, *n'est-ce pas?*' Fleur became suddenly white and the Comtesse hastened to apologize. 'Forgive me for hurting you, *ma petite*, my probing is unforgivable I'

'It's quite all right, Maman,' Fleur managed to smile. 'I know how you worry about Alain and how much you desire his happiness. It is unfortunate, but I'm afraid he will never find the happiness you wish for him, at least not with me.'

'If not with you, then with no one I' the Comtesse replied with such conviction Fleur was momentarily heartened. Then the old lady sighed. 'I wish I could reprimand Alain on your account, his neglect of you is unpardonable. But he is not the son I once knew—kind, lovable, one I would never hesitate to approach. Iron has entered his soul and, though I'm loath to admit it, I feel the son I knew and loved is lost to me for ever.'

'No! Never allow yourself to think that, Maman!' Fleur was surprised at the strength of her own conviction. 'He could be himself again if only he could see. If we could convince him that only one more operation would be necessary... !'

The Comtesse caught a little of Fleur's enthusiasm and her face brightened. 'Then we must try, *ma cherie*, we must both try! There must be some way of convincing him, and between us we shall find it.' Her slender, finely- veined hand reached out to clasp Fleur's,

communicating renewed optimism and Fleur found her own hopes miraculously revived by the effort she had made to dispel the Comtesse's despondency. With rising excitement, she began to marshall her thoughts. Alain was not omnipotent, somewhere in his armour there had got to be a chink and it was up to her to find it, whatever the cost to herself. He could destroy her, because in loving him she had given him that power, but if in destroying her he should find happiness for himself then the sacrifice would be justified.

The Comtesse's voice reached through her glow of enthusiasm. 'How wonderful it would be to have my son restored to me. Once, Alain was a constant reminder of my dear husband, they were so alike in every respect it was as if part of him had never left me. That is why I felt doubly deprived by the accident that robbed Alain not only of his sight, but also of his generous, loving nature. My husband,' she mused, lost in the past, 'was a man of volatile feelings, his loving could take the form of tender consideration or violent rage. In a matter of seconds, if something happened to make him think it justified, he could sweep into a storm of jealousy devastating in its intensity.' She laughed softly, her eyes tender with memories. 'Then afterwards, he would be contrite, ashamed of his lack of control, but always his favourite excuse would be: "Consider it not as a lapse but as a compliment to yourself, because if I did not love so acutely I would not feel so acutely." What woman,' the Comtesse appealed, 'could resist the logic of such a statement? He was so vibrant, so vitally alive, he found it impossible to repress his natural inclinations— not like Alain,' she sighed sadly, 'whose balance of feeling weighs down so heavily on the side of rage and icy displeasure that one wonders if the gentler emotions are lacking entirely...'

For a moment while they both struggled with the depression her words had engendered there was deep silence, then, suddenly, the Comtesse drew a sharp breath. Fleur looked up quickly, alarmed by the sound, and saw that the Comtesse was smiling, a pert smile whose

mischievous glint was echoed in her eyes. 'I have it!' She snapped her fingers with the vivacity of a young girl, then, at the sight of Fleur's obvious puzzlement, she laughed excitedly and startled her still further by commanding: 'You must make Alain jealous!'

'Jealous?' she stammered, completely bewildered. 'But why ... how?'

'Because,' the Comtesse answered firmly, 'that way you will prove to yourself—and to him—that he is not the unfeeling automaton he tries to be! Jealousy,' she insisted triumphantly, 'is the twin of love, if you arouse one you must surely arouse the other!'

Fleur's heart sank. The Comtesse made it sound so easy, whereas the situation between herself and Alain was not half so uncomplicated as the old lady thought. To her, it was merely a case of jolting Alain out of the despair she thought was an aftermath of his accident. She had no idea that not even attraction, much less love, had been part of their strange alliance, and Fleur knew she could not break the promise to Alain never to allow his mother to discover the real reasons behind their marriage.

Gently, she tried to dissuade her. 'I'm afraid your plan won't work, Maman. Alain would never be jealous on my account. For one thing, I see very little of him now, and even if I did he has no cause to feel jealous when he knows I spend most of my time with you and the rest in the plantations.'

'Hm... m,' the Comtesse pondered. 'We must consider taking Louis into our confidence. I know a situation such as this will appeal to his sense of humour and he is always ready to indulge in a prank. Yes, we must certainly ask for Louis' advice.'

Fleur felt the situation was getting out of hand and that now was the time to put her foot down, but before she could marshal her arguments the Comtesse took the initiative. 'We must also entertain!'

She rose from her seat and began pacing backwards and forwards, her enthusiasm in full flood. 'Our neighbours and friends are eager to welcome Alain home and they are especially eager to meet you, my dear. I have put them off with the excuse that you are both still at the honeymoon stage, but news that Alain is working each day at the distillery must by now have spread all over Grasse, so when I put it to him he will not be able to refuse to go along with my plan for a dinner party.' She stopped dead, her tiny figure alive with suppressed excitement, and asked Fleur abruptly: 'Well, do you dare?'

Fleur, to her own dismay, was incapable of disheartening her. Struggling to submerge the trepidation she felt, she stared mutely back at her. Then, when the Comtesse tapped her foot impatiently, she whispered, 'Very well, if you think it will do any good ... I'll try.'

The Comtesse's rigid frame relaxed. 'Good!' she said simply. 'Alain ^{car^} not fail to find you lovable, *cherie*, and when we have finished our campaign to rout his morbid self-pity he will be so anxious to regain his sight that he will allow nothing to stand in his way.'

'Oh, I do hope you are right, Maman, I do hope so!' Fleur choked.

The Comtesse leant forward to take her chin between her hands and when she saw tears glistening in the velvet blueness of her eyes she derided softly, 'No tears, *ma petite* \ I shall excuse them only if they are tears of joy. Come, dry your eyes, I have something to show you.' She urged her to her feet and shooed her in the direction of the house. 'Alain left instructions this morning that you were to be shown the family jewels so that you might choose from them the pieces you prefer. I had forgotten, but now that I have remembered I'm sure you'll see his request as I do—as a good omen for the future, *n'est-ce pas?*'

No, not so! Fleur wanted to scream as she followed her down the passageway to the library. Quite unknowingly the Comtesse had

plunged a dagger into her heart; how distressed she would be if she knew she had been delegated by her son to pay his wife the first instalment of the debt he considered was owing to her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THERE were pearls, milk-white and perfectly matched, made up into a necklace of three strands long enough to have reached her waist. A pearl and diamond suite comprising tiara, necklace, earrings and bracelet, so magnificent they could only be worn at functions of royal proportions, nestling against a background of black velvet. And an abundance of rubies, sapphires and emeralds mounted in settings of fine gold were fashioned into a fabulous assortment of rings, bracelets and brooches. The Comtesse took them all from a concealed safe *in* the library, and as she opened the caskets one by one to lay them on a table for inspection Fleur drew back from their magnificence with a dislike that amounted to near repugnance. She hated each and every one of the beautiful things. In different circumstances she might have delighted in the richness of colour, in the purity of design, but as it was each pearl represented a tear, each diamond echoed the cold hardness of Alain's eyes.

Lovingly, the Comtesse displayed the Treville family's treasures, now and then holding up to the light some particularly fine piece so that the sunshine flooding the room delved into the heart of the stones, making them burst forth with scintillating, colourful brilliance.

'Well?' The Comtesse cocked her head on one side as she queried, 'Which pieces do you most admire, *cherie*?'

'They are all gorgeous, Maman,' she stammered, 'but they are much too lavish for me to wear, I should be terrified of losing them.'

'Nonsense!' the Comtesse answered fondly. 'As the Comtesse de Treville you will soon become accustomed to wearing fine stones. Our neighbours entertain extensively and you will be expected to return their hospitality. Such occasions are welcomed by the womenfolk because they give them an excuse to dress up as well as

being a help in prising husbands away from their all- absorbing work. So you see there will be plenty of opportunity for you to wear your jewels. Come, let us decide together which pieces will best flatter your delicate colouring.'

But not even to please the Comtesse could she evince sufficient enthusiasm, and the old lady was quick to sense her lack of interest. After debating at length upon the merits of each stone and receiving very lukewarm response, she began with a perplexed shrug to replace the jewels in their caskets, snapping back the catches with a sharpness that emphasized her disappointment.

Conscious of her hurt feelings, Fleur tried to make amends. Lying in the bottom of one of the jewel cases, looking, as forlorn and out of place amongst its grand companions as she felt herself, was a small blue enamelled charm on a fine gold chain. She reached out with pretended eagerness to lift the small object from the depths of the jewel case.

'I ... I like this very much.' She sounded so contrite that the Comtesse had to respond with a smile as she took the bauble from her.

'This? But it is almost worthless, child! Louis bought it for me years ago, when he was a mere boy—a birthday present, I think—yes, I'm almost certain, and for all these years it has lain here overlooked.' She dangled the chain from her finger so that the charm flashed blue in the sunlight.

'Then of course you must keep it,' Fleur told her awkwardly, wishing she had never glimpsed its cool beauty.

'Certainly not,' the Comtesse smiled fondly, 'I'm pleased you have found something to your taste, my dear. See!' she pointed out an inscription traced inside the charm, '*Unis mais toujours se pares.*' When her eyebrows were raised enquiringly, the Comtesse

translated: 'Together but always apart.' Fleur's heart jerked painfully. What mischievous fate had ordained that she should pick out the one thing that expressed so aptly the situation existing between Alain and herself?

The low neckline of the cream-coloured silk dress she wore that evening cried out for a trinket to relieve its severity and the little blue charm fulfilled the purpose admirably. It nestled against the tender smoothness of her skin, making itself an immediate part of her, rising and falling gently with each breath she drew, its poignant message hidden from sight but emblazoned in letters of fire across her heart. *Together, but always apart!* She and Alain had become as one, his heart had beaten against hers with a wildness that even now brought a tremor to her vulnerable mouth and an urgent wave of yearning through her suddenly weak body. For the space of a few short hours she had been completely his and she had had his undivided attention. If, for the rest of her lifetime, she had only that one night to remember she would have no regrets, because however far apart they were to become in the future she would have those moments of complete unity to sustain her. She closed her eyes, shutting out the sight of her own agony reflected in the mirror, and sat for long moments battling with tears that sprang from a seemingly never-ending source.

Alain's entrance was noiseless. His presence hit her with the force of a blow when his voice resounded across her shoulder. 'I have been speaking with my mother. She tells me none of the jewels are to your liking?'

She spun round, her hand going immediately to the little blue charm, clinging to it as if to a talisman that would protect her from his anger. Her throat ached as she forced out the answer. : 'On the contrary, they are all much too beautiful and too costly for me ever to wear with comfort. You must remember that I am a country girl, unused to such opulence, and you must give me time to adjust.'

Expecting a sarcastic rejoinder, she held her breath, but his voice when he spoke was unfamiliar—run through with tenderness.

'Poor, meek little girl, don't you like living from the top of the bottle?' Wary of his unaccustomed gentleness, her blue eyes distended with alarm. When he moved to touch her she stepped out of reach so hastily she overturned a stool, projecting it against the dressing-table with a crash that set bottles and jars jangling. Like a sword into a scabbard, his hand was quickly sheathed.

Blind remorse filled her. She stepped forward to touch him—to communicate without words— but even as she moved his darkly handsome face clouded and his mouth tightened into a 'line of arrogant scorn.

'You have no need to run from me!' he accused, his dark eyes glittering. 'I came, at my mother's request, because she has formed the opinion that I am neglecting you. She, naturally, is not aware that you prefer my neglect to my attention and I would not wish her to know.' Ignoring her attempt to stammer an objection, he went on, 'She has willed me into agreeing to yet another plan for which I have no liking but which, nevertheless, I have promised to support. We are to give a dinner party—rather a formal one, I'm afraid—so that our friends and neighbours might be introduced to the new Comtesse de Treville. My mother will help you arrange it, she is an expert hostess and you will learn much from her. I shall be too busy during the next couple of weeks to be of much help, but I'm certain you and Maman together will be able to cope. It should, at least, alleviate some of the pressure she is bringing to bear upon me regarding my neglect of yourself, and it will also be a good opportunity for you to begin adjusting to your new position. Everyone, therefore,' his words became heavily charged with sarcasm, 'should then be completely happy.'

Fleur thought, as she scanned his grim face, that she had never seen anyone looking less happy. It seemed that not even Celestine's

constant companionship, nor the return of their former friendliness, was enough to drive the demons from his soul.

'We will go downstairs together,' he gritted, holding out his arm with such surety in her direction that she thought he must have built-in radar where she was concerned. She took it without a murmur, laying her fingertips so lightly against his white-jacketed arm that it seemed impossible he should be aware it was there. But the muscles under his sleeve responded immediately to her touch, knotting as if to control any stray impulse that might lead to a softening that could be construed as intimacy.

During dinner Fleur was reminded of the scheme the Comtesse had evolved that afternoon. It was obvious that she had lost no time in acquainting Louis with the facts, because as soon as they were seated at the table he began to flirt outrageously, flinging himself into the act with an enjoyment that was not all manufactured.

Holding her eyes with his, he leant across and whispered penetratingly, 'How flattered I am that you have chosen to wear my small contribution to the Treville treasury, *ma petite*. Do you like it for itself alone, or did the fact that I bought it have a bearing on your choice?'

She was taken completely by surprise and before she could form a reply the Comtesse spoke to her. Without so much as an ashamed blink, she informed everyone, 'Fleur fell in love with the charm as soon as she saw it, Louis. Every other stone was discarded in favour of the little blue charm you bought me so many years ago. You do not mind that I have parted with it to Fleur?'

'Mind? I am delighted, Maman! Its wearer has brought it to life, enchanted it with her beauty so that it rises and falls with every beat of her heart. How I envy it its resting place...'

His wicked enjoyment of the situation sent the blood rushing to Fleur's cheeks. She tried not to look at Alain, but when she finally succumbed to the urge she wished she had not, because although he seemed to be listening calmly, even disinterestedly, she noticed that the hand holding his fork was showing white at the knuckles and the other was claspings and unclaspings in the manner she had long since learned was an indication of savagely held restraint.

Celestine, ever vigilant, seized upon the situation to twist it to her advantage. With her eyes trained upon Fleur's confused face, she mocked,

'Poor Fleur, you must not let Louis embarrass you so, he is an expert philanderer, never to be taken seriously, and especially not by a girl as unsophisticated as yourself. Although I must admit, Louis,' her brilliant glance speared him, 'your teasing does have an uplifting effect— Fleur's flushed cheeks and bright eyes are very becoming, don't you think?'

Unwittingly, Celestine had helped along their cause and the Comtesse was delighted. 'Indeed they are,' she hastened to agree, 'and you do seem to have the gift of cheering her up, Louis—Fleur always seems so happy in your company.'

'And I in hers,' he returned smoothly, one wicked eyelid closing in a wink as he met her glance across the table. 'It has always been my pleasure to indulge beautiful women, and my new cousin's loveliness is unique.' With sudden cruelty he taunted Alain, 'How maddening it must be, dear cousin, to have a wife whose beauty earns you the envy of every man and yet to be unable to enjoy your ownership to the full. If I were in your shoes,' his voice became sibilant with meaning, 'I should not rest until I could look upon what is mine.'

'Louis! ' His name, uttered in reproof, was the Comtesse's warning that he had gone too far, but he shrugged, unrepentant, and ignored

her unspoken warning. 'Well, Alain, *do* you feel as I do, or axe you immune to the frustrations that bedevil the common man?'

Alain folded his napkin with great deliberation, making them keenly aware that the limit of his control had almost been reached. Fleur's shocked eyes were upon his face when his lips moved to eject words born of an anger so great he could barely keep his voice steady. 'If you were me, Louis? But that wish is not newly conceived, is it? It is one that has plagued you for a lifetime! If you were me, you would be in control of the business and would find limitless funds to squander! Again, if you were me, you would sell this chateau, regardless of sentiment, and travel the world in search of pleasure! How fortunate for us all that you are not me,' he bit out with j ill-contained fury, 'as you will never be allowed to get your, hands on the business, on the chateau or,' his eyes flashed cold flame, '*on my wife.*'

Fleur jumped to her feet, appalled and sickened by the stark bitterness revealed between the two men. 'No, Alain, you must not say such things! You've misunderstood ... Louis is only trying to help—'

'*Himself!*' He turned on her savagely, daring her to contradict farther. She would have taken up the challenge. Louis might be weak, but he was not the villain Alain had portrayed and it would have been, less than justice not to have defended him, but the Comtesse intervened with a command that demanded all the respect due to her age and to the position she had occupied for the greater part of her life.

'*Alain! Louis!*' Her thin old voice was as inflexible as steel, 'you will put an end to this disgraceful scene immediately!'

But with unheeding fury the cousins rose to their feet, their stance antagonistic. Lithe, tensed to spring, they could have been the spirits of bygone Trevilles, each reaching instinctively to his side for the sword that would revenge their outraged cavalier instincts. The old Comtesse's frame was rigid as silently she willed them to obey her

command. Celestine's eyes glistened with enjoyment as she revelled in excitement seldom experienced within the ultra-civilized circle in which she moved. Then into the over-stretched silence broke a sob Fleur failed to suppress and at the sound Louis swung in her direction, looking contrite and, at the sight of her distress, faintly ashamed. When her lips moved, silently forming the words: 'Please, Louis!' he forced back his anger, then managed a short laugh which did not quite project amusement. Lightly, his flippancy belied by a wry expression Alain could neither see nor sense, he conceded defeat.

'Forgive me, Alain, I spoke out of turn, and for that I must apologize.'

Alain did not relax; on the contrary, he seemed savagely disappointed at being thwarted of his prey. If he had held a sword it would have been thrown to the ground as a measure of his disgust, but as an alternative he chose merely to acknowledge Louis' apology with one terse nod of his proud head before reaching out his hand towards the ever-ready Celestine so that she might accompany him from the room.

When the door closed behind them, Louis sank down upon his chair with an exaggerated attitude of exhaustion. 'Whew!' he expelled a relieved breath, 'I thought for one awful moment that we were about to exchange blows! Please, Maman,' he begged the distraught Comtesse, 'if you have any more ideas for arousing Alain's emotions please leave me out of them. I'd much prefer to tease a slumbering tiger than go through that again!'

But the Comtesse was not amused by his banter. Lowering her shaking frame into a chair, she faced him across the table and accused sternly, 'You>.,were very cruel to Alain, Louis—deliberately and callously cruel—and that I find hard to forgive. Why did you taunt him so?' Her voice trembled as she fought back the tears. 'Why, Louis?'

Dull colour ran under his skin as he shifted uneasily under her reproachful gaze. He tried to answer, ruffled his hair with an impatient hand, then began, shamefaced, on his defence. 'I reasoned that the only way his armour could be pierced was by taunting him with his affliction,' he confessed. When Fleur caught a pained breath, he swung towards her and challenged, 'Well, it worked, did it not? Anything else I might have said would merely have scratched the surface of his damnable aloofness, not pierced it!' He swung back to his aunt, his anger rising at the condemnation he saw in both their faces. 'That, or so I understood, -was the object of the exercise. Do I now stand condemned because of my success?'

His belligerence, fierce though it was, did not quite cover up his bewilderment and Fleur responded quickly to the hurt he was trying so hard to hide. Gently, she placed her hand on his sleeve to convey her sympathy before attempting to explain, 'It was not so much your words as your actions that upset Maman. It was horrible,' a shudder ran through her body at the recollection, 'to see you prepared to fight your cousin —your *blind* cousin, Louis!'

He blanched before answering, 'I understand.' It was a flat statement, spoken without a trace of shame, but they were left feeling he had more to say, so they remained silent. After a few minutes of introspection he threw out his arms in a gesture of helplessness and appealed, 'It's his damned arrogance, it makes me forget that he is blind! Sometimes, when I see him striding down the stairs or walking unhesitatingly to his chair I wonder if he really is blind or if he is perhaps having a

tremendous joke at our expense I' When both of them made' to interrupt, he shrugged off their protests. 'Oh yes, I know, I know, it simply is not possible! He *is* blind, and I'm ashamed of the way I provoked him just now, but explain to me if you can how he does it. Can it be that he possesses some extra sense that we lesser mortals lack?'

Fleur answered his defiant question by saying simply, 'He counts...'

'Counts?' Louis was startled.

She nodded. 'Yes, he counts. Everywhere he walks with such assurance has already been paced out in secret so that he knows exactly how many steps will be needed to reach his goal.' Louis was speechless. 'I've heard him,' Fleur continued/ unknowingly betraying her own agony. 'Night after night when he thinks everyone is asleep he paces the passageways, his bedroom; the stairs—always counting, retracing his steps time after time until he is satisfied he can find his way without stumbling.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' Louis croaked, his eyes fastened upon her calm face, 'what endurance ... and what courage!'

The Comtesse intervened, her eyes bright with unshed tears, 'None of us has ever doubted the existence of that. Whatever else Alain might lack he has proved he has courage in abundance.' There was a short moment when Fleur thought the Comtesse's iron control would break, but after a visible struggle she lifted her head to display a bright smile. 'Well, *mes enfants*,' she directed them both, 'we must not allow tonight's scene to weaken our determination to overcome Alain's resistance. By keeping in mind what you, Louis, have managed to prove—that the battlements *can* be breached—we must remain as resolute as ever to penetrate Alain's armoured shell. Are we all agreed? You, Fleur? And you, Louis?'

Louis' impish look returned as his volatile nature responded to the challenge. 'Very well, *mon Colonel*,' he mocked, sketching a gay salute.

But when the Comtesse's imperious, demanding look was trained upon Fleur she blushed, wild carnation, and forced herself to stammer

painfully, 'I ... I'm willing to try ... if you are quite sure it will help Alain.'

CHAPTER NINE

FLEUR was on her way to the flower plantation. For more than three weeks she had been kept busy helping the Comtesse with the many arrangements necessary for the success of the dinner-party which was to be held that evening, and now, the first chance she had had, she was hurrying to renew her acquaintance with the many friends she had made among the pickers. The Provencal peasant-folk had taken to her warmly, delighted with the genuine interest she had shown towards themselves and their families, and Fleur, in return, was rewarded by a feeling of homecoming when at every visit she enquired after each one's ailments, real or imaginary, just as she had done during the parish visits she had undertaken on behalf of her father.

They were hard workers, these people of Provence. They toiled from dawn to dusk during the successive harvest seasons that went on almost all the year round, reaping the blossoms from the great terraced plantations and from the great gardens lower down, filling sacks which were then loaded into wagons ready to be hauled to the distilleries so that the soul of the gorgeous harvest could, be extracted and sent, in the form of oils and essences, to the four corners of the globe.

It was early afternoon and very hot. As she hurried along the path Fleur smiled to herself, remembering how only half an hour earlier the Comtesse had insisted upon sending her to her room to rest after remarking that she was looking peaky and disturbingly pale. She had had quite a job convincing her that she felt perfectly well and was not sickening for anything, but eventually she had given in to the Comtesse's urging and had been glad to go to her room to escape her fussing. But it was such a beautiful day—the sky a hot sheet of blue with the surrounding countryside displayed like a bridesmaid's bouquet against its uncrumpled backcloth; the thrusting cypress trees

throwing a circle of relieving greenery around the colourful mass—that she had not been able to resist the urge to be out of doors.

Her springing steps faltered as disturbing thoughts intruded, acting as a depressant upon her usually sunny nature. She had been married for almost four weeks now and for three of those weeks she had seen Alain only infrequently, a glimpse of his straight back as she watched him each morning from her bedroom window being driven to the factory and again in the evening, very late, because since the row between the cousins Celestine and he had formed the habit of dining each evening in Grasse, making as their excuse the fact that pressure of work would not allow them to leave the factory in time to dine at the chateau.

So the Comtesse's brave plan had come to nothing; lack of opportunity had prevented any repetition of the last stormy evening, and Fleur was secretly thankful at being spared an identical ordeal. Besides which, she had become convinced over the past few weeks that there could never be a second passionate scene with herself as the predominating influence; Alain's absorption with Celestine was ample evidence that he was now regretting the impulse that had driven him to marry a girl he had never seen.

Almost without thought, her feet had carried her in the right direction and a shout of welcome from nearby workers jolted her out of her reverie. Instantly, her face lit up and she returned their greetings happily, completely at ease with her new friends.

She spent a happy hour wandering along the rows of bushes talking to the pickers whose nimble fingers never once stopped in their task of gathering the sweet-smelling petals while at the same time, in halting English and with many uproarious- attempts to mime, they managed to convey to her up-to-date news of their families. As the sun rose higher, generating molten heat, she felt the first twinges of a headache. Gradually the rows emptied of pickers as they departed for

the break they took each afternoon, to return later when the sun's rays ' were not so fierce and they were able to work in comfort. Fleur followed in their wake, her headache now too marked to be ignored, and accepted thankfully an invitation from Maman Rouge to share the meal they brought with them each day to the fields.

She declined food, her stomach revolted most decisively against sharing the wedges of bread, strong cheese and onion which was offered, but she eagerly accepted the cup of strong coffee which was handed to her. As she sipped at it, Maman Rouge scrutinized her white face and rebuked her with much concern for not having brought a hat.

'Our sun is much stronger than your weak English variety, Madame la Comtesse, and already you are looking pale! *Jean-Paul!*' she screeched suddenly at a cheeky-faced boy who was at that moment running past. 'Go to your mother and ask if Madame might borrow her new sunbonnet. *Vite! Vite!* And tell her I sent you!'

'Oh, really, it isn't necessary... !' Fleur protested, wondering at the back of her mind if she really did look such a wreck that everyone should be commenting about it. But Maman Rouge's dictate was reinforced by another of the group, a sweet-faced young girl whose large dark eyes had not left Fleur's face since she had joined the party. 'Maman Rouge is right, *madame*, it would be a tragedy if you were to spoil such a beautiful complexion,' she offered shyly.

The rough chorus of agreement that came from the men caused a tide of rich colour to flood her cheeks and one man, older than the rest and therefore privileged, leant forward to pass a teasing compliment.

'You are aptly named, Madame Fleur, for, if you will excuse my presumption, you are the favourite flower of all that grow around us. I named you "English Rose", but on second thoughts I have changed my mind. The English rose is attractive enough, but it cannot equal

those of Bulgaria. Roses grown in the hilly Balkan country are the loveliest in the world, none can compare with them just as, in our opinion, none can compare with you, Madame la Comtesse, and now that Monsieur le Comte's experiments are quite finished we have two triumphs to celebrate tonight—the coming of the fairest flower of the family of Treville with the most subtle perfume ever devised by Maison Treville! Mmmm!' he bunched' his fingers and lifted them to his lips in a smacking kiss. 'What an achievement for Monsieur le Comtel'

So Alain's work was finished. Fleur did not doubt the old man's assertion because on plantations, as in villages, secrets are kept only for as long as it takes one man to tell another. But she had not the heart to tell them that the perfume was not for her—that Celestine's claim to it was far superior and of much longer duration than her own—and also she did not want to spoil the party that had been arranged for them that evening...

All at once, the row of laughing, expectant faces blurred into one with the sheet of blue sky and began wavering in front of her as if seen through a heat haze. The heavy perfume of the - flowers merged with the smell of strong cheese and garlic and began pressing down, depriving her of air so that she could not breathe. Chattering voices escalated into a tremendous clamouring when, with a choking sigh, she slid from her seat and blackness descended upon her in an irresistible wave.

When she came to she was lying flat on a rough couch inside one of the workers' huts. It was dim, cool and silent and for a moment she was bewildered by her unfamiliar surroundings. She struggled to sit up, but before she was upright Maman Rouge's kind, wrinkled face appeared above her head.

Tie still for a moment longer, *mon enfant* she urged, 'to give yourself time to recover.'

Fleur sank back and admitted ruefully, 'You were right to rebuke me, Maman Rouge, I must have a touch of sunstroke I'

'Indeed, yes,' the old peasant nodded affirmation, and showed signs of distress. 'We ought to have warned you sooner about the strength of the sun upon an unprotected head. When Monsieur le Comte will say when he hears of our neglect I shudder to think. We deserve to be cursed for the idiots we all are!'

'Nonsense!' Fleur tried to sit up, but the effort brought on a wave of dizziness that caused her to sink back thankfully upon the bed. Her voice surprised her by its weakness when she continued to try to soothe the old woman's fears. 'It is entirely my own fault, J should have known better than to wander around bareheaded in this heat. When I've rested for a while, I'll make my way back to the chateau and no one will be any the wiser.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' The old woman blanched at the thought. 'That will never be allowed, Madame la Comtesse! One of the men must drive you back to the chateau! Bad enough that we allowed you to suffer because of our unthinking stupidity, but never must it be said that we were guilty of *deliberate* neglect! No, when you are able, you will be transported back home in one of the trucks.'

Nothing Fleur said could budge her from this decision, and so it was that instead of creeping up to her room by a side door as she had planned, she was driven to the front of the house in a smoke-belching truck whose engine made so much noise that it aroused everyone in the chateau when it revved up the drive.

The servants were the first to appear, but' as the voluble driver made known to them the reason for his noisy appearance the Comtesse appeared at the head of the steps demanding an explanation. One quick glance at Fleur's ashen face as she was helped out of the truck was enough to startle her into giving terse instructions, and before

Fleur quite knew how it had happened she was being tucked up in bed in her own blessedly cool room where shades were drawn against the hard light which by then was beating against her eyes, forcing a pain to throb through her head with the persistence of an insidious drum. The Comtesse uttered no word of reproach, but frowned anxiously when she gazed down into Fleur's pain-filled eyes.

'Try to rest, *ma petite*,' she murmured. 'The doctor has been sent for and should arrive very soon.' When Fleur answered with a deep sigh and closed her eyes, she tiptoed from the room and closed the door softly behind her.

Fleur awoke much later completely free from pain. Gingerly, she raised her head from the pillow to test her reactions, and when the expected pain did not materialize she sank back with a smile of relief. For one dreadful moment she thought her stupid actions had jeopardized her chances of being present at the dinner-party, and although she was not in the least looking forward to the event she would have been most upset on the Comtesse's account if all the weeks of preparation had been wasted.

Her bed gave a slight creak when she moved and ,she was startled when a voice carried a question across the dimness of the room.

'Are you awake?'

Her eyes sought the source of the voice and found Alain standing by the window, hardly visible against the screening drapes.

'Yes, thank you.' She sounded small and weak, like a child expecting a scolding. His voice had been austere but not unkind, and under the flimsy lace of her nightdress her heart began to pound. When he moved towards her she clasped her hands tightly and tried hard to control a fit of trembling when he sat down on the edge of the bed, so near that his presence overshadowed everything else in the room.

'They tell me you have not been looking well for weeks. I should have been told earlier.' He frowned darkly. 'This afternoon I gave instructions to the doctor that you are to have a complete check-up.'

'The doctor has been?' The words tumbled out in a breathless rush.

He nodded. 'I brought him myself after receiving a telephone call from my mother telling me you were ill. When we arrived you were asleep, but he managed to make his examination without disturbing you and left instructions that you are to have a light diet and for a few days you are to stay out of the sun—especially at midday. You may get up whenever you feel like it, but you must do nothing strenuous.'

His mouth relaxed into a smile so unexpected it took her breath away. 'Mad dogs and Englishmen ... !' he quoted with a devastating lift of his eyebrow. 'Even our tough, sun-baked pickers are wary of exposing their heads to the noon heat and yet you, I believe, do not hesitate! How can I guard you from the folly of your proud English independence? Will you give me your promise to be more careful in future?' He sounded as if her answer really mattered, as if he intended staying there all day until he received her assurance that she would do as he asked. She cleared her throat, but still the words came out huskily. 'Very well, I promise.'

For a few minutes there was silence, a pregnant, meaningful silence he made no attempt to break, and she became very conscious of his lean strength mere inches away from her. Her hands dropped to pull nervously at the silk coverlet and a restless movement of his resulted in their hands colliding. When she tried to draw quickly away, her fingers were caught in his cool clasp and once more she thrilled to the terrifying ecstasy of his touch. It was the first time they had made physical contact since the first night of their marriage when anger and contempt had motivated the hard passion that had driven him beyond control. But anger held no sway over this brief encounter, and in that

moment she caught a glimpse of deep loneliness, a loneliness which was usually kept well hidden under his solitary, autocratic manner.

She suddenly felt his nearness was too much. His touch was electrifying, sending a charge of high tension through her body and hitting her heart with a force that started the blood pounding in her ears. Her fingers fluttered in his, attempting an escape, but his grasp tightened.

'I ... I feel well enough to get up now,' she practically implored. 'It must be almost time to begin getting dressed for the dinner-party.'

'There's no hurry,' he told her coolly. 'As it is some time since we talked together we might as well make the most of this opportunity.'

She flinched from the memory, of the last time they had exchanged words and tried to relax, but when his hand reached out and began to stroke her cheek she became startingly alert.

'Your skin is velvet smooth,' he murmured, 'with the texture of a petal. Are you blushing? Your cheek feels hot beneath my hand.'

His touch was so gentle and his eyes so confusingly tender she could not draw away. His cool fingers were caressing not only her flushed face but also her wretched, troubled heart, and for the first time in weeks she began to feel completely at peace.

'You can be so understanding when you want to be Alain,' she whispered against his hand as it feathered against her mouth.

Her action surprised him. For a second his hand was still, then it descended with meaning to grip her shoulder. 'Don't tease me, Fleur,' he warned. 'I am not a boy who can be tormented and then told to run away and play!'

His words underlined his deep mistrust of her and her heart jolted against her ribs. For some reason he had become approachable, but the balance of his emotions was so fine that one unthinking remark could upset his equilibrium and chase him back into his brooding shell. Carefully, her eyes wet with tears, she whispered, 'I am your wife, Alain!'

His fingers tightened on her shoulders with a strength that threatened to paralyse all feeling, but she gladly withstood the pain rather than destroy the fragile, unbelievable moment.

'Fleur...!' Her name was crushed out from between tightly compressed lips. With a small murmur of surrender she swayed towards him. His hands were reaching out to draw her closer when a tap sounded on the door and the Comtesse's voice cut through the tender ribbon of emotion.

'Well, *ma petite*, and how are you feeling now?' Her bird-bright eyes swept from Fleur's flushed face towards Alain, who had stood up immediately his mother entered the room and was now a couple of paces away from the bed, his features a composed mask. The Comtesse, always alert to the chance of furthering her cause, nodded meaningfully at Fleur before asking slyly,

'May Louis come in? The poor boy has been distracted with worry since I told him of your mishap and he is blaming himself terribly for not taking more care of you. He will not rest until he has seen with his own eyes that you are quite recovered!'

When Alain's face darkened at the sound of Louis' name, Fleur sank back on her pillows with desolation in her heart. The Comtesse's well-meant interference had torn the flimsy fabric of understanding into a thousand pieces and she doubted if she would ever be allowed so close to Alain again. Struggling to overcome her misery, she nodded and told the Comtesse, 'Yes, of course, please tell him to

come in.' Then she closed her eyes to shut out the sight of Alain's rigid back as he strode, unspeaking, from the room.

* * *

An hour later, composed and outwardly calm, Fleur began preparing for the evening ahead. The huge wardrobe that had shown up her scanty possessions was no longer empty; days before the clothes Alain had promised her had arrived and she now had a choice of outfit for every conceivable occasion. But, as with the jewellery, their possession gave her no pleasure. Size, fit and colour were all perfect, carefully chosen by someone to whom explicit directions must have been given, but if it were not that the occasion was a grand one that called for a high standard of grooming she would have chosen to wear one of the dresses so lovingly stitched by her mother.

She stood undecided before the racks of clothes, trying to decide which dress to wear, and finally she picked a silk taffeta dress in a shade of pink that reminded her of the thrust of a tightly packed rosebud newly emerged from its protective boll. She laid it on the bed ready to step into after she had finished applying her make-up. She had already bathed, so she crossed over to her dressing-table and began coaxing her gleaming hair into heavy coils on top of her head, a style that added a regal dignity to her naturally graceful carriage. A touch of mascara to darken her lashes and the merest trace of pale pink lipstick and she was ready for the dress.

It whispered as she lifted it from the bed, and again when she stepped into it to zip it fastened. As, she walked across the floor the sound intensified, a rustling and sighing that might have come from a despairing ghost always just one step behind her. Alain had mentioned in England that he liked her to wear taffeta because he had said being able to hear her movements compensated a little for not being able to see her, so it was not surprising that most of the evening dresses he had ordered were made of the same rich material and

underskirts of taffeta had been included for wear with the filmier dresses.

She stood back from the mirror to judge the finished effect and wondered at the elegance money could achieve. The bodice of the dress was a pink shell above which her white shoulders rose satin-smooth; from her slender waist the skirt ran straight, following the line of her slim body, and stopped just short of the delicate cobweb of silver straps that formed an excuse for sandals. She bit her lip and frowned at her reflection. Her mouth still betrayed a tormented quiver which must not be allowed to be seen; her eyes echoed a sadness that was sure to excite comment from a company expecting to meet a radiant bride of a few weeks; and dark smudges under her eyes imparted an expression of fragile melancholy to her wan face. She was reaching for her make-up when a tap at the door caused her to brace instinctively. She turned towards the sound and reacted just in time to remove a pair of discarded shoes which lay directly in Alain's path as he walked unsuspectingly towards her. He stopped, his head tilted, and she knew he had heard the rustle of her dress when she moved.

'Fleur?' he clipped, his eyes roving the room, waiting for the answer that would pinpoint her presence.

'I'm here,' she answered, her eyes assessing him gravely, wondering at the control that enabled him to suppress all the anger that burned within him. For a brief moment he hesitated, then he held out his hand to offer her the object he was holding. Abruptly, he commanded,

'Tonight, I wish you to wear this perfume. It is my new creation, the one that has kept me busy these past weeks. I hope you will like it.'

Surprise overwhelmed her as she took the proffered glass phial. This was the perfume Celestine coveted so much—why was he offering to give it to her? She felt her question was answered when he went on

coldly, 'Most of the guests invited here this evening are competitors as well as friends. They will all have heard rumours of a new perfume from Maison Treville and I thought this an appropriate occasion to introduce both my new acquisitions.'

'I understand,' she answered, mechanically, subduing the wave of hope that had led her mistakenly to believe he had chosen her particularly to be the one to introduce the perfume. As the Comte de Treville he had a position to live up to, family honour to maintain, and that alone was reason enough for his decision even though afterwards, once the proprieties had been seen by his friends to have been observed, the perfume would be handed over to its rightful owner.

She started violently when he stepped closer. 'I shall put it on for you,' he stated, so coldly matter-of-fact she could have believed she had dreamt the tenderness of an hour ago. She wanted to stammer a refusal, but he was already removing the phial from her nerveless fingers and unscrewing the stopper.,

'First,' he took the stopper with its attached applicator and stroked it across her wrists, 'it is applied to the wrists. Then to the crook of the elbow,' his fingers burned her skin as he progressed up her arm. 'Next, the throat.' His impersonal fingers started a pulse beating like a wild thing, and when he transferred his attention to her uncovered shoulders she had to battle hard to suppress tremors from running through her body. 'A touch here,' his voice was beginning to sound constrained, 'and a little on the upper lip is all that is needed.' He released her and stepped back, completely withdrawn.

The warmth of her body generated a cloud of fragrance such as she had never before enjoyed and she drew in a deep breath as the beautiful smell filled the room.

'Do you like it?' he questioned politely, giving the impression that her answer, whatever it might be, was quite superfluous.

'Oh yes!' She twirled around so that the smell wafted about her, and breathed in deeply. 'It reminds me of home, of the garden after a shower of rain when the scent is so heavy and so glorious one feels enfolded in a mist of magic! Yes, k really does remind me of home!'

Ignoring her delight, he warned, 'Never apply perfume behind the ears or on the nape of the neck, its fragrance will simply float off behind you. Perfume, properly used, can work wonders. There is no more innocent or delicate means of self- expression, and by its use a woman's very soul, her spiritual atmosphere, can be infused around her in an unmistakable cloud of fragrance. It is not merely a cosmetic, but an essential aid for all women who wish to be more alluring and enticing to men.'

She stared at him. If a perfume, to him, was such a personalized thing how could he bear to allow her to wear one he had created especially for another woman—a woman who, both physically and spiritually, was her own direct opposite? Suddenly she felt she could not bear it. Her tangled emotions, together with the slight weakness she still felt, combined to create within her a feeling of deep depression. If there had been time, she would have run to wash off the perfume she now felt was alien. Highly fastidious, she felt degraded, as if forced by circumstances to wear another woman's clothes, and the idea was abhorrent to her. Her distaste was evident in her voice when she answered flatly,

'You make it sound like a love philtre, a bait with which to hypnotize the unsuspecting male! According to what you have just said, the relationship between perfume and personality is essential, but if this is so, the psychological side of your art requires more study, Alain! I have no wish to wear a perfume devised solely to stir men's emotions and I'll be obliged if you will hand over the rest of it to the person for

whom it was originally intended. Certainly I have no intention of ever using it again!"

His eyebrows drew together in a straight black line. All his aristocratic pride was evident in the haughty lift of his chin and in the flare of his narrow nostrils when he answered her in just two terse sentences.

'As you wish! Please be ready in five minutes to greet our guests!'

When he had left the room, she stood for a moment, undecided, then a quick upsurge of hurt helped her to make up her mind. She grabbed the phial of perfume from the dressing-table where Alain had left it, and ran quickly to the door and out into the passageway. Celestine's room was on the same floor as her own, and when she reached it she did not wait to knock but hurried straight inside before her courage could desert her. She was determined the perfume should be turned over to its rightful owner and the sooner the better. Although it was necessary to pretend, for the sake of Alain's friends, Celestine had to be made aware that the farce was being played for one evening only.

But the room was empty. Celestine had obviously just left, because her possessions were scattered all around the room and there was a mess on the dressing-table which the maid had not had time to clean up. Fleur's nose wrinkled with disgust as she stepped over discarded clothes to reach the dressing-table where a pile of screwed-up tissues and other trivia betrayed Celestine's untidy habits. Quickly, she cleared a space and left the phial where it could not fail to be noticed, then she hurried out of the room and went downstairs to Alain and the waiting Comtesse.

The first guests were announced just as she reached Alain's side, and for the next hour she was fully occupied trying to memorize the many names and faces presented to her. Elegantly dressed women escorted by distinguished-looking men filed past to be introduced, all

displaying a natural curiosity that was quickly replaced by genuine liking as Fleur's shy diffidence was communicated to them. The men especially were not slow to voice their admiration and Alain's features grew slightly less bleak as the introductions continued until, by the time they were seated at the dinner table, his attitude towards her showed signs of thawing. She knew, of course, that the change was purely for the benefit of his friends, but basking in the warmth of his approval was a heady sensation that brought the sparkle back to her eyes and an upward tilt to her drooping mouth.

C estine, much to her own chagrin, had been placed too far down the table to take part in Alain's conversation, and she had to be content with glowering every now and then at Fleur and Louis who were in her direct line of vision. But afterwards, when dinner was over and the guests were circulating or sitting in groups around the room, she made a beeline for Alain, who was in the centre of a group of local businessmen, all extolling praises of the new perfume.

Fleur found it amusing to be the focal point of so many inquisitive noses, and she almost giggled aloud when Monsieur Devereux, a rival manufacturer, took hold of her arm and began projecting his nose along its entire length, sniffing deeply.

'Ah.' He meditated for a second. 'A sweet, fresh top note!' Then he challenged Alain, 'Bergamot, sweet orange, verbena, lemon and mandarin!'

'And...?' Alain retorted.

At his cryptic reply Monsieur Devereux looked almost apoplectic and seeing Fleur's look of bewilderment Monsieur des Essalts, another of the party, offered an explanation. 'Devereux prides himself on being an expert "smeller", Comtesse, and refuses to admit himself beaten by the balance of ingredients your husband has used in his latest creation. A perfume expert is expected to be able to detect the finest

shades of odours, ' to name the various ingredients used, and to say whether it is wholly natural, wholly synthetic, or partly one and partly the other, but Alain's skilful blending is so perfectly balanced that we experts are all baffled.'

As Fleur acknowledged this tribute to Alain's talent she felt a deep thankfulness that he had retained the skill for which he was renowned. She was just about to thank Monsieur des Essalts for his ungrudging praise when Celestine's voice cut into the conversation.

'And have you decided yet what name is to be given to the perfume, Alain?' The question rang out like a challenge, but he seemed unperturbed by the angry undertone projected into her words.

'Yes, I have decided,' he answered smoothly. 'The name is "Fleur d'Amour".'

Amid the clamour of approval no one but Fleur saw the flash of chagrin that chased across Celestine's proud face. Fleur herself was so astonished by his declaration that she could do no more than stare across at Celestine, willing her not to read into his words a slight he certainly had not intended. The perfume was Celestine's, blended and created only for her, and the naming of it was a mere sop to Alain's conscience—a ploy to hoodwink his friends. She believed this so sincerely that Monsieur des Essalts' next words startled her.

'Ah,' he said. 'Flower of Love! A most apt title, *mon ami*, you have captured your wife's beauty and personality faithfully within your new creation; the portrait you have so skilfully executed should certainly bear her name.'

Fleur's heart missed a beat as dreadful doubts assailed her. With a sense of anti-climax, she heard Monsieur Devereux grudgingly admit, 'Yes, indeed. Alain, you have not lost your blending skill, nor has your gift for matching perfume to subject diminished. No one

could possibly doubt that the young Comtesse,' he bowed towards Fleur whose eyes were distended with growing alarm, 'is the inspiration behind "Fleur d'Amour"; its soft, delicate, sweet floral complex matches her personality perfectly.'

There was a question she had to ask and she forced it out huskily. 'Thank you for your compliments, gentlemen, but would not this new perfume also suit the personality of others— Celestine, for example?'

The immediate chorus of dissent that greeted her question verified her growing suspicion that she had badly misjudged Alain, and when Monsieur des Essalts took it upon himself to explain she listened with shocked dismay. 'You are right in one respect, Comtesse. There could be others with character and looks similar to your own who might wear this perfume successfully, but Celestine? Never! Her type of beauty calls for the essences of the Orient, in fact, for the sultry penetrating jasmin-patch you note that she is wearing at this very moment!'

Fleur could not bear to look at Alain, so certain was she that his face would be registering grim satisfaction. He had not bothered to deny her wild accusation; he had probably considered it beneath his contempt and unworthy of notice. How she must have hurt him by her rejection of his gift. Even if it had been meant simply as another payment of the debt he considered he owed her, he had deserved to have his generosity acknowledged. Instead of which—she had given it away! A wave of shamed remorse swept her. Frantically she searched her mind for some way of preventing her action from being found out and with a flash of inspiration she recalled Celestine's empty room. Celestine must have already been downstairs when she had crept in to deposit the bottle of perfume on her dressing-table and as she had had no reason to return upstairs since, the bottle must still remain in her bedroom, undiscovered! Even as the thought struck her her eyes swung towards Celestine, just in time to see her lift her shoulders in a disdainful shrug before moving away from the men

who were too engrossed in talking shop to give her the attention her ego demanded.

Fleur murmured an excuse and moved discreetly away from the company who were so intent upon their conversation they hardly noticed her departure. With her eyes firmly fixed upon the door by which she intended making her escape, she passed groups of chattering guests, smiling and nodding when they spoke but evading any attempt to delay her from her purpose. Her hand was on the knob of the door, when Louis's voice sounded close to her ear and his detaining hand descended upon her arm.

'Where are you rushing off to in such a hurry?' he grinned, making no effort to hide his approval of the blush that exactly matched the pink rosebud colour of her gown.

'I ... I've left something in my room ... a handkerchief ... I was just slipping upstairs to get it,' she stammered, the blush deepening as she forced out the lie.

'Til ring for a servant,' he insisted lazily, determined not to lose sight of her.

'Don't be silly,' she answered crossly, fretting at the delay. 'You know I've never been able to accustom myself to your habit of leaving everything to the servants, Louis, and I certainly wouldn't dream of asking one of them to undertake a task I can do myself in a matter of seconds.'

His eyes suddenly narrowed. Ignoring her criticism, he bent to peer into her face and wondered aloud, 'You look different tonight! I noticed it during dinner, but could not quite pin it down to any one thing. At first I thought it was your dress,, but, becoming though it is, the cause of the change is not a material one. Now and then I watched a tremor pass your lips and saw you suppress it by digging in your

pretty white teeth. Your hands shook when you lifted up your wine glass and a couple of times when I spoke to you it seemed I was dragging you back to earth from out of some private dream world you were reluctant to abandon. What is it, Fleur? What inward upheaval has caused you to look upon the world with a madonna's eyes—full of tender, painful secrets?'

She recoiled from the notion that her unasked for and unwanted love for Alain had become obvious to curious eyes. She wondered, with panic, if everyone present had the same awareness, then comforted herself with the thought that Louis was particularly acute. His perception was as great as Alain's, even more so—he could see! Fighting down the panic his words had caused, she made a brave attempt to appear unconcerned. She even managed to laugh a little when she drawled, 'You have an inventive imagination, Louis? but it becomes over-active with too much wine.'

The likeness between the cousins was never more marked than when their dignity was outraged, and when Louis' chin was arrogantly out-thrust she knew she had offended him. 'Are you implying that I am drunk?' he demanded of her with a coldness akin to Alain's. Her spirits sank. She had no wish to hurt his feelings, but she dared not allow him to probe further and, besides that, with each moment she was delayed her chances of recovering the phial grew slimmer. She had no choice but to offend him further.

'Not yet,' she deliberately teased, 'but you very soon will be and then Maman will become annoyed. Why don't you pay more attention to our young lady guests and allow your imagination to run riot in their direction, I'm sure they will be most gratified?' Without waiting to hear his explosive reply, she slipped through the doorway and sped up the stairs towards Celestine's bedroom.

A servant had tidied up the room, but otherwise everything remained as before. Light headed with relief, she tiptoed across to the

dressing-table and her hand was just about to close over the bottle when a voice cut through the silent room. 'Would you mind explaining what you are doing?'

She spun round to face Celestine who was standing in the doorway, obviously having just followed her up the stairs. The hard angry look she had worn all evening deepened as she waited, one foot tapping an impatient tattoo on the floor, for an answer.

'I'm sorry,' Fleur gasped, 'but I left something of mine here by mistake and I've come to collect it.'

'Something of yours?' Celestine walked up to the dressing-table and her eyes grew stormy when they alighted upon the phial of perfume. 'Why is that here in my room?' she demanded imperiously.

'I brought it just before dinner,' Fleur admitted, knowing it was useless to prevaricate any longer. 'I made a terrible mistake in thinking Alain had created it especially for you and although I knew I had to wear it this evening for the benefit of his friends, I wanted you to have what was left. However,' she drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes for a second as she relived the memory, 'what I heard downstairs made me realize the terrible mistake I had made. The perfume is mine^v and I've come to take it back.'

Celestine expelled a hissing breath, her beautiful young face growing ugly, distorted with a rage she made no effort to conceal. 'I shall find it hard to forgive Alain for leading me to believe the perfume was mine, then waiting for an occasion such as this to play his diabolical trick 1'

Fleur shrank back from the venom in her voice. 'Are you saying he planned it deliberately, just to hurt you?' she questioned huskily.

'What else?' Celestine flung back. 'I should have known there was some underhanded reason for his decision to dispense with me in favour of a new assistant, but I never dreamt he meant to deceive me in such a way! For weeks I have hung around the distillery, bored to distraction but willing to be on hand in case he should need me, and what is my reward? A slap in the face from the inhuman Comte whose insufferable dignity will not allow him to rest until all slights have been avenged!'

'Do you mean,' Fleur faltered, fastening on to a ray of hope, 'that all these weeks while you have been together at the distillery you have seen hardly anything of him?'

Celestine's mouth twisted into a derisory sneer. 'That is so, my dear, but that, too, was part of my punishment; he wanted revenge, to pay me back for imaginary wrongs! But do not deceive yourself that everything between us is ended. Come, stop pretending and begin to face facts! Why do you think he feels such revenge is necessary? Why would any man who is supposedly indifferent to a woman go to such lengths to hurt her?' When Fleur flinched she smiled and continued in a satisfied purr, 'We understand one another, Alain and I. Ours is a love-hate relationship that far outshines the wishy-washy emotion you English call love and, make no mistake about this, he will be drawn to my side whenever I call however much you might appeal to his chivalry and his sense of responsibility. His mother can remind him as often as she wishes about his position and his duty towards yourself, but he is tied to me by bonds far stronger than bonds of marriage. He knows this, the Comtesse knows it, and now—you know it!'

Fleur nodded, hypnotized into believing by the force of conviction behind the words, and too dazed with hurt to deny the cruel statements. How could she deny what she knew to be true? Alain's complex nature was such he could derive savage satisfaction from hurting the one who was closest to him, she knew that from her own

experience in England when for a few short weeks she had been the only one to bear the brunt of his displeasure. And then again, she had guessed right from the beginning that there was more between Celestine and himself than was ever allowed to show on the surface.

Still struggling with chaotic thoughts, she straightened and without speaking made to leave. Celestine watched her^ a lazy, feline smile playing about her lips, and when she had almost reached the door she mockingly questioned, 'What about your perfume? Isn't that what you came for?'

Fleur mustered a shred of dignity and turned to answer quietly, 'Thank you, but I should be glad if you would dispose of it for me. I never want to wear it again.'

When Fleur left the room Celestine's smile disappeared. Sounds from downstairs told her that guests were beginning to leave, so she decided against returning to the party. Her eyes fell upon the phial of perfume and she picked it up and looked at it long and thoughtfully, then with a slow smile she made her way to the bathroom to run her bath.

Fleur, too, heard the sound of departing guests, but nothing could have persuaded her to face the prolonged goodbyes she knew she could expect if she returned to speed them on their way. Knowing the family would make some apology for her absence, she went straight to her room and closed the door with a feeling of relief. Here, she had no need to pretend that all was well between Alain and herself; the strain of behaving all evening like a devoted and cherished wife had been greater than she had realized.

Her hands shook as she prepared for bed and it was much later as she lay, unable to sleep, when she forced herself to review the conversation between Celestine and herself. Nagging doubts, subdued until then by Celestine's forceful arguments, were allowed

space in her mind and her just nature rebelled against taking Celestine's word without first seeking confirmation from Alain. He was too honest, she assured herself inwardly, to carry on an alliance with Celestine while still married to herself. He had taken his marriage vows with an impressive sincerity that still lingered in her mind, making it impossible for her to believe in his deceit. While he had made it quite plain before their marriage that he neither offered nor wanted love in return, she had nevertheless been made aware of his genuine regard and his unswerving resolve that she would never have cause to regret her decision to become his wife. She clung to these facts with desperation, forcing them to the forefront of her mind that they might enable her to whip up sufficient courage to confront Alain with a request to either confirm or deny Celestine's words.

It seemed a long time later when she heard him walk past her door on his way to his room. She would have confronted him there and then, but it was late and the questions she wanted to ask would sound better in the morning when she hoped she would be better able to control the emotional quiver in her voice. Just then, a feather- light tap sounded on the door that connected her bedroom with the bathroom she shared with Alain. She was so startled that for a moment she remained very still, staring in the direction of the sound, but when it was not repeated she relaxed, telling herself it was the work of her over-active imagination. But the noise bothered her. She jumped out of bed, shrugged on her negligee, and walked over to the door. She hesitated for a moment, then turned the handle and walked inside.

Across the width of the floor speared a ray of light that came from Alain's partially open door. She wavered, but an undeniable compulsion drew her forward. Through the gap she could see into the interior of the room and the scene inside turned her limbs to stone and her heart to a hurt, quivering mass. As she watched, Celestine, looking especially lovely in a dressing-gown of stiff white brocade, its high, outstanding collar framing her face, rustled across to Alain and stood close to him for a moment without speaking before raising

her arms to place them confidently around his neck. For a moment he looked startled, as if her presence in his room was unexpected, but then his face was transformed by a look of such immense pleasure that Fleur knew she was looking at a man deeply in love. When his arms reached out to clasp Celestine around the waist, Fleur lingered no longer. She withdrew from the scene, her ragged feelings unable to cope with more, and stepped backward into the darkness. But before she was out of earshot she heard Alain's deep voice murmuring with passionate feeling, *'Oh, my heart's darling, how I've yearned to have you back in my arms!'*

Sickened, and so hurt she could hardly swallow back the tears that constricted her throat, she stumbled back to her room, sank back on the bed, and stared with desolate eyes at the square of ceiling above her head, searching its empty surface for an answer to the problem that had suddenly become insoluble.

CHAPTER TEN

It was not quite four o'clock the next morning when Fleur left the chateau. She crept downstairs, her shabby suitcase packed with only those possessions she had brought with her from England gripped tightly in her hand. In the solemn quiet of early morning the chateau was full of unexpected creaks and sudden small noises and a dozen times she halted in her tracks, in a sweat of fear, in case one of the sounds should herald the arrival of Alain demanding to know why she was opting out of fulfilling her end of their bargain.

The solid wooden doors swung open easily in response to her touch, and once outside she stepped on to the grass and began to run along the length of the drive, never once allowing her steps to falter until the massive iron gates loomed into view and she knew there was no longer any danger of being seen from the house.

The road was deserted. She had no idea which direction she should take, only that she wanted to get to Nice where she knew she could board a plane for England—and home. So she took a wild guess and began walking in the opposite direction to Grasse, arguing to herself that as the town was inland and the chateau stood between it and the coast she must surely be going in the right direction. After travelling along what seemed miles of tree-lined road without coming across a signpost or any person who might have directed her, her steps began to flag. Her suitcase felt a ton weight and in her hurry to leave the chateau she had not stopped to consider the need for food. Dinner the evening before had been the last meal she had eaten and the exercise of walking, together with the freshening effect of clear morning air, had combined to make her feel ravenously hungry.

She was just about to sit down for a rest when she heard behind her the chugging of a heavy motor. Her first instinct was to hide, but then she reasoned that no one from the chateau would use such an obviously slow-moving form of transport with which to catch her up

so she waited hopefully at the side of the road until the noise appeared in concrete form.

It was a tractor-driven wagon, piled with boxes of cut flowers, and her relief was tremendous when in answer to her one desperate word: '*Aeropart!*' the young driver nodded his understanding of her pleas for a lift and answered, '*Mais oui, mademoiselle!*'

She could have kissed his cheerful young face when he leant to clear a space, then helped her on to the wagon. Her understanding of the local *patois* had improved enormously during her many talks with the pickers and she had no difficulty in understanding when he told her he was on his way to the flower market in Nice. He seemed glad of her company, even though the noise of the tractor made conversation difficult, and when he took from his pocket a packet containing bread and cheese and offered to share it with her she accepted gladly.

Munching her slice of fresh bread—not long from the oven and spread liberally with pale, creamy butter—she sat high behind the lumbering tractor and watched the coastline draw nearer, feeling for the first time since her discovery of Alain's treachery a sense of peace entering her soul. She would soon be home, back with her loving parents and the friends she had missed so badly. Wistfully, she wondered if the old Comtesse would miss her. She had not had time to write a note, her flight had been made on impulse, but she promised herself that as soon as she reached home she would write to her and try to explain, in a way that would cause her as little pain as possible.

Very soon, the tractor rumbled into the streets of Nice. The promenade and avenues were deserted, only one or two flower-sellers were setting up stalls in the market place, preparatory to displaying their blooms. Fleur jumped from the wagon, thanked the young man for his help, then set off according to his directions to find a taxi which would take her to the airport. A sense of urgency was

beginning to make itself felt. About this time of day the occupants of the chateau would be beginning to stir, and she wanted to be well on her way to England when her absence was discovered.

With relief, she hailed a cruising taxi and scrambled into it, giving the rapid instructions: '*Aéroport, vite, s'il vous plait?*' It was not until she had been driven almost half the way there that she realized her hands were shaking and her heart was beating with hard, nervous thumps.

As soon as they arrived at the airport she paid off the taxi and hurried into the vast reception area where, even at that early hour, porters were rushing trolleys full of luggage towards moving conveyor belts and people were rushing to buy coffee, cigarettes and boxes of freshly cut flowers as last-minute mementoes, as well as demanding all kinds of information from the harassed staff.

Her fingers gripped her bag with unconscious apprehension as she approached the counter and stated her requirements. 'One seat on the first available flight to England, please,' she stammered.

The official smiled reassuringly, thinking the nervous timidity he saw in her face had its origin in a fear of flying. 'You will be quite safe, *mademoiselle*, no need to worry I Wait until your flight number is called, then go to the appropriate gate where a stewardess will be waiting to take you to the plane. You have plenty of time/ he added swiftly when she clutched her ticket and looked ready to run, 'your plane is not due to leave for two hours yet!'

Two hours! Somehow she had not expected to be delayed. Her fevered mind had led her to imagine she would step out of the taxi and straight on to a plane that would whisk her away to England before any last-minute doubts could begin to cloud her mind. But two hours! That was time enough for Alain to alert the police and half the countryside!

She wandered disconsolately into the airport lounge and found a corner seat partly obscured by a large potted palm. She sat down facing the plate-glass window that looked out on to the tarmac and prepared to wait, determined to keep her thoughts from straying to Alain and the scene that had precipitated her hurried departure. At first it was not hard—the incoming and outgoing planes were fascinating to watch—but then as passengers disembarked it seemed each batch contained at least one tall, lithe figure whose arrogant profile caused her heart to lurch with sickening force, then subside into a terrified thumping when she realized she was jumping at shadows: her tormented mind had fashioned into images of Alain.

A dozen times she looked at her watch, urging the hands forward to the appointed time, until at last over the metallic-sounding tannoy she heard her flight announced. She moved quickly towards the departure gate with her eyes fixed straight ahead and her mind so intensely set upon reaching it that she did not hear her name when it was called. She had just joined the end of the quickly forming queue when a hand closed over her arm and a voice called out: '*Fleur!* Thank God I've found you!'

She spun round, her face ashen. 'Louis!' Her tone implored him not to delay her as her fellow- travellers began moving towards the waiting plane.

'Fleur, wait! I must speak with you!'

'Not now, Louis.' she answered wildly. 'I'll miss my plane. I'll write as soon as I reach home, I promise!'

She was almost through the gate when he caught hold of her again and swung her round to face him. For the first time she noticed the signs of distress in his face. His hair was tousled by agitated fingers and he was breathing heavily as if fighting to overcome the aftermath of a strenuous sprint.

'Fleur, it's Maman, she's had some sort of an attack. The doctor is with her now, but she's been-asking for you...'

'Maman? Oh no...!' Her shocked cry was drowned by the revving of powerful engines, but she did not give a second thought to the plane that was waiting on the runway. 'Take me to her at once, Louis! Hurry!'

It was not until she was in the car, speeding along the miles that separated Nice from the chateau, that Louis was able to explain fully. In a matter-of-fact, steadily controlled voice that emphasized rather than hid his strong feelings, he told her,

'She was found lying on the floor of your room by the maid when she took up your early-morning tea. We think she must have felt anxious about you—when you did not reappear last night Alain explained to the guests that you had had a touch of sunstroke that afternoon and that because you had not quite recovered from it you had retired early. His mother accepted the explanation, but she must have woken earlier than usual and decided to find out for herself how you were feeling. She had tried to reach the bell to summon help, but before she could reach it she collapsed. Luckily, it must have happened less than half an hour before she was discovered, otherwise the consequences might have been much more serious. A stroke is serious at any time, of course, but at her age...' He shrugged, and left the sentence unfinished.

'How bad is she?' Fleur whispered.

'One side of her body is paralysed, but the doctor is hopeful that with careful nursing this condition will improve. Her words, when she tried to speak, sounded gibberish to me, but Alain understood. She was speaking your name, asking for you, and the only way we could get her to rest was by telling her I was going to fetch you. Thank God

I started my search at the airport, otherwise in another few minutes you would have been on your way to England!'

He was concentrating on his driving, but her distress was so intense it was communicated to him. He glanced around and was shocked by the horror he saw in her eyes.

'Fleur! For heaven's sake! You're surely not blaming yourself for Maman's collapse—you couldn't possibly have foreseen.. .'

When she crumpled up in her seat and began to sob he cursed his own stupidity and drew in to the side of the road. Then, pulling her forward into his arms, he cradled her shaking body and tried to comfort her. But her remorse went too deep for mere words, and it was a long time before her storm of weeping had subsided enough to enable his words to penetrate.

It was not your fault, do you hear!' He shook her. 'The Comtesse is old—it was unfortunate and terribly distressing that it should have been your absence that triggered off the stroke, but it could have happened any. time, Fleur, you must believe that!' In his agitation he shook her again, but she was stiff and unresponsive. Impelled by compassion, he half-lifted his hand to stroke her bright hair, but changed his mind and with a grim look-of maturity upon his strained features he decided to try to arouse her from her numbness by appealing to her for help.

'I do not intend to ask questions, Fleur,' he told her quietly, 'but as it is obvious that the situation between yourself and Alain is much worse than was thought, I must ask you a favour.' She did not stir, but he was sure he had her attention, so he carried on, 'Will you stay at the chateau? Maman needs a woman, someone who loves and understands her as you do. The servants are devoted, but they are not the same as family, as I am sure you will agree. And Fleur ...' She looked up when he hesitated, wondering what it was he found so hard

to say, and faint colour stained her cheeks when he went on, 'I feel I must ask this of you, both for my aunt's sake and for Alain's. Although both he and his mother need you desperately, it is quite plain that after your flight from him today his pride would never allow him to ask for your help.'

Her colour receded, leaving her deathly white. 'He must hate me for what I have done to his mother,' she whispered, her blue eyes pools of agonized remorse. 'And why should he want me around when he has Celestine?'

'She packed her bags and left for Paris this morning,' he answered flatly.

Hardly able to believe it, she faltered, 'Does Alain know?'

'Presumably, since it was he who told me,' he shrugged. 'It seems they discussed the possibility of the trip last night, and this morning, even though she was told of the Comtesse's illness, Celestine saw no reason to change her mind—she hates sickrooms, so she has gone, bag and baggage, and good riddance I' he flared contemptuously.

For long seconds they were wrapped in silent thought; Louis hoping desperately that his plea would penetrate her numbed senses and Fleur fighting with the devastating knowledge that she had almost caused the death of the old lady she loved. Finally, Louis broke the silence. 'Well, what do you intend to do? There is no question of your being forced into a decision, but if you feel you cannot stay it might be less painful for Maman if you leave now without seeing her at all. Believe me, *ma petite*, if that is what you decide I will understand. Just say the word and I will drive you straight back to the airport.'

He was pretending she had a choice, but she knew she had none. Even if she had not come to love the Comtesse as much as she did, her

strong sense of duty would not have allowed her to desert her in her hour of need. But she had Alain to face...

Louis never guessed the effort it cost her to whisper, 'Please drive on, Louis. Of course I must stay.'

She went straight up to the Comtesse's room when she reached the chateau. The doctor had left, but a nurse was in attendance upon the old lady whose frail body barely disturbed the surface of the silk coverlet that was spread like a bright wave of mimosa across her bed. Fleur tiptoed across the carpet, and was shocked to see how small and withered the Comtesse had become. Her face was etched like a delicate porcelain carving against the pristine pillows; her hands, with blue veins showing prominent through almost transparent skin, were still, their lifelessness curiously emphasized by the absence of the many rings she usually wore. When the nurse held up her hand,

warning her not to speak, her apron crackled and the crisp sound split the silence of the room with the impact of clashing cymbals.

There was an almost imperceptible movement from the bed, then a low moan, and the Comtesse opened her eyes just as Fleur's concerned face appeared above her head. Her drug-clouded eyes brightened, and her lips moved to speak, but the effort was too much and with a sigh she slipped back into unconsciousness—but with a small, secret smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

The nurse motioned Fleur out of the room and when she obeyed she followed her into the passageway.

'She knew you, *madame*, and she is now content. . She will not waken again until the sedative has worn off, so if you take my advice, you will sleep yourself for an hour or two. You look as if you need it,' she concluded with a keen professional look at Fleur's wan face and unsteady mouth.

Fleur thanked her and agreed to follow her suggestion, but when she was back in her own room she knew sleep would be impossible. She had one more upsetting duty to perform before she could even hope to rest. She washed away all traces of tears and changed into a fresh dress before going downstairs in search of Alain.

He was alone in the library, sitting in a deep leather armchair placed in front of the window so that a stream of sunlight played on his dark head with the directness of a silver-bladed lance. Her cotton dress did not betray her with a whisper as she glided through the partially open door, and when her eyes fell upon his hands, clenching and unclenching as he wrestled with solitary thoughts, her heart sank.

'Alain!' Although she tried to project her voice his name sounded like a frightened whisper, but she knew he had heard when he froze to attention, his restless hands immediately still. 'Alain,' she trembled as she walked towards him, 'I'm so terribly sorry!'

He stood up and towered over her. 'You have seen her?'

'Yes,' she choked. 'She knew me ... she smiled ...' She could not go on.

His grim mouth relaxed, but not enough to form a smile. He moved, an uncertain, uncharted movement that projected his foot against the leg of a chair, sending him slightly off balance. She darted forward to help him, but he righted himself immediately and groped outwards with his hands, seeking the back of his chair. Fleur was shocked. It was the first time he had ever shown any lack of confidence; he seemed stripped of all the arrogant assurance which so annoyed Louis but which to her had symbolized his complete independence of everyone around him.

She was not allowed time to wonder at the change in him. Aloofly, as if aware he had betrayed a weakness, he asked, 'Will you please sit down, Fleur, I think it is time we discussed our future.'

Her heart turned over when he ran his fingers through his hair with a movement so dispirited, so weary, it seemed to indicate that all his brave battles had been lost. Suddenly it seemed terribly important that he should know how bitterly she regretted her actions. Her heart was full of the words she wanted to say, but all she managed to force through her trembling lips was the inadequate sentence: 'I'm sorry, Alain, so very sorry...'

He went white to the lips. 'I'm sorry, too, Fleur, sorry I talked you into a marriage that has brought nothing but regrets. I made a dreadful mistake; I only wish it were possible to turn back the clock so that you might be spared more heartbreak ...'

The meaning behind his words brought staggering pain. He had no need to go on, no need to spell out his yearning for Celestine when she had already heard and witnessed with her own eyes the intensity of the love he felt for her. She had to stop him from saying any more, stop him before her pitiful defences crumbled and she embarrassed him still further by pleading with him not to send her away.

'Don't worry about me, Alain. I'll stay for a while until your mother recovers, but afterwards...'

'Thank you, it is good of you to even consider doing so, in the circumstances,' he replied gravely. 'I know what your presence here means to her, so I cannot try to dissuade you from staying, but...' his face wavered in a grey mist as he considered his next words carefully before continuing in a controlled voice that contained neither apology nor remorse, 'Do you think you will find your stay easier if I tell you I intend going away for a while?'

'Probably!' Pride made her answer just one word.

He stood up to walk a few paces away, turning his back towards her. 'Aren't you interested enough even to ask where?' he demanded with sudden savagery.

Again, it was just as well her answer needed only one word, because it was all she was capable of uttering. Tense and unhesitantly, she answered: 'No!' then she ran from the room as if it contained all the devils in hell. She had no need to ask where: Celestine was in Paris, so where else would he be going but there?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FLEUR was pushing the Comtesse's wheelchair along the path that wound its way through the grounds of the chateau. It was October, almost two months since the Comtesse's stroke and Alain's desertion which had followed just a short week later, but the sun was shining upon countryside profuse with flowers, only the scent had changed from that of roses and mimosa to the even headier fragrance of geranium and wild mint. Fleur stopped and carefully positioned the wheelchair so that fingers of shade cast by tall cypress trees protected the Comtesse from the sun, then she sat down on a convenient garden seat facing her.

'Are you comfortable, Maman? Would you like a cushion behind your head?'

The Comtesse smiled up into her anxious face and chided gently, 'Stop hovering, child! I am almost completely recovered, the doctor himself has assured you of this, and yet still you insist upon cossetting me as if I were made of some insubstantial substance the sun's rays might melt. I insist you sit down and stop fussing.'

The words were gently said, but meant to be obeyed, so Fleur smiled and relaxed in her seat, comforted by the knowledge that what the Comtesse had just said was true: except for being still a little unsteady on her feet, and the fact that she now grew tired easily, she had made a marvellous recovery. For weeks Fleur had watched over her, hardly leaving her side by night or day, until the doctor had insisted upon her relaxing her vigil for the sake of her own health and his peace of mind. But she had found it impossible to take his advice. Constantly, she had been drawn back to the Comtesse's side, anticipating her every need, and finally she had been rewarded by a lightening of the tremendous load of guilt that burdened her mind when as each day passed she saw signs of progressive improvement.

Alain's absence hovered like a giant question mark between them. The Comtesse had never once questioned her about the events that had led up to her flight from the chateau, it was as if she wished to erase the incident from her mind, to pretend it had never happened, and Fleur was content to have it so because she knew the old lady was not yet well enough to withstand the upset of having the painful subject reopened. It would have to be discussed, of course. Sooner or later Alain would have to make known his attachment to Celestine, but his absence lessened the urgency of a decision and each day he remained away extended the Comtesse's chances of being well enough to weather the shock when it came.

The Comtesse settled back in her chair and looked thoughtfully across to Fleur. 'Did you know I had spoken to Alain on the telephone last night?' she enquired, her knowledgeable old eyes seeming capable of reading thoughts.

Fleur gave a visible start and lifted her hand involuntarily to her cheeks to hide the rush of burning colour. She knew that during his absence he had been in constant touch with his mother by telephone, but not once had he asked to speak to her and pride had prevented her from asking the Comtesse for news of him.

'No,' she managed a stifled answer, 'I did not know. How is he?'

Cautiously, obviously wary in case an unthinking word should cause distress, the Comtesse told her,

'He sounded in surprisingly good spirits, in fact, his voice was so confident and so full of vigour I could have believed I was speaking to the man he used to be; the son I thought was lost to me for ever.' She wiped away a vagrant tear, then, as if determined not to succumb to the weakness of self-pity, she took a deep breath and spoke with asperity. 'He would not speak of himself. Even when I tried to insist upon knowing when he would be returning home all he did was tease

me by saying that he preferred that his homecoming should come as a surprise but that when he did come home he would have some very special news for me which he wished to deliver in person. It is most annoying of him to persist with this secrecy,' she frowned. 'Why won't he even tell me where he is staying? What possible reason can he have for wanting to keep us in ignorance of his whereabouts?'

Fleur did not reply. It was agony to think of him in Paris with Celestine. Many times during the past weeks she had wakened from her sleep imagining his arms were around her, hearing in her dreams his husky voice whispering wonderful, passionate phrases and feeling for a fleeting, drowsy second a delirious happiness as she teetered once again on the threshold of the heaven she had been introduced to one rapturous night when the scent of roses had drifted through the open window to add extra sweetness to those precious hours. She wondered if he, too, remembered; wondered if it could possibly have been the memory of that evening that had prompted him to name his new perfume 'Fleur d'Amour'— Flower of Love...

But when the Comtesse's words returned to mock her she knew she was grasping at straws, dreaming impossible dreams. He had sounded in surprisingly good spirits, she said—confident and full of vigour. If Celestine had wrought such a wonderful change in him she deserved to be congratulated. Not even Maman, with her built-in resistance to Celestine's charms, would be able to speak disapprovingly of the woman who had restored her son to her, and still less would she find it possible to object to their alliance once Alain made it plain how much his future happiness relied upon having her by his side.

She stood up quickly, unable to bear the agony of such thoughts, and forced back an onrush of tears as she comforted the old lady, 'I'm certain Alain will not keep you in suspense much longer, Maman, and meanwhile you must stop worrying. Think how disappointed he -will be if he should return home to find you too ill and upset to hear his

news! Come now,' she exerted gentle pressure upon the Comtesse's shoulders, 'lean back and close your eyes, it is time for your nap.'

She sat beside the wheelchair for ten minutes until she was sure the Comtesse was asleep, then she tiptoed along the path until she reached a favourite spot which gave a wonderful panoramic view of the plantations and the surrounding countryside. Beneath the spot where she sat the ground fell away, then rose in the distance in waves of vivid red, shaded here and there by tones of pink. Massed geranium petals, heavy with a perfume so potent it drugged the senses and with a beauty so indescribable that to gaze too long was to induce a hypnotic state bordering almost upon stupor.

It was here Louis found her half an hour later. It was quite some seconds before she became aware of him standing looking down at her, and when she eventually did her pensive face lightened with a smile of welcome.

'Why, Louis, how unusual to see you at this 'time of day! Maman was remarking only this morning how little we see of you these days. Suddenly you seem to have become a dedicated businessman!'

He did not respond with a smile to her teasing, and when he dropped down beside her and said gravely: 'Fleur, I must talk to you,' her eyes widened with foreboding. She twisted around to send a panic-stricken look towards the wheelchair, but he shook his head and reassured her, 'She's perfectly all right when I passed her she was sleeping soundly.'

She relaxed. 'Then what is it, Louis? What have we to discuss that makes you look so serious?'

But now the opportunity he had sought was upon him he seemed to be having difficulty in finding words. She waited patiently, her eyes puzzled, until he had sorted out his thoughts, then stiffened with

shock when he abruptly jerked out, 'Is everything over between you and Alain?'

The geranium-red mass behind her was no brighter than the colour in her cheeks when she whispered, 'You have no right to ask me 'that, Louis.'

Her answer snapped the tight rein on the feelings he had sought to contain and with sudden anger he turned on her. 'But I do have that right, Fleur, no one has more right! For weeks I have watched you slowly dying inside while you wait for a word or a sign from the man whose neglect of you absolves him of all rights as a husband! Each day your eyes have grown a little sadder, your lovely face a little less serene until now you are a silent little shadow that creeps around the chateau with a heart that is heavy with remorse and a spirit too depressed to recognize the love I have found impossible to conceal. *I love you, Fleur!*' His hands fastened upon her shoulders as if impelled to shake the dazed incomprehension from her eyes. 'Come away with me—now, today—and I swear I will spend my whole life leaking up to you for Alain's devilish treatment!'

When he pulled her forward, intent upon kissing her trembling mouth, her numbed senses revived. With every bit of strength she possessed she pushed against him so that he had to let her go.

'How could you, Louis!' she panted, so shaken she had to tense every muscle for control. 'How could you betray not only my friendship but also your family's trust! Have you no thought for Maman's feelings? I know there is little accord between yourself and Alain, but surely he has done nothing to deserve such treachery from you. *I am Alain's wife*, Louis! You might forget that fact—and so might he—but I never shall!'

When her voice broke on a heartbroken sob, his shoulders sagged. For a while there was silence between them, then hesitantly he told her,

'I tried to fight it, Fleur, I am not so entirely without conscience that I found it easy to plan to steal the wife of a man who is blind. If Alain still had his sight I would not have found it necessary these past weeks to work myself almost to a standstill in an effort to keep my mind off loving you. But he does not deserve such consideration! He left you to cope alone with Maman and went off to pursue his own interest without a thought for either of you. How can you defend him? Surely you can't still have a regard for him?'

'Would you have me hate him simply because he cannot return my love?' she asked simply.

'Most of the women I know would do just that!' he bit out in return.

She winced for him. 'Then I don't wonder you are so disillusioned, Louis.'

'*Mow Dieu!*' He turned away with a defeated shrug. 'I should have known better than to expect you to return my love. Alain is even more fortunate than I thought.' He thrust his hands into his pockets and kicked moodily at a stone. 'I suppose I now have no alternative but to leave the chateau...'

'No, Louis, you can't do that! What about Maman? How can you even think of deserting her when her health is so precarious? You must stay, for her sake and also for the sake of the business. Who will make the necessary decisions if both you and Alain are absent?'

'*Alain! Alain!* Always your thoughts are for him!' He threw his arms wide in a furious Gallic gesture, amazed that she should be worrying about the man who alone was responsible for her own heartbreak. He

was so angry on her behalf she saw she had no choice but to make him' fully aware of the situation between Alain and herself. Steadily, with her emotions firmly under control, she told him,

It is I who will be leaving the' chateau. When Alain returns he will be bringing Celestine to stay ... permanently.'

He stared back at her, surprised and shocked. 'It can't be true! Are you sure of this?' he questioned sharply, hardly needing to doubt her words when he glimpsed the agony that darkened her deep blue eyes to purple.

'Yes, quite sure.' But when she saw a flash of renewed hope lighten his eyes she had to disillusion him. 'But that makes no difference to my feelings towards you, Louis.' She swallowed hard, and when she again began to speak her voice had descended to a whisper. 'I shall never love anyone but Alain, never ...' Her hand went to the little blue charm she always wore around her neck and he knew, with quick insight, that she was thinking of the inscription that might have been penned exclusively for herself and Alain. *Together but always apart!* Marriage vows bound them, but nothing, it seemed, would ever bridge the gulf that kept them apart. Her courage made him feel both ashamed and dejected. He was no scoundrel, but over the years an innate selfishness had been allowed to sway his character until he had become accustomed to taking for granted that whatever he wanted he must have—regardless of the cost. Dull colour ran under his skin as for the first time he saw himself as he must appear in her eyes, and the picture was not a pleasant one. Discovering himself capable of shame was an experience he found hard to digest and his distaste was reflected in his voice when finally he came to a decision.

'Very well, I'll stay, but only because you ask it of me. *Le bon Dieu* knows I'm no martyr, but if you think my presence here will help then I cannot go.' He spun on his heel and walked away, his back rigid with

disapproval of his own uncharacteristic benevolence, then he hesitated and turned back towards her.

'Fleur!'

'Yes, Louis?' She trembled, not far from tears.

'I'm sorry if what I said hurt you, can you forgive me?'

She recognized this as his way of saying the subject was now closed, never to be reopened or referred to again, and her generous heart opened to accept his plea. Her smile was like sun shining through clouds when she answered.

'Your friendship will always be very dear to me, Louis, I should hate to lose it. There is nothing to forgive.'

It took great effort to begin dressing for dinner that evening. The day had contained too much worry, too much emotion, and when she walked across to the wardrobe to choose a dress Fleur's eyes were immediately drawn to a restful smoke-grey chiffon with a demure white collar that seemed to match precisely her mood of the moment.

The flimsy fabric moved silently around her as she walked, floating outward on each suspicion of a breeze, then wafting gently back without any betraying whisper to caress her slender ankles. She brushed her hair until it shone, but lethargy held her in its grip and instead of piling it on top of her head she left it to hang loosely down to her shoulders. -

Somewhere downstairs there were sounds of unusual activity. A car door banged twice, voices echoed in the hall, then footsteps began to ascend the stairs—eager, vital steps that spelled out the owner's

impatience to arrive at his destination. When they came to a halt outside in the passageway her nerves began to pull. With a suddenly dry mouth she stared across at the door, willing whoever it was who hesitated outside to walk in and put her out of her misery.

The draught from the opening door caught her dress and swirled it around her so that she looked enchantingly ethereal, like some fey creature caught up in a grey mist. Completely immobile, she waited, then released her breath in a sigh when Alain's tall figure walked into the room. Hungrily, she watched him as he advanced towards her. -Dark glasses screened his eyes, but through the misted glass they caught and held hers in a look so intense it would not be broken. An unaccountable shyness made her blush scarlet, and when he stopped so close they were almost touching she could hear the sound of her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

She had to break the tense, pregnant silence. 'Alain,' she breathed nervously, 'you've come home.'

'Hello, Fleur.' He spoke as if at a first meeting, his glance exploratory, his manner eager, slightly impatient of preliminaries. His mother was right, he had changed. Despite a slight paleness, which was understandable considering his stay in Paris, he exuded a raw vitality, an aura of curbed excitement that was so marked she backed away from him in confusion.

'Are you pleased to see me?' There was devilment in the question; he was playing with her like a cat with a mouse and she resented the cruel torment he so enjoyed inflicting. He was vibrantly happy, of that there was no doubt, but did he have to flaunt his happiness in her face? Celestine was probably downstairs waiting for him, ready to discuss ways and means of getting rid of an unwanted wife---a wife both unknown and undesired. The thought, bitter though it was, caused her to tilt her chin with newly-aroused pride. He was

confident, unaware of the fact that she knew where he had spent the last few weeks, and it was time to enlighten him.

Cool as an April shower, she asked him, 'How was Paris?'

She expected him to look shocked, but puzzlement was the overriding expression on his face. One enquiring black eyebrow tilted questioningly when he repeated:. 'Paris?'

Nerves in her throat fluttered like a captive bird, and she caught her breath when she charged him, 'I know you've spent these past few weeks in Paris with Celestine! Please don't try to deny it, Alain. You once said,' she bit her lip to steady a quiver, 'that you always expect the truth from me. Haven't I the right to expect the same from you?'

She could have sworn his astonishment was genuine. She felt pinned down by the intentness of his look as he stood silently digesting the shock of her words. She backed away from eyes which, though sightless, seemed to bore into the depths of her soul, and was astonished when his hand reached out to snap around her wrist.

'You are adept at jumping to conclusions, are you not, Fleur?' he charged with dangerous softness. 'I have not been to Paris. Nor have I had any contact with Celestine since the day she left the chateau!'

Her heart threatened to somersault straight out of her body. 'I'm sorry,' she gasped. 'Perhaps I *did* jump to a hasty conclusion, but it hardly matters, does it? I know you are in love with Celestine ... I saw her in your room ... heard what you said to her...'

When the quiver in her voice turned into a sob, she faltered into silence and turned her head away.

'And the next morning you ran away from me,' he challenged, with such gentle concern her tear- wet eyes flew immediately to his face.

His hand dropped from her wrist. He walked towards the window-seat and sat down. 'Come, sit here beside me,' he commanded.

She fought to withstand the softly given order, but when she hesitated he demanded forcefully, 'Come, Fleur, I want you *here!*'

She obeyed, but reluctantly. The window-seat was wide and she made towards the opposite end from where he sat, but again he disconcerted her with his uncanny perception by catching hold of her arm and pulling her down beside him. She trembled at his touch, but when he kept her hand a prisoner and began to speak, her trepidation died as she began to listen intently.

'As you are so convinced of my love for Celestine, it seems I must share with you a secret known only to her and to me.' His voice was so devoid of feeling it gave no inkling of what was to come, but she knew by the gravity of his expression that the words came painfully to him.

'It was Celestine who caused my blindness,' he stated simply.

A start of sheer horror jerked through Fleur's body, but she held back the cry that sprang to her lips and waited, wide-eyed with distress? for him to continue. 'We were engaged to be married at the time; an engagement that crept upon us both as it does sometimes with two people who have been thrown together since childhood and whose family and friends have come to expect it. In the beginning I did not mind her fits of caprice, her childish demands for my complete attention; she was a spoilt only child whose word was law to an indulgent father. But as my interest in the business grew I found it less and less convenient to dance attendance upon her, and the consequent scenes that followed because of my neglect finally decided me that the engagement should be terminated.' He stirred restlessly, reliving the pain of resurrected memories, and his grip

tightened around her hand, but she was too intent upon his story to notice pain.

'It happened,' his mouth grew grim, 'on the day I told her of my decision. We were together in the laboratory. I had finished my work for the day and had just begun to clean out the utensils I had been using. Perhaps I was partly to blame, my mind was occupied choosing the words I would use to tell her of my decision and I must have absent-mindedly poured more spirits than I ought into the cleansing compound. But that is beside the point,' he shrugged. 'Celestine lost her temper. She threw some object towards me and it dropped into the dish of spirits I was holding, splashing the contents straight into my eyes.'

For long minutes there was silence as he relieved the horror of that moment, and when she felt the shudder that ran through his body she knew that never again would she suspect him of loving Celestine. Her throat was so tight with the pain of shame and compassion that she could barely force out the words.

'Oh, how could she, Alain! How could anyone ...'

When her choked exclamation reached him, he shook himself free of retrospective thoughts and brought them both determinedly back to the present by sliding his arm around her slim waist and drawing her close against his heart. 'Don't condemn her too much, Fleur,' he whispered against her suddenly fiery cheek. 'I owe her a debt of gratitude I will never be able to repay.'

'Gratitude? How can you speak of gratitude in connection with Celestine?'

She was very still within the circle of his arms, her face hidden against the breadth of his chest which was rising and falling with increased rapidity. A paralysing shyness held her, she was afraid to

lift ,her eyes, afraid the message she might see would not be the one for which her bewildered heart was searching. His hand searched for her chin and forced her face into the open, then he told her,

'The night of the dinner-party... the night you saw Celestine in my room—I had mistaken her for you, Fleur...' Her reaction to this admission seemed to be of great importance to him; she felt his arms tense around her as he waited for her reply.

'Me? But how...' she stammered, her heart racing at the implication behind his words.

'When I entered my room I heard a rustling noise—the noise I always associate with the clothes you wear. Also, the perfume I had devised especially for you, to which, so far as I was aware, no one else had access, was heavy in the air. So — naturally...'

'You thought they were my arms that closed around your neck,' Fleur added incredulously. She was allowed only fleeting seconds to ponder on the scene, to remember the light tap of her bedroom door, the stream of light that had been left as a guide by Celestine who must have been waiting in the bathroom for the sound of Alain's footsteps as he passed on his way to his room. How cleverly she had fooled them both!

'Fleur!' Alain's urgency was not lost upon her, he was becoming dissatisfied with talk! A thrilling wave of feeling turned her bones to water when she met his glance and remembered the words he had spoken to Celestine: *My heart's darling! How I have longed to have you back in my arms!*

His eyes glittering down at her sent shivers of delight up and down her spine. He was holding on to his control, waiting until he was sure she understood before attempting to encroach further. 'Are there any other of my actions I need to explain?' he jerked out thickly. 'Other

than those which were caused by my diabolical moods and my frustrated longing to see the wife whose sweetness had led me once to the very gates of heaven? *Mon Dieu!*' he whispered passionately as his lips hovered fractionally above hers, 'if there is they will have to wait. I refuse to be put off a moment longer!'

He kissed her, and her whole body was consumed by a heady, intoxicating wave of desire that rose to meet the passion in his hard, demanding caresses. When their lips met restraint fled, and the hunger in him was gratified by the sweet and utter generosity of her responses.

It was a very long time before he was ready to release her and when he did so it was only to hold her a mere fraction away from him. He looked down at her bemused, rapturous face and whispered, 'Fleur, *mon ange, je t'adore!*' Then, deliberately, 'I thought Louis exaggerated when he described your beauty, but he understated, *mon amour*. You truly are the loveliest sight I have ever seen I'

She became very still, registering the implication, then her eyes, startled and pleading, fastened upon the dark glasses that were protecting his eyes. He removed them, and she was dazzled by the eager, sparkling *aliveness* that twinkled down at her. She felt the beginnings of an incredulous joy and could not even attempt to force out the question that was clamouring to be asked.

Completely understanding, he smiled and nodded his head as proof he could read the question mirrored in her eyes. 'Yes, Fleur, *I can see you!* This is the reason I owe a debt of gratitude to Celestine. When she came to my room that night she stayed only long enough to be told the truth about herself, but in that time I determined that no other arms but yours would ever tempt me ... no other lips but yours would ever rest under mine. That was why, as soon as I was sure Maman was out of danger, I went back to the hospital. So you see, my darling,

if you want it, I can furnish proof that I was not in Paris!' he teasingly charged her.

She was unable to respond to his quip. The shock he had given her was so intense that she could only grapple with the many emotions that overwhelmed her in swift succession. But he did not intend to wait longer than a minute for her reaction. She just had time to whisper, 'Alain, is it really true?' before he swept her up against his heart to kiss her again, long and dynamically, proving once and for all that dreams are mere figments of the imagination and no substitute at all for glorious turbulent reality!

His lovemaking demonstrated the depths of his adoration, and helped to heal the scars upon her heart. But one small part of her still quivered with hurt, one hint of reserve still lingered in the deep recesses of her mind. She knew he was aware of it when he pressed his lips against a pulse that was fluttering in her throat and murmured,

'Tell me you love me, Fleur, let me hear you say it.'

'I've always loved you, Alain,' she admitted gravely.

'Always?' He held her away and searched for the truth in her steady eyes. She was wildly happy that he had regained his sight, but his added perception made it doubly hard to hide any secret doubts. So she did not try. Swallowing the fear that "his answer might prove more hurtful than her burden of doubt she asked him,

'Did you really believe ... in the beginning ... that my motives for marrying you were mercenary?'

She closed her eyes as she waited for his answer, which was given solemnly and without reservation.

'Never, *ma petite*, I swear it! I pretended to myself that I believed, but only because I was searching for an excuse to take out my own humiliation on you. I had treated you so badly, but much as I regretted having had to hurt you I cannot be sorry for my actions that night. I came to you full of rage and bitterness and left you with peace and love in my heart.'

'You loved me *then*?' It was a cry from the heart, an echo of a hurt so appalling that he flinched from the realization of the agony he had forced her to endure. Her lashes swept up just in time to meet the torment of remorse in his passion-dark eyes before she was gathered quickly back against his heart. 'Yes,' he stressed thickly, 'I loved you then as I'll love you always, *mon coeur*. I was jealous of Louis, in despair of ever regaining my sight, but nothing could equal the madness I felt at the thought of losing you!'

His mouth closed over hers in a fervour of passion, and within his vital embrace the slender chain that held the blue charm snapped and fell from around her neck. It lay discarded and unnoticed on the floor, only two of the words it contained now relevant—*Unis, toujours!* Together always!