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MARGARET ROME

the marriage of caroline lindsay



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THE MARRIAGE OF CAROLINE LINDSAY

Margaret Rome

It had been a dreadful shock to Caroline when her sister disappeared, leaving her baby with Caroline, but she vowed to herself she would do the best she could for the infant.

So when the baby's uncle, Domenico Vicari, appeared, with an offer to marry Caroline and give the child a home and security, she felt she could not refuse. A condition of the marriage was that it would be in name only -- but when Domenico had made it he had been under the impression that Caroline was the child's mother.

What would his reaction be when he discovered how she had deceived him?

CHAPTER I

THE last of the mourners had left the house and Caroline, who had resisted all efforts by her kindly neighbours to get her to stay with them until she had got over her father's sudden and unexpected death after a bout of a particularly virulent form of influenza, sat in front of the glowing fire trying to instil some warmth into her numbed body.

For the past three days she had existed in a sort of vacuum. Eating, talking, shopping for mourning clothes, all these things had been done mechanically, as though from the moment her father had died another person had taken over her duties.

This other Caroline had hunted out her father's papers, contacted his lawyer, and his few close friends, thanked the neighbours for their solicitude and for the meals which they had so thoughtfully provided, she had assured people that yes, she was all right and sleeping well and no, she didn't need a thing, while the real Caroline had been hiding behind this facade, weeping, heartbroken, without appetite, energy or purpose, since the one person who had been her whole world had been taken from her.

She was thinking of him now as she sat alone in the firelight. He had been so full of fun - a pure optimist, never admitting that things could be as black as they looked. He had said of any problem, "Let's sleep on it, darling, and tomorrow it will have disappeared."

The tradesmen's debts never had disappeared, of course, but Caroline would never mention them again. She had economized and scrimped her own small allowance until the debts had been paid, anything rather than upset her gay, happy-go-lucky father.

It was not surprising, therefore, that her dresses had become threadbare and flimsy with constant laundering and making-do for another year, and that she had long since had to cut out small luxuries

such as perfume and makeup. But she hadn't minded. She had adored her father.

Her mother had died when she was a few months old, and although Charles Lindsay had loved her to distraction he had soon realized that without a woman by his side to smooth his way, life would become intolerable. So, six months after his wife's death, he had married again.

There had been no pretence of great love or even passion between him and Mildred, but both had something which the other needed. She had been an unmarried mother needing a name for her two-year-old-daughter, Dorinda. In return she had offered Charles and his baby daughter a woman's care, and, as she had been a good listener, a willing ear. She had also been a very good cook and a thrifty shopper, getting the best value for the small amount of housekeeping which Charles had allowed her. The house had been kept spotlessly clean and the girls reasonably well dressed. As well as adopting Dorinda and giving her his name, Charles had given Mildred the companionship for which she had yearned and the plain gold band on her finger had symbolized, to her, respectability.

In all, they had been quite a contented family. The girls especially had been as close as sisters generally are, sharing their triumphs and their sorrows to a minor degree. It was only when either had had a serious mishap or problem that their family unity had wavered, for then, in every instance, Caroline had turned to her beloved daddy, and Dorinda to her mother. Both Charles and Mildred had accepted this as being quite natural, and had made no effort to bind the family closer by encouraging each of their girls to communicate more closely with the other parent. This state of affairs had lasted until Mildred's death three years before, resulting, in Dorinda being left feeling absolutely bereft. Charles and Caroline had been grieved as much as she by Mildred's death, but they had found consolation in each other,

whereas she had felt an outsider with no one to turn to for comfort or encouragement.

It had come as no surprise to Charles, therefore, when three months after her mother's death, Dorinda had announced quite calmly, "I've decided to go to London."

Caroline had looked up incredulously. "To London? But why? What will you do there?"

"Well, you know that legacy my grandmother left to me when she died? Mother handed it over to me last year when," her voice faltered, "when she told me about Father adopting me and bringing me up as his own daughter." The pain showed in her eyes as she went on, "I've decided to enrol at a modelling school in London. They guarantee to find me work when my training is finished, and as it's a job which has always appealed to me, I feel sure that I'll make good. Anyway, I've paid my fees and I'm expected there at the beginning of the new term, in two days' time."

Caroline had pleaded with her to change her mind, to no avail. Two days later she had left for London, promising to write regularly as soon as she had settled where she was to live. Her happy excited face and waving hand at the coach window as her train moved slowly out of the station was the last they had seen or heard of her.

The sudden splutter as a log was dislodged and fell into the heart of the fire jerked Caroline from her reverie. At the same time there was a peal from the old-fashioned doorbell which startled her into awareness. Who could that be?

At first she was bewildered as she stood staring at the tall elegant girl who was standing on her doorstep, then, with a cry of delighted recognition, she threw the door open wide and flung her arms around her.

"Dorinda! Oh, darling, I knew you would come! I prayed you would come, and you have!"

The object of Caroline's affection smilingly allowed herself to be dragged across the doorstep and into the sitting-room. With a quick glance around she took in the same shabby armchairs, the Welsh dresser with its complement of willow pattern ware, the beautifully polished old furniture, the shabby but once expensive rugs on the uneven floor, and she felt that time had stood still for the three years she had been away. Then she turned to look at Caroline. As the light fell on her sister's bright hair, giving it a glow like burnished gold, she gasped with astonishment. "Why, Caroline, you've grown up! You're a beauty. If Rene could see you he would snap you up in a trice."

"Who's Rene?" queried Caroline.

"He's my employer, the photographer I model for. You would send him into raptures, my dear."

Caroline laughed disbelievingly as she tried to imagine a famous photographer going into raptures over a dowdily dressed girl such as she while surrounded by a bevy of beauties such as Dorinda. She was utterly lacking in conceit, and had no idea of the picture she made as she stood under the pool of light which was cast from the lamp above her head. Her small heart-shaped face, with eyes like dew-wet pansies, was crowned with hair of deep glowing gold. Her figure was willowy slim, but with beautifully rounded contours and delicate ankles and wrists. She was everyone's idea of the perfect Anglo-Saxon type, an English rose waiting in her secluded arbour for the sun's first kiss. But, thought Dorinda, where in this backwater will she find a man of perception who will appreciate the need for great delicacy in wooing this painfully unsophisticated child to a woman's maturity?

"Dorinda!" Caroline was almost dancing with joy. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you've come home. Let me take your bags. Come in and sit down by the fire and I'll make you some supper. You must be frozen."

Dorinda smiled up at her as she sat down in her father's old chair. "I'm as pleased as you are, darling. And I'm just dying for a good cup of tea and a long natter. We have such a lot to talk about."

They ate their supper in front of the glowing fire. The wind howled around the sturdy little grey stone house and rattled the window frames as they ate and talked, catching up on news and doings of their three-year separation. As the clock struck twelve Caroline gave it a startled glance.

"Just look at the time," she said, "and I still have to make up your bed. We'll probably oversleep in the morning and old Mr. Wilkins is coming around at ten o'clock to read Daddy's will." A shadow fell across her face as she said this, and she realized that this was the first time she had thought about her beloved father since Dorinda had arrived.

Dorinda realized what was going through her mind. She caught hold of Caroline and held her close. "I'm sorry I didn't arrive sooner, Caroline, to be with you at the end to comfort you and help you make all the arrangements for the funeral. But as I told you, my job takes me all over the world, and somehow, every time I made up my mind to write to you, something came up. Either I had to go for a fitting or the photographer wasn't satisfied with the lighting and wanted retakes, always something. And then, when I suddenly reached the top and everyone wanted me, life was simply hectic - social engagements, cocktail parties, hopping on planes to go from one place to another. Life was like a merry-go-round and I felt like a puppet on a string with never a moment to call my own."

Caroline looked at her in wonderment. "It must be simply heavenly to have the world at your feet. Travel, adventure, romance -! Did you meet any handsome young men, Dorinda? Did you fall in love with anyone?"

Caroline was shocked at the grey pallor which swept over Dorinda's face when she asked this question. She cried out and went to put her arm around her sister's shoulders, but Dorinda shook them off and stepped into the shadows away from the bright tell-tale light of the lamp above her.

"I'm feeling very tired, Caroline. Do you mind if I go up to my room?" Without waiting for an answer she turned and almost ran up the stairs and into her old bedroom. Caroline went up the stairs and made to follow her into the bedroom, but as she reached the door the key turned in the lock with a resounding click. She stepped back, hurt, and stood indecisively, wondering whether to beg Dorinda to open the door and to insist upon her telling her what was wrong. Finally she decided against it and walked slowly into her own bedroom. All night long she was haunted by the memory of the frozen look of hurt and misery on her sister's face, and she was full of remorse at the thought that it had been her thoughtless questioning which had caused it.

The clatter of china and a whistling kettle wakened Caroline the next morning. She must have fallen into an uneasy sleep in the early hours. Her bed was a mass of tumbled sheets and she still felt drowsy and unrefreshed. She lay for a moment gathering her wits, and then she remembered the night before. Dorinda was home! She scrambled out of bed and into the bathroom for a quick shower. Hurriedly she zipped up her green tweed skirt and pulled on a primrose sweater. A quick flick of the comb through her hair, and then she ran down the stairs into the kitchen.

Dorinda turned from the stove where she was grilling bacon, and gave her sister a radiant smile. "Good morning, Caroline. Breakfast is just ready to dish up. Pour out the coffee, will you?"

The pale distraite girl of the night before might never have existed. She hummed lightheartedly as she moved about the kitchen, and Caroline was tempted to ignore her outburst of the previous evening, until she caught sight of Dorinda's eyes. She had applied her make-up skilfully, but nothing could have camouflaged the puffiness of her eyelids or the wretched wounded look deep down in her lovely green eyes.

"Are you all right, Dorinda? Why did you lock your door last night? I couldn't get in to make up your bed. How did you sleep? Did I upset you? Honestly, I didn't mean to pry!"

"Whoa! One question at a time, Caroline. Anyway, I firmly refuse to answer such a spate of questions before breakfast." Dorinda's smile didn't quite reach her eyes as they met Caroline's. "Come, sit down and eat your breakfast. Mr. Wilkins will be here in half an hour and we mustn't look as if we're lazy lie-abeds when he comes. You know his views on early rising, and I don't suppose he's changed in the three years I've been away." As Caroline looked hesitant she put out her hand and took hold of hers. "Please," she pleaded, "give me a little time, just a few hours, and I promise I'll tell you everything."

Caroline flung her arms around Dorinda and gave her a big hug. "You make me so ashamed," she said. "I have absolutely no right to ask questions and I'll try to mind my own business. But remember, if there's any way I can help you have only to ask."

"Bless you, darling. I may have to take you up on that, but meanwhile, let's have our breakfast and forget all about being serious."

It was a gay, light-hearted meal. Afterwards Dorinda cleared the table and washed up the breakfast dishes while Caroline dusted and vacuumed the house in readiness for Mr. Wilkins' visit. He arrived promptly as the clock struck ten.

If Dorinda's presence was a surprise he gave no sign, merely greeting her with a dry humourless smile and a quick look over his antiquated spectacles. He took a legal-looking document out of his briefcase and, when they were both seated in the comfortable old armchairs, he began to read their father's will.

It was short and to the point. Everything he owned was to be Caroline's - the house and contents, a few hundred shares in a not very lucrative company, and his personal possessions. No mention was made of Dorinda, and Caroline, as she looked at her pale set expression, felt a wave of indignation against her father.

"But surely Daddy hasn't ignored Dorinda completely?" she asked him. "She's as much entitled to what Daddy had as I am." Her troubled, beautiful eyes implored Mr. Wilkins to pull something out of the air for Dorinda, as a magician might be expected to produce a rabbit out of a hat. "My dear child," he answered testily, "please let me finish. I don't think you realize, as your father obviously did not, that once the tradesmen have been paid and other outstanding debts cleared up there will be nothing left to share with anyone. I asked him repeatedly to have you trained for some job in order that you might earn your living, if the circumstances warranted it, but he always dodged the issue, saying you were quite happy at home and that he liked to have you around him all day. I am afraid his attitude was a very selfish one. And now you find yourself in a very difficult position. Indeed, Miss Dorinda is much happier placed than you are. She has the benefit of having been trained for a job and has a secure future, whereas you are completely untrained and practically destitute."

Dorinda jumped up and put her arms around Caroline, who was looking up at the old solicitor with wide, frightened eyes. "You mean I shall have to sell the house?" she whispered, as she looked around at the dear familiar objects which were so much a part of her life.

Mr. Wilkins cleared his throat and gave her a sympathetic look. "Well, no. Perhaps we shall be able to save that. But there will be no money. No money whatever."

He picked up his hat and bag and moved towards the door, shaking his head at the folly of a man who, against all advice, had left his daughter in this predicament. The fellow had no right! No right at all! he thought to himself as he made his departure. Best thing that slip of a girl could do would be to marry. Even Mr. Wilkins, crusty old bachelor that he was, recognized the attractions of his young client.

"I -shall call in a few days," he said, "and I shall be able to tell you in more detail what your exact financial position is. But in the meantime, young lady, I advise you to give serious thought to the choice of a career. Then I shall know how much to set aside for your training."

For a few moments after his departure the two girls sat deep in thought. Dorinda's mind was working furiously. Damn! Damn! Damn I she thought frenziedly. What am I going to do now if there's no money? How on earth will I manage? I've simply got to have money from somewhere.

Caroline's mind was on money too. On the way it had frittered through her father's fingers - a picture here, a piece of pottery there. He simply had not been able to deny himself anything of beauty which had taken his fancy. But the pleasure in the things he had bought had been so great that Caroline had finally stopped remonstrating with him. She knew what beauty had meant to him, how it satisfied his aesthetic tastes. She also remembered, sadly, how

he used to say, "You are my greatest treasure, Caroline, the most precious possession in my collection."

"Caroline, you know I said I had something to tell you?"

The sound of Dorinda's voice broke through Caroline's thoughts. "What? Did you say something?" she asked.

With a hint of impatience in her manner Dorinda repeated her question.

"Oh, yes, please go on. Is it something to do with your job?"

"Well, indirectly I suppose it is," said Dorinda. "I shall have to give it up for a time."

"Give it up? But why? Aren't you well?" she asked anxiously. Then as she remembered their earlier talks and Dorinda's description of her hectic life as a model she breathed with relief and went on, "Oh, I know. You need a rest and you have come home to recuperate from the mad social whirl."

Dorinda gave a wry smile and walked across to the window. She was silent for so long that Caroline thought she had changed her mind about confiding in her. Then she spoke.

"I'm going to have a baby."

She said it so calmly that Caroline thought she had imagined it and she gazed at Dorinda uncomprehendingly.

Seeing her dazed expression, Dorinda repeated the words slowly and clearly in a way which left no room for doubt.

"I'm going to have a baby. I'm not married and I'm never likely to be now. He doesn't want me," she said bitterly. "I've tried to get in touch with him, but my letter has been completely ignored."

She swung around suddenly, no longer calm, her face working in an effort to stem the tears which forced their way through. Great sobs shook her body. She flung herself upon her knees beside Caroline's chair and asked her pleadingly; "Caroline, what am I to do? Please help me. Don't turn away from me, you're the only one I can rely upon. You're all the family I have!"

"Ssh, darling, please don't cry. Of course I'll do all I can to help. You know that." Her trembling fingers smoothed Dorinda's hair as she talked soothingly to her until the terrible sobbing ceased, but she was frantically trying to control her whirling thoughts. A baby! Dorinda was going to have a baby! Her first instinct was one of incredulous disbelief. Not Dorinda! Not *her* sister! This was a thing which only happened to other people's sisters, not to hers.

Caroline's simple life in a quiet backwater, shielded from the seamy side of life by a doting father, had left her unprepared for such a disclosure. She had had no opportunity of finding out whether or not she was a prude. No demands had ever been made upon her which had called for either broadmindedness or censure. She had read the newspapers, of course, and watched television, but the characters in the seamy kitchen sink dramas and the people in the headlines might have lived on another planet for all the impact they had made upon her.

Dorinda's sobbing penetrated her shocked immobility and, instinctively, she hugged her close as all the love she felt for her surged to the surface. She spoke soothingly to her and rocked her to and fro while she waited for the storm to cease.

When she was calmer Dorinda began to tell her story from the beginning. "I met him at a party given by my employer, Rene, to celebrate his birthday. He wasn't exactly a friend of Rene's, someone whom he was staying with while he was in London on business for his firm brought him *id* along. He was so handsome. Dark, tall for an Italian (Caroline started at this. So he wasn't an Englishman!), and so lively and full of fun. I can't begin to tell you how much I loved him, Caroline." Her voice faltered, and then went on, "I could have sworn that he loved me and was not just out for a good time. We danced, dined and went to theatres. Then one night," Dorinda paused and for a second she seemed to drift away on the wings of thought, "one night he brought me home from the theatre. We'd had a few drinks, but not a lot, we were drunk with happiness and our love for each other. When we arrived at my flat I asked him in for a coffee. At first he refused, but eventually he came in. He stayed all night!"

While she had been telling her story Dorinda had not looked at Caroline, but now she twisted around and gazed into her eyes earnestly. "There was nothing sordid about it. We were young and in love and we were going to be married...The very next day he took me out and bought me this ring!"

She held out her hand and for the first time Caroline saw that she was wearing a beautiful half hoop of diamonds. It looked very expensive, not the type of ring which was generally bought for a casual girl-friend, more the type of ring which was bought as a pledge of love and as a token of fidelity. She said as much to Dorinda before urging her to continue with her story.

"He was flying the next day to Africa, then to Canada. In all, he was to be away on business for six months, go back to his firm in Rome, and then come to England to take me back to Italy to meet his family before we married." Dorinda went white and Caroline thought she was going to faint. She insisted upon her drinking a glass of sherry before she attempted to carry on.

"For the first few weeks he wrote every day. I was quite happy gathering up my trousseau and looking forward to his return. One morning, four weeks ago, I fainted while I was posing for Rene. He insisted upon sending me in a taxi to my doctor. When the doctor had examined me and told me what was wrong I was devastated. I'd been so wrapped up in my dreams all the obvious signs had passed me by. Of course I was foolish, but somehow the idea didn't enter my head. That night I wrote to Vito telling him about the baby, and from the time it would have taken for the letter to reach him, his letters to me stopped. I've had no word whatever. So you see," the pain in her eyes tormented Caroline, "he doesn't want me or the baby. All he wanted was fun. He never intended coming back for me."

Her head drooped upon Caroline's knee as though she would give way to tears again. But none came. She was so still and quiet that Caroline thought she had fallen asleep. But presently she stirred and held out her hand. Caroline took it and warmed the cold fingers with her own warm ones.

"Are you very shocked, Caroline?" Dorinda asked quietly.

Caroline sat quietly deliberating the question, then answered truthfully. "I think I was at first, a little. But now that you've explained how it came about, and your feelings for him, I can understand. I haven't experienced love such as yours, but I believe loving means giving, and the more you love a man then the more you must want to give. It's quite simple really, isn't it?"

Dorinda sighed and gave her a grateful look as she said, "You're an angel, Caroline. Some day you'll make your husband a very happy man. I only hope he's worthy of you."

But Caroline hadn't heard. She was trying desperately to think of some way in which she could support the two of them until the baby came, and, at the same time, keep an eye on Dorinda. She mustn't be

left alone for hours at a time to brood. Besides that, she would need someone with her to make sure she rested, especially when she was nearing the end of her pregnancy.

CHAPTER II

CAROLINE had her second restless night in succession as she tossed and turned, trying to find some solution to their problem. In her big-hearted way she had shouldered Dorinda's burden; she considered it, quite naturally, as being *their* problem now. But however she tried she could not think of anything she could do which would allow her to stay at home with Dorinda and at the same time bring in some money with which to pay their way.

Dorinda, too, had had a sleepless night. Caroline had heard her restless movements until the early hours, but she must have fallen asleep eventually, for there was no sound from her bedroom as Caroline crept silently past it on her way to the kitchen.

As she drew back the kitchen curtains the early morning sunlight flooded the room. Caroline felt her heart lift. Her normally happy disposition asserted itself as she looked out of the window and watched the sparrows disporting themselves on the lawn and in the birdbath which she had put up for them many years before. She began to hum as she prepared breakfast for herself and Dorinda. She decided against waking her sister and set a tray ready to take upstairs as soon as she heard any sound of movement from her room.

As she ate her solitary breakfast she scanned the morning paper which she had propped up against the coffee pot. When she had read the front page she turned to the Situations Vacant column. Nothing there. She sighed and rose to prepare fresh coffee for Dorinda, ready for when she awoke.

The phone rang as she was preparing the vegetables for lunch. She wiped her hands hurriedly on the kitchen towel and picked up the phone.

"Caroline? Thank goodness! I know I have a frightful cheek bothering you in this way, but could you possibly take my two brats off my hands again this morning? Farmer Brown has just phoned. He's in a terrible tizzy. His best mare has started to foal and things seem to be going wrong. That wretched Carrigan girl hasn't turned up again to mind the babes and I simply can't take them with me. You know how mischievous they are. The last time I was misguided enough to take them along on a job they fell into a duck- pond."

Caroline laughed at her friend's horror-stricken tone as she described her twin sons' latest peccadillo, and she could hardly answer her for mirth. "You know you don't need to phone first, Jane. Just drop them off here on your way to the Browns' farm. I love having them, as you know. They are my godchildren, after all."

"Bless you, child! I knew I could rely upon you. I only wish I could say the same of Maisie Carrigan. The way I pay that girl should entitle me to undying devotion - instead of which she rambles on about her friends at the shoe factory in Newham and their five-day week and bonuses. Ah well, I suppose I should be grateful to anyone who will watch these two terrors of mine Without succumbing to a nervous breakdown in a matter of weeks. I'll be around with them in about half an hour, if that will suit you? 'Bye for now."

As Jane rang off Dorinda appeared at the top of the stairs. "Who on earth was that? I could hear her frantic tone in my bedroom. It must be a fire, at the very least, which is responsible for her agitation."

"Not a fire," laughed Caroline, "two balls of fire. And .they'll be descending upon us in half an hour, so hurry and get your breakfast, for you'll have no peace when they arrive."

Caroline explained Jane Martin's predicament to Dorinda as she ate her breakfast. "Jane is our local veterinary surgeon. She started her practice here about three years ago, just after you left home, Dorinda.

After fighting a lot of prejudice from the local farmers because of her sex, she finally proved herself to be one of the best vets we've ever had in these parts, and the farmers now think the world of her, so much so that when she married they begged her not to give up the practice. So, as her husband is a naval officer and is away on long trips for most of the time, she carried on. However, since the twins were born eighteen months ago she's found it extremely difficult to carry on. But, being the darling that she is, she tries to answer every call for help from the farmers and is fast running herself into the ground in the process."

Just then there was the sound of a car door slamming and a frantic rushing up the garden path.

"Aunty Cawoline! Aunty Cawoline!"

Two little bodies flung themselves at Caroline, and as she hugged them and kissed their chubby little cheeks their mother burst into the kitchen.

"That girl -" she began. "I could cheerfully wring her neck!" She pulled up short at the sight of Dorinda. "Caroline, you didn't tell me you had a visitor! I wouldn't dream of dumping the twins on you, in the circumstances."

She looked apologetically at Dorinda, but Dorinda reassured her, "Please don't change your mind because of me, Mrs. Martin. I'm sure the twins and I will get along fine together. Besides which, I'm not a visitor. I live here. Caroline is my sister."

Jane held out her hand. "You must be Dorinda. I've heard so much about you from Caroline that I feel I know you already. Please call me Jane. And if you don't mind I shall call you Dorinda."

They smiled into each other's eyes. Dorinda took an instant liking to the small brown-haired girl with the gamin smile and merry brown eyes, while Jane thought she had never before seen such a beautiful girl with such a world of sorrow - or was it disillusion? - in her eyes.

The twins were clamouring around Caroline, seeking attention. They were quite happy to be left in her care because she spoiled them dreadfully, but luckily their nature was such that no amount of spoiling could affect their cherubic dispositions.

As their mother, after being reassured by both of the girls as to her sons' welcome, was climbing into her car she called out to Caroline, "I nearly forgot to tell you - that dreadful girl has gone and got herself a job at the shoe factory. Didn't bother to give me notice. Just dropped a line through the letter box this morning. Couldn't even face me. But just wait, I'll tear a strip off her when I next see her!" She drove off muttering indignantly about the slap-happy ways of the modern teenager, crashing her gears in her agitation.

Caroline and Dorinda laughed helplessly at Jane's furious look, and the twins, although they had no idea what it was all about, joined in with fat little chuckles. They rolled over in an ecstasy of merriment which sent the two grown-ups into a fit of laughter which left them with aching sides and tears streaming from their eyes.

"Oh, the darlings! Aren't they simply gorgeous?" gasped Dorinda when she could get breath.

Caroline laughingly agreed, as she picked up the nearest twin and sat him on her lap. He had dribbled down the front of his romper suit and as Caroline was battling with his sturdy little body in an effort to wipe him dry the import of Jane's last words hit her. "That means that Jane will be looking for someone to watch the twins permanently," she said musingly.

Dorinda looked up from her machinations with the other twin, slightly surprised at Caroline's half pleased, half excited expression. "I suppose so," she said. "But I'm afraid the pull of the big pay packets at the shoe factory in Newham will Make it hard for her to get anyone to oblige. After all, the young girls these days set their sights higher than domestic work and baby-watching, and I can't say I blame them. They know they'll get plenty of that when they marry."

"Bui don't you see?" Caroline asked excitedly. "I could do it. I've often watched the babies for her, so I know she'll have no objection. And what's more, I simply love doing it. I know she pays well. If we pool our money, Dorinda, and I get a wage from Jane, I'll be able to stay here with you all day. I'm sure Jane will have no objection to my having the twins here instead of my going over to her place. I think it's a simply splendid solution, don't you?"

Caroline's eyes were dancing with excitement as she outlined her plan. She looked at Dorinda a trifle impatiently when there was no answering smile upon her face. Instead of the relief she had expected to see there Dorinda's countenance was shadowed by a look of doubt and uncertainty.

"I couldn't allow you to bury yourself in domesticity at your tender age, Caroline. You need to be out in the world with people of your own age, going to dances, enjoying yourself, meeting young men. I've made a mess of my life, but I have no intention of making you suffer for my mistakes. No, I couldn't let you do it." She got up from her seat and went over to Caroline, who was sitting gazing at her mutinously. "Please understand, darling, it simply wouldn't be fair to you. I can't let you sacrifice yourself for me."

She laid her hand on Caroline's shoulder and gave her a light fleeting kiss upon her brow as though she were putting a full stop to the end of the argument. "I'll manage somehow," she said determinedly.

If she had thought that that would be the end of the discussion she soon thought differently. Caroline had no intention of having her idea cast aside lightly, and as she had no inclination towards any of the jobs which her sister had suggested might be in her line she began putting up a fight. Dorinda was amazed at the steely obstinacy with which she was confronted. She began remembering isolated incidents of their childhood days when Caroline had dug in her heels and refused steadfastly to give in to any coercion on anyone's part to make her change her mind on something about which she had strong views. She had forgotten how rigidly Caroline stuck to her beliefs when she thought she was in the right. After hours of altercation when Caroline had pooh- poohed the notion that she needed young people, entertainment, dates with young men, and the like, Dorinda felt exhausted, but Caroline's efforts to make her change her mind never faltered.

Finally, after one of Caroline's renewed attacks, she capitulated.

"All right, all right! You win, Caroline. If you're absolutely sure. I can't fight you any more. Your will was always stronger than mine and if this argument isn't resolved now you'll keep on at me all night. I give in!" She threw up her arms in a motion of mock surrender and gave Caroline a slightly worn-out smile as she sank into the comfortable armchair in an attitude of hopelessness.

Caroline ran to her chair and knelt at her side in compunction. "I've tired you out, darling. I'm so sorry." She gave her a quick hug, then jumped lightly to her feet and gave a few hops and skips around the room in her delight at Dorinda's capitulation. "But you must admit," she grinned triumphantly, "it's the most marvellous solution. And as for all that guff about young men and romance, you know perfectly well that I've always been perfectly content staying at home with Daddy. I've never met a man who has appealed to me in that way. In fact," she said categorically, "I think I'm a born spinster!"

As she stood there with the light from the lamp above shining upon her swept tumbled hair, her bright eyes shining with satisfaction and her beautifully rounded figure outlined by the clinging sweater and well-washed slightly shrunken jeans which she was wearing, anyone less like a born spinster would have been hard to imagine. Dorinda had to smile and she had a job to hide her mirth as she tried to think of Caroline in fifty years' time with a cottage in the country and surrounded by cats, which was her idea of a born spinster. She felt a surge of love for Caroline and a hint of humility as she wondered if she herself would have been to wholeheartedly willing to sacrifice herself for Caroline if their positions had been reversed. Tears threatened to fall from her eyes and she furtively wiped them away before Caroline saw them and began fretting about her.

She stood up and put her hands upon Caroline's shoulders. "Thank you, Caroline," she said huskily. "One day I hope to be able to repay you for your loyalty and understanding. No one has a more wonderful sister."

"Oh, come on," said the wonderful sister bashfully. "Let's have something to eat. I'm famished!" Laughing, their serious mood dispelled, they made their way to the kitchen.

The months which followed brought about a dramatic change in Dorinda. As her body began to change from a slim, svelte figure to a rounded, unmistakably pregnant one so did her whole attitude, especially her attitude towards the baby. She would make no plans for when it was born, nor would she make any preparations for its coming.

Caroline knitted tiny vests and cute little booties and mittens, holding up the finished articles for approval or even some slight sign of

interest, but her only reward was an uninterested look or a shrug of the shoulders.

She sat about in a state of apathetic moodiness and was given to such bouts of depression that Caroline was alarmed and, finally, insisted upon calling Dr. Thomas, their family doctor, to give her a thorough examination.

His verdict was forthright. "Physically she's as healthy as a young horse. But I'm worried about her mental condition. Where is her husband?"

Caroline was at a loss for reply. She did not want to lie, and yet she had no right to betray Dorinda's confidence. So she prevaricated.

"He's abroad on business."

"Then it's about time you sent for him to come home to look after his young wife. She's pining for him, that's the whole root of her trouble. Pining for him! If he doesn't come home, and soon, I won't be answerable for the consequences." With that he picked up his bag and stumped out of the house.

As he was climbing into his car, he said, "I'll call again next week, but meanwhile I'll ask Nora Mason to call in as she's passing on her rounds. It won't do your sister any harm to get to know her midwife before she's actually needed at the birth. She'll give her some exercises to do and keep a check on her health, generally."

The doctor's diagnosis confirmed what Caroline had been almost certain of for the past few weeks. Dorinda's moods of depression, her lethargy, the terrible fits of sobbing which she frequently indulged in when she was alone in her bedroom during the night, all these were the result of Vito Vicari's despicable conduct. Dorinda still loved him, although he had not had the decency to acknowledge her letter

telling him that he was about to become a father. Caroline could not understand how Dorinda could have been taken in by such an obvious rogue.

She went up to Dorinda's room. She was lying on her bed gazing listlessly out of the window. Caroline decided to try once more to coax her to write another letter to her lover.

"Darling, won't you please reconsider writing to Vito again? After all, something may have happened to your first letter. If he's travelling around the globe goodness only knows what might have happened to prevent him from receiving it. I believe the postal services in some of the more out-of-the-way places are very primitive, and it's hardly fair to judge him on one letter which he may not have received."

Caroline crossed her fingers behind her back as she watched to see what effect her words had had on Dorinda. She had tried many forms of persuasion to get her to write again-'to Vito, but without success, so far. This was a new approach which might not have occurred to Dorinda.

She thought she saw a slight flicker of interest on her sister's face and she pressed home her attack. "Why not write just one more letter?" she coaxed. "He could be ill in hospital or have had an accident. Anything could have happened." The look of alarm which crossed Dorinda's face when she said this gave Caroline renewed hope and she waited breathlessly for Dorinda's reaction. She was not disappointed. With a distressed look she appealed to Caroline.

"Do you really think he might be lying ill somewhere with no way of communicating with me? Oh, I hope not! I couldn't bear it if anything had to happen to him. Surely his cousin will begin looking for him if he's had a mishap."

"His cousin?" queried Caroline. "I haven't heard you mention a cousin before. Have you met him?"

Dorinda's mind was on other things as she answered abstractedly, "No, I haven't met him... Caroline, do you really think that something may have happened to Vito? I must know. He may be lying ill somewhere. He may even be dead!" At this thought Dorinda's face drained of what little colour she had and with a catch of alarm in her voice she asked Caroline to pass her her writing case from the top of the dressing table where Caroline had left it as an incentive to her to write just once more.

She was soon immersed in her letter and Caroline went downstairs with a joyful step, tremendously pleased with herself and the result of her conniving. It looked as if Dorinda was going to snap out of her dreadful melancholia and begin to live again. For one awful moment Caroline dwelt fleetingly on what might happen if this second letter remained unanswered. The consequences did not bear thinking about and she hastily pushed the thought out of her mind. He must answer. He must!

Please let him reply, she breathed to herself. Please!

She counted up the approximate time when they might reasonably expect an answer. She estimated it to be about five weeks at the very most, and offered up a short fervent prayer that it would come eventually.

It didn't.

From the time the letter was posted and up to five weeks later Dorinda was a different being. She seemed to have clung to Caroline's suggested explanation of why Vito had not written as a drowning man would clutch at a straw. She chattered excitedly about the baby, which she was now convinced would be a boy, and said she

would call him Vito after his father. She ordered a pram and a cot and was contemplating buying a large teddy bear as well. Even the twins, who by now were part of the household, and whom she had practically ignored for the last few weeks, much to their chagrin, noticed the change in her and began showing her their efforts in the sand-pit once again. Her anxiety showed, however, in the eager question which she put to Caroline each morning.

"Is there a letter for me today, Caroline?"

At Caroline's negative reply she would turn away swiftly and begin to chatter brightly or to busy herself with the twins if they happened to be playing in the house. She never once mentioned Vito's name after she had posted her letter to him, and Caroline's heart began to squeeze with fear as the five weeks' deadline drew nearer and still there was no answering letter.

She watched Dorinda's eyes begin, gradually, to lose their sparkle. The spring in her step grew a little less jaunty each day, and eventually, when about seven weeks had passed, she was back in her slough of despond, weeping bitterly each night until Caroline thought she would die of misery.

She reproached herself bitterly. It's all my fault. Why didn't I leave things as they were? She would have got over it by now. I've caused her needless agony because of my interference. But I was so sure there was a reason for his silence. Dorinda couldn't be so wrong about the man she has loved to that extent. I hate him for the misery he has caused her. I'll never forgive him for that. Never!

She put her drooping head, so weary with the anxiety of the past few months, upon her arms, and gave way to the tears which she had been holding back for weeks. She was so carried away on the wave of misery and remorse which engcrified her that, at first, she thought she

had imagined her name being called. She held up her head and waited. It was a call from Dorinda.

"Caroline! Caroline!"

She flew upstairs to Dorinda's bedroom. It was early evening and the room was full of shadows. Dorinda's face was a pale frightened blur in the gloom and as Caroline switched on the light she saw her clutch her side and double up with pain. She gasped when she saw Caroline. "Fetch the doctor. Quickly! I think the baby's coming!"

She dashed downstairs to the phone and with trembling fingers dialled the doctor's number.

In response to her frantic tone the doctor spoke soothingly. "All right, Caroline. I'll be along in about five minutes. Don't panic, child. Women are having babies every minute of the day, you know. I'll bring Nora Mason with me. I pass her house on my way."

As he had promised they arrived five minutes later.

Caroline was sitting at the side of Dorinda's bed wiping the perspiration from her pale, lovely face and, at the same time, holding her trembling hand and talking gently to her.

"Don't, be afraid, darling. I'll stay with you. It will all be over quite soon."

"I don't care about the baby," Dorinda said bitterly. "Can't you see? I want to die. I've nothing to live for now."

Caroline was aghast. "But, Dorinda," she said, shocked to the core, "you can't mean that. What would I do without you? And what about the baby?"

"Perhaps he'll die, too," Dorinda replied despairingly. "I simply don't care, Caroline. And after all, it would be for the best. You think I've been too wrapped up in my own misery to see what all this has done to you. But I haven't. I've seen how you've tried to be cheerful and happy for my sake, when all the time you've been worried half to death. You've been crying too. I can tell."

Her voice wavered and the tears began to flow again. Before Caroline could reply a voice boomed through the bedroom.

"Now, and what's this, may I ask?" The doctor and Nora Mason walked quickly into the bedroom and over to the bed. The doctor spoke sternly to Dorinda. "We'll have no more of this crying, if you don't mind, young lady, or the baby will be born with a permanent wail and keep you out of your bed at night with his tantrums. Off you go, Caroline. Nora and I will manage fine. We'll call you when we want you."

He waved his hand in Caroline's direction in a gesture of dismissal and she turned and walked reluctantly out of the room.

She sat downstairs for what seemed an eternity. For the first hour she paced up and down like a frantic father. As this thought struck her she gave a short laugh and wondered wryly where Vito Vicari was at that very moment. Wining and dining some other gullible girl, I shouldn't wonder, she thought bitterly.

Presently there was the sound of a sharp slap, followed by the thin wail of a new-born infant. Caroline was galvanized into action. She ran up the stairs and reached the bedroom door just as Nora popped her head around it. She smiled broadly and announced:

"It's a beautiful baby boy and he has the loveliest dark eyes and masses of thick black hair!"

"Can I come in?" asked Caroline anxiously. "Can I see Dorinda? Is she all right?"

"Just give us a few more minutes," said Nora, "and we'll let you see them both."

Five minutes later she was gazing down at her new nephew. His ten minute fingers with their delicate pink nails and his little fat toes fascinated her.

She said in an awed voice, "Dorinda, isn't he the most darling creature you've ever seen?"

She was so enchanted by the baby that for a few moments she did not realize that there had been no response from the girl lying exhaustedly on the bed. She looked towards Dorinda questioningly. There was no sign of pleasure upon her face, none of the usual pride which is generally to be found in a new mother. Simply indifference and an unutterable weariness.

The doctor beckoned her out of the room. "Did you send for the father?" he asked her sternly.

Caroline was flustered and still shocked by Dorinda's indifference. She swallowed hard before replying.

"Well, yes, but he hasn't been able to get here."

The doctor gave her a keen glance. "I don't like the way Dorinda is acting," he said. "I'm very worried about her attitude. Mind you, I've seen it happen this way before. Women taking a dislike to their babies for some reason which only they can tell. But this seems to go deeper. Can't you impress upon her damned young fool of a husband that she needs him?"

When Caroline nodded, too miserable to speak, he went on sympathetically. "Don't worry too much, child. You take too many burdens upon your young shoulders. Always have. It's about time you married some nice young fellow and let him do the worrying for you."

Caroline looked at him stonily. She was thinking to herself that after living through these last few months and seeing what loving a man could do to a woman she would rather remain a spinster all her life than have to face such misery.

Doctor Thomas patted her upon the shoulder before he left, unaware of her reactions to his well-meant advice. He said in his professional manner, "Off you go to bed now, Caroline. You look all in. They're both fast asleep, and will be for what is left of the night. So take advantage of the lull, my dear, for I have no doubt that the young man will be demanding your attention shortly, and if you don't get some sleep you won't be able to cope."

She assured him that she would do as he said and he drove off with assurances that he and Nora would call that morning, later, to check up on the patients.

She walked wearily into the house. After locking up and putting out the lights she went upstairs and took one last look at Dorinda and the baby. They were both sleeping peacefully and, reassured, she crept silently into her own room and into bed, snuggled gratefully into the warmth of the blankets and slept away the few hours which were left of the early morning.

The days which followed were hectic ones for Caroline, a continuous round of nappy-washing, bottle-making and running backwards and forwards with hot drinks or tempting trays for Dorinda. Not that she

ate much - just enough to pass for a meal and to please Caroline. Vito junior lived up to the doctor's prediction and cried without ceasing for what Caroline felt could have been a month, but was actually just four days. His mother would have nothing whatever to do with him. She flatly refused even to feed the poor little mite, much less nurse him. Caroline was frantic. She pleaded, threatened, cajoled, but Dorinda just lay gazing out of the window in a private world where no one could reach her.

Doctor Thomas tried to reassure Caroline, but he looked worried when he told her, "Just leave her for a while to pull herself together. This trauma can't last for ever. It's emotional shock which has made her withdraw from the rest of the world and I'm convinced that she'll come to as soon as that husband of hers arrives. He is coming, I trust?"

The doctor's quizzical look as he asked this question proved to Caroline that he was suspicious of her repeated assurances that Dorinda's husband was on his way, and she was sorely tempted to throw discretion to the winds and tell him the truth. Her blood ran cold at the thought that unless Vito Vicari turned up Dorinda might never snap out of her trance-like state of mind.

The sound of the baby's crying jerked her to her senses and she swiftly said goodbye to the doctor, leaving his question unanswered, and sped up the stairs to Vito junior. He only cried now when he was hungry - not like the first four days of his life when he had screeched until he was almost blue in the face with temper. Nora Mason had said that it was sheer temper, but Caroline thought privately that he was protesting because he wanted the comfort of his mother's arms which was denied him.

She lifted him out of his cot, cooing gently at him as he nestled down in her arms. His helplessness turned Caroline's heart to water and she wondered for the thousandth time, how can she resist him? If only she

would look at him I'm convinced she wouldn't be able to help loving him. Perhaps tomorrow I'll be able to coax her into holding him, and then he'll steal her heart just as his father did.

The next day as she was preparing his bath she carried him over to his mother as she lay in bed moodily gazing out of the window. Daringly she thrust the pitiful little bundle into his mother's arms and with a slightly pleading voice she asked her, "Would you hold him a moment, Dorinda? Just until I test the temperature of the water."

She was prepared for a refusal, but not for the savage look of loathing which Dorinda threw at her son, nor for the bitterness in her voice as she rejected him violently. "No! No! Take him away. I refuse to have anything to do with him!"

She threw herself across the bed in an abandonment of hysterical weeping, and Caroline hastily snatched the baby to her breast and swiftly carried him out of the bedroom and downstairs where he was out of sight of his mother.

"Oh, my darling," she whispered brokenly as she looked down at him, "what are we going to do about your mother? How can we help her? "

He gazed up at her with an infantile, vacant look and his utter dependence upon her was enough to arouse a fiercely protective emotion within her which welled up into her throat and threatened to choke her. She stroked his downy little cheek and murmured softly, as though making a vow:

"I'll look after you, my little love. If I have to dedicate my life to you then I shall do so. You will always have me."

He gave a great sigh which seemed to denote satisfaction at her words and closed his eyes and slept. Caroline laughed a little at her fanciful notion that he could understand her words as she gently laid him in

his pram while she made fresh preparations for his morning ablutions which had been so suddenly curtailed.

Dorinda had stopped crying and was once more indulging in her morbid practice of gazing unseeingly out of the window when Caroline entered the bedroom with her breakfast tray. She had the grace to look slightly ashamed as Caroline blithely chattered to her as she arranged the tray on the bed as if nothing untoward had happened earlier. She even tried to make a tentative apology in a subdued, rather sulky voice.

"I'm sorry I made a scene, Caroline. You must be heartily sick of me. After breakfast I'll get up and come downstairs and help you with the housework or the cooking. I'll do anything you wish, but please - don't ask me to nurse *him*. I can't bear the thought of touching him, Caroline. I simply can't!" This last was said with a rising note of hysteria in her voice, and as Caroline looked up at her and noted the over-bright eyes heavy with unshed tears she bit her lip and said hastily:

"Well, don't think about nursing Vito just yet, Dorinda. Just concentrate on getting well and up and about again. The rest will follow, I'm sure of it. Doctor Thomas will be pleased to see you making an effort to get downstairs. He was saying only yesterday that it would be the best thing for you and that I had to encourage you to dress and move about a little. No housework, though!" she added warn- ingly. "A chair in the garden where you can get the benefit of the sun will suffice for the moment."

While she was speaking she was busy sorting out clothes and underwear ready for Dorinda to wear when she was ready to get up. This was too good a chance to miss. Dr. Thomas had impressed upon her the urgency of encouraging Dorinda to start picking up the threads of her life again as soon as she showed the least interest in doing so, and getting her downstairs was the first step.

Half an hour later she was ensconced in a comfortable chair in the garden with a book which she had no intention of reading but which Caroline had hopefully supplied her with as an incentive to kindle her interest in fashion and the latest trends at present in vogue in London and the other major fashion centres.

There was the sound of a postman's cheery whistle and a rattle at the letter-box. Instinctively Dorinda turned her head as Caroline walked slowly towards her across the tiny lawn holding an envelope in front of her as if she expected it to bite her. Her voice had a strangled sound as she handed it to Dorinda.

"It's for you."

Dorinda's pallor was pronounced as she slowly took the letter and glanced at the handwriting. She answered Caroline's unspoken question with a slow shake of her head.

"It's from Rene," she said dully. "I wonder what he wants."

Caroline's disappointment was a living thing. She had hardly dared hope that it might be from Vito Vicari, but her optimistic nature had overreached itself and her heart sank to her shoes at Dorinda's negative reply. She walked into the house and left her sister to read her letter.

Why couldn't it have been from him? she said to no one in particular. Then, in a determined effort to push her bitter thoughts out of her mind, she began to polish the furniture as if her very life depended upon it.

She was a little hurt as the days went by and Dorinda showed no inclination to tell her of the contents of her letter. But she consoled herself with the thought that each day brought a little more colour to Dorinda's cheeks and although she was still inclined to lapse into

moody silences she was getting up each morning and was even allowed to do a bit of dusting, or to prepare the vegetables for lunch while Caroline bathed and fed baby Vito and kept the twins out of mischief.

Jane was still bringing them along to the house each morning, and Caroline had one ear open for the sound of the car as she sat with Vito on her knee powdering him with sweet-smelling talc as she prepared him for a dry nappy.

They generally arrived about nine o'clock and, as she glanced at the clock above the mantelpiece, she saw that they were over-due by about half an hour. A worried frown puckered her forehead as she wondered what could have happened to them, but it cleared as she heard the sound of a car stopping at the front of the house. There was a scamper of tiny feet and two miniature whirlwinds flung open the door and rushed towards Caroline and the baby, followed by their mother, a little more sedately, but not much. Jane had a glow about her which told Caroline that she had had news from her husband and, judging from her expression, she was just about bursting with excitement. Caroline smiled at her and waited patiently until her friend had got her breath back, which was no more than a second.

"I've had the most marvellous news," she said rapturously. "Jim has taken a shore job. He's written to say that he can't bear to be separated from us any longer and that it's all fixed. We're to meet him at Southampton next Friday to go and look at a house and we are to put up at a hotel while he arranges everything. Oh, Caroline, I can't tell you how happy I am!" She picked up the twins and waltzed around the room with them until they were all dizzy.

Caroline was so pleased for her she could have cried. Later she would begin to worry about how it would affect herself and Dorinda and the baby, but at that moment she had thoughts only of her friend's happiness and the fact that the twins would be with the father whom

they adored, but did not see half enough of. Her face clouded as she thought of how much she would miss Jane. The same thought occurred to Jahe and she said anxiously to Caroline:

"You will come and visit us when we're settled in, Caroline? We mustn't lose touch. These mites will be absolutely desolate at the thought of leaving you even for a little while, and I must be able to console them with the fact that it won't be for long and that you'll come as soon as possible for a long visit."

"Just try to keep me away!" Caroline smiled, as she looked at the bright-eyed trio. "I shall be on your doorstep as soon as you send me word that you're ready for visitors."

"You, Dorinda, and the baby shall be our very first," said Jane firmly, "and we shall insist on an indefinite stay, so be prepared for an invitation as soon as possible after we've settled in."

"What will happen to your practice when you leave, Jane?"

"That's another stroke of luck," said Jane gleefully. "You know young Colin Grant, his father farms about five miles from here? Well, he's just graduated from veterinary school and he's looking for a practice around here. His father asked me only the other day if I would be interested in selling the practice. I asked him for time to consider, as he made me a very tempting offer, and now I shall be able to give him an answer."

She looked as if her cup of happiness were full to overflowing, as indeed it was, as she enthusiastically outlined her future plans to Caroline.

She still had work to do, however, and with an anxious look at the clock she began hurriedly to gather up her gloves and handbag and after giving the twins a quick hug she made her way swiftly to her car

to begin her rounds. With a last wave to Caroline she drove away smiling to herself in happy anticipation.

Dorinda had been in the garden while Jane was giving Caroline her news and Caroline went out to tell her of Jane's good fortune. She was pleased for her, of course, but when Caroline had finished telling her about it a frown creased her forehead and she asked Caroline worriedly:

"How will we manage without the wage that Jane is paying you? We haven't much left over at the end of the week as it is. What will we do, Caroline?"

Caroline put on a breezy manner and waved away her fears. She knew that if Dorinda began worrying about their financial position she would undo all the good which the rest and fresh air of the past week had done for her. "Don't you start worrying about that," she said confidently. "We'll manage. After all, these coming months will, be good ones for us as far as food is concerned. The garden is absolutely bursting with vegetables and salad greens and the fruit trees are coming along nicely. We certainly won't starve, darling. Indeed," she said laughingly, "we may be able to sell some of our produce to the shops. There's far too much for us."

Dorinda was not convinced. She bit her lip anxiously and refused to respond to Caroline's chaffing.

"One of us will have to get a job," she said bleakly. She moved her gaze to the pram which was standing in the shade of a tree at the far end of the garden. "And that means that I shall be left with him," she pointed a finger at the pram, "if you go to work." A look of distaste passed over her face as she said this, and if Caroline had not known that it was a symptom of her nervous state and that she was not responsible for the way in which she repulsed her baby, she would have been tempted to berate her for her utter callousness towards her

son. As it was, she bore in mind Doctor Thomas's instructions that on no account should she take her to task for her unnatural attitude and to leave her to Mother Nature's healing powers.

"Time," he had said, "heals all things. You may find it hard to believe, Caroline, but when you reach my age you'll realize how true that saying is."

"Please stop worrying, Dorinda," she scolded her. "I have no intention of leaving either of you." She saw that Dorinda was still not convinced, so she started to talk, determinedly, on another subject and refused to allow Dorinda to harp back to it.

In no time at all, or so it seemed to Caroline, Jane and the twins were setting off for their new home. Everything had gone according to plan so far as the practice and the selling of the house and furniture were concerned, and the day of good-byes finally came. Caroline had insisted upon going to the railway station with them to see them off, and as she dared not ask Dorinda to tend the baby, she told them that she would meet them there and bring Vito along with her in his pram. She had arranged with Dorinda the evening before their departure that she would spend the best part of the morning, after seeing them off, doing some essential shopping, and as she had neglected one of her friends shamefully in the past few months, that she would pay her a visit. Dorinda had been surprisingly agreeable to this plan and had told her to take her time in town and not to hurry back as she would be quite happy on her own.

The platform where Jane's train was to leave from was crowded and Caroline hurried along, searching frantically for two little heads craning from the coach window. They saw her at the same instant that she caught sight of them and they began to wave beckoningly. Jane's excited face beamed at her as she hurried along trying to reach them before the train moved from the platform.

"Jane! Thank goodness I made it!" she gasped. "My watch must have stopped after I left the house and I've been meandering along thinking I had plenty of time to get here before your train left. When I saw the time by the station clock I was amazed."

"Never mind," said Jane, "you made it just in time." The twins ran from the carriage and flung themselves into Caroline's arms just as the train started to make sounds of preparing to depart. One last bear-like hug from Jane and a couple of damp kisses from the twins and they had scrambled into the train and were moving away slowly out of her life. She watched them go with a feeling of anti-climax, and a deep despondency filled her as she stood there until the last carriage was out of sight. She wiped a furtive tear from her eyes and slowly turned and walked dejectedly out of the station.

She got through her shopping as quickly as she could, not stopping to gaze at the tantalizing displays of summer fashions which were a frustration to a girl such as she who had a sadly depleted wardrobe and an equally depleted purse.

She had phoned her girl friend the evening before to make sure her visit would not inconvenience her and had been urged to call as soon as she possibly could as they had a lot of news to catch up on. Aline Saunders had been a school friend of Caroline's and had married an accountant just a year ago. She and her husband lived in a neat semi-detached house on the outskirts of the town and Aline was finding living in the suburbs in a brand-new house with all the labour-saving devices she could wish for just a trifle boring. She ran down the path to open the garden gate for Caroline as she struggled to get the pram through, and went into raptures when she saw the baby.

"Isn't he an absolute sweet?" she cooed over him. She insisted upon lifting him out of his pram. Caroline did not mind that, for he was due to be fed and changed and she knew that he would fall asleep again when this was done.

The two girls had a marathon gossip over their lunch. Caroline had been one of Aline's bridesmaids and she had known her husband for most of her life, so they had plenty of topics on which to touch. Aline also knew Dorinda and Jane and was interested in all of their doings. The afternoon flew past. It hardly seemed possible that Aline's husband, Jim, should be driving his car into the garage and a few minutes later be demanding his dinner in a mock-ferocious manner. Caroline felt that it was time for her to be going. Vito was used to being settled for the night at around six o'clock and she had a long bus journey in front of her before she reached home. Jim, however, insisted that he would drive her home. Vito's pram was the folding variety which could be easily dismantled to form a carry-cot and placed on the back seat of a car or bus, and when Aline added her pleas to his she relented and stayed on for dinner. After the meal she was insistent.

"I simply must go, Aline. I can't tell you how much I've enjoyed today, it's been such a pleasure to see you both again, and I'll phone you some day next week to arrange for you to come out to our place. Dorinda will be so pleased to see you again."

With a final wave to her friend she got into the front seat of the car, Vito being already installed in the back seat, and they drove off.

She was puzzled when they reached home to see that there was no light at the window. Dorinda must be out, she thought, but as this was most unlikely she began to get a panicky feeling and she glanced up at the bedroom windows to see if there was any sign of her there. Jim would not accept her offer of a cup of coffee; he had brought some work home with him, he said, and if she didn't mind he would make right back home. She waved him off and then hurried up the path to the front door.

She had a distinct feeling of unrest as she struggled to open the front door with her latchkey which had a habit of sticking at the most

awkward times. Why doesn't Dorinda open the door as she usually does? she wondered. She must have heard the car.

At last she was inside. She called out in a rather panicky voice, "Dorinda! Where are you? We're home!" There was no response, so she tried again. "Dorinda, are you there?"

The house was quiet as a tomb. Caroline placed Vito's cot on the couch in the living-room and went upstairs to see if Dorinda had perhaps felt unwell and had gone to bed.

The bedroom was empty. The premonition she had that all was not well was growing stronger every minute. She ran downstairs and into the only room which was left which she had not already searched, the kitchen. All was tidy in there. Dorinda had obviously cleaned up and washed the breakfast dishes, but when Caroline looked into the pantry to see if she had had her lunch everything she had left for her was still there.

Caroline began to tremble. What if a tramp had called and, finding her alone, had attacked her?

"Don't be silly," she chided herself. "If that had happened she would still be here, wouldn't she?"

Then she saw it - a letter propped up against the tea caddy where she would be sure to see it. Slowly she reached for it and with a strange feeling of fear she ripped open the envelope and began to read.

When she had finished, every drop of blood had drained from her face. She walked slowly into the living-room to where the baby lay in his carry-cot and looked down at his mop of curly black hair and his cherubic face until the tears which would not be held back blurred her vision and she sank down beside him in an attitude of despair. She

had no need to read the letter twice. Every word of it was blazoned in her mind in letters of fire.

Dear Caroline [Dorinda had written], I don't know if you will ever forgive me for what I am about to do, but I must do it nevertheless. I am going away. When you get this letter I shall have been gone about six hours. It was not an easy decision to make, but I think I have done the right thing. The letter which I received from Rene asked if I would take up a modelling commission which means travelling all over the world. I feel that if I take it I may see or hear news of Vito. Once I see him and hear from his own lips that he wants nothing more to do with me I shall come home. Don't try to find me, Caroline, for I shan't come home until I find him. I can't give you an address as I shall not know from one week to the other exactly where I will be working, but I will send you as much money as I can. Please forgive my secrecy, but I know that you would have tried to stop me if you had known what I intended doing. All my love, Your humbly grateful sister.

CHAPTER III

IT was a beautiful day, the sun had shone from early morning and now, in the late afternoon, the heat of the day was less overpowering. The scent of the flowering borders wafted over to where Caroline was lying full stretch on her stomach, under her favourite tree in the garden. Vito, a sturdy bouncing boy of nearly six months, was creeping over her back attempting to grab a handful of the shining gold of her hair. She was laughing teasingly as she dodged the grasping little fist each time he made a sudden lunge at her and he was chuckling with glee at her antics and the little squeals of protest which she was purposely making added to his enjoyment of the game.

She did not hear the sound of the great purring car which stopped at the front of the house, nor did she notice the man who stood, with narrowed eyes, watching the two who were so immersed in their game.

His attention was focused upon Caroline. His eyes travelled from her unruly mop of pure gold, over her excitingly lovely face, he caught a quick glimpse of pansy-coloured eyes as she rolled over in her efforts to escape the baby's clutches, and in that moment every curve of her really beautifully proportioned body was outlined by the taut pull of her skimpy jumper and the lovely length of her shapely limbs was emphasized by the tight shrunken jeans which encased them.

He began walking over to where she lay. Some instinct told Caroline that she was not alone. She glanced up quickly, startled into awareness of his presence. She sat up on the grass and stared open-mouthed at the tall, dark, handsome stranger who stood looking down at her with an unfathomable look in his eyes.

He had the bearing of a gladiator, tall, straight, and with an unconscious arrogance which communicated itself to Caroline, and she felt herself stiffen with resentment. His voice when he spoke was

laced with sarcasm and his eyes seemed to mirror a faint contempt as he looked down at her.

"Do I have the pleasure of addressing Miss Lindsay?"

Caroline scrambled to her feet and self-consciously brushed the grass from her jeans and tried, unsuccessfully, to comb her hair with her fingers.

"You have," she answered frigidly. "What can I do for you?"

He looked around him questioningly and asked, "Is there somewhere we can talk, Miss Lindsay?"

"What could you possibly have to say to me that you can't say out here?" She had no intention of letting him bully her into doing as he wished just for the sake of exercising his arrogant manner, she thought to herself mutinously. She set her chin squarely and dared him to contradict.

He looked a trifle taken aback at this show of truculence, but only for a second. He took a wallet from his inner pocket and took out a card which he handed to her, wordlessly.

She glanced down at it and a name jumped out at her. She gave a gasp of astonishment as she saw it. Vicari! His name was Domenico Vicari!

Her face crimsoned as she handed back the card and rather ungraciously said, "You'd better come inside."

He smiled, a supercilious smile which made Caroline want to hit him, as he followed her into the house. She told him to take a seat while she put on the kettle to make a cup of tea. Even if he was one of the hated Vicari clan she had to offer him hospitality. She had been

brought up to honour guests-who were in her house and habit died hard. Nevertheless, her thoughts were in turmoil as she entered the room where he sat looking around him with great interest.

"I see you have some quite good pieces of sculpture, Miss Lindsay, and some remarkably good pictures. Presents from admirers, perhaps?"

The studied insolence of his tone took Caroline's breath away and she suddenly realized that he thought that she was Dorinda. He had obviously come prepared to meet a heartless gold-digger or a good-time girl. He looked quite capable of handing her a cheque for services rendered, thought Caroline viciously. Payment, no doubt, for entertaining a member of his family while he was away from home.

Her blood boiled at the thought of all they had suffered at the hands of his beloved cousin, for she remembered now that Dorinda had mentioned that Vito had a cousin named Domenico, and she desperately wanted to hurt him as they had been hurt.

"Perhaps so," she replied with saccharine sweetness. "A girl must look into the future, Signor Vicari, and what better way than to invest in works of art?"

He gave her a look of distaste and his strong white teeth snapped together in anger. With an imperious gesture he indicated that he wished her to sit, and she did so with a look of resentment which he either did not notice, or chose to ignore. He took a wafer-thin platinum cigarette case from the pocket of his immaculately tailored suit and offered it to her politely, carefully selecting one himself when she refused him. He lit it, after asking her permission, and gazed pensively at her through the haze of smoke which he expelled from his firm, well-cut lips. Caroline sat there waiting impatiently for him to speak, and after a look which seemed to take in every aspect of her dishevelled appearance he asked her:

"How well did you know Vito, Miss Lindsay?"

Caroline was about to reply that she did not, and had no wish to, know him, when she suddenly remembered his derogatory remarks about her works of art and the fact that she had decided to adopt Dorinda's identity in an attempt to punish him for his insufferable intolerance. She put on a mask of casual indifference and in what she hoped was a suitably sophisticated tone of voice, remarked:

"As well as anyone knows the father of her children these days, I suppose. We had fun, lots of fun, and I enjoyed it while it lasted, but unfortunately I was left holding the baby,

as you might say, while dear, darling Vito is footloose and fancy free with a devoted cousin willing to clean up his mess when he has had his fun. I presume that is your purpose in coming here, Signor Vicari? To offer some compensation to the mother of his child? How often have you had to do this chore? Do you enjoy it?"

Caroline was amazed at her acting ability as she sat there deriding him with scorn in her voice whipped up by thoughts of Dorinda's agony of mind and the abandonment of her precious little Vito by both his parents.

She was totally unprepared for the hand which shot out and grabbed her wrist. The pressure of his steely fingers dug into her soft skin. His voice was crushed ice, each word crackling with cold as he answered her.

"Vito is dead, Miss Lindsay — killed by his own foolhardiness in chartering a plane which was not safe in order to reach you sooner. If he had been content to wait for a seat on the regular air line he would be alive today, but no, his love for you was such that he could not wait for even a few days to reach you. The plane was found, a charred wreck, miles from civilization, after a search party had been alerted

by the wife of the pilot of the machine. There was no evidence that either of them had survived."

Caroline's eyes were dark with horror as he flung the words at her without a sign of compassion on his granite-like face. His hand still grasped her wrist like a vice, but she could not feel it. Her heart was too full of the pain which she was feeling at the thought of Dorinda's suffering when she found out about Vito's death.

Unconsciously pleading, she lifted her eyes to his.

"Oh, no! Please say it isn't true! It mustn't be true! What will happen to the baby? How will I manage if his father is dead?" She was thinking that the news would have the effect of driving Dorinda even further away from her baby son and that it might cause yet another bout of deep depression to encompass her highly-strung sister.

She flung out her arms in an attitude of despair, jerking her wrist from his grasp as she did so. The weals which his fingers had made on her wrist stood out corrugated and, as the blood began to rush back to the maltreated area, bright red and ugly. He glanced down at her arm and when he saw the result of his anger a "dull flush suffused his face and he picked up her wrist again, gently this time, and began to smooth the bruised skin with a light stroking movement of his fingers. All his anger had evaporated at the signs of her obvious distress and in a softer tone he replied to her outburst.

"That is the reason I have come, Miss Lindsay - to look after you both. My cousin would have wished it. I owe Vito and his mother more than I could ever repay and I have come here today to carry out what I feel would be his desire. I only hope that you will be agreeable to the plan which is in my mind."

Caroline regarded him suspiciously. She did not trust his gentle manner. Although the words were spoken softly he had an assurance

of manner which suggested that of course she would do as he told her to and no questions asked. "Plan?" she queried.

"Yes. I have decided that the simplest solution to the problem will be for us to marry!"

Before he could say another word Caroline jumped to her feet and said in an outraged voice:

"Are you mad? Marry you? I would rather die!" Her blue eyes flashed fire as they challenged him to dare to carry on with his monstrous suggestion. He leaned back against the couch and negligently crossed one leg over the other as he regarded her with eyes which had narrowed to two slits. With cool precision he repeated his proposal. Caroline almost choked with rage, but before she could find words with which to annihilate him he continued:

"The baby would be assured of an upbringing suitable to his father's station. His future would be a bright one and," with an oblique look at Caroline, "when he attains his majority he would automatically become a partner in one of the largest and most famous export and import businesses in Italy, indeed, I might go so far as to say, in the world. Combined with that he would inherit a considerable amount of money which I would set up in trust for him as soon as we married. Can you deny him his inheritance for the sake of the mild antipathy which you have taken to me?" he asked her with masterly understatement.

"Surely," looking pointedly at the treasures which he had examined earlier, "you can put up with me if I can assure you, also, a life of luxury and ease."

Caroline hated the look of mocking assurance which accompanied this last remark and she felt that nothing would give her more pleasure than to smack his arrogant, unbelievably handsome face.

She glowered at him, defiance in every line of her slender body, but her defiance turned to confusion as she stood there and his eyes swept her every line and curve, a faint smile twitched at the corner of his mouth as he tried deliberately to embarrass her with his bold, almost indecent raking of her body. She turned away abruptly to hide the burning blush which was creeping up from her neck to her brow. She felt her whole body was blushing, but she did not intend that he should witness her discomfiture.

After a few moments she had regained her composure and felt equal to returning to the fray. She turned from the window where she had been watching baby Vito at play and, at the same time, giving herself the breathing space necessary to calm down her jangled nerves. Clearly and succinctly she spoke.

"Signor Vicari," he looked at her questioningly, "I have no doubt that your intentions are genuine in that you wish to help us. Nor do I doubt that you would provide us both with more than we could ever hope to have, living as we do on our own, but I feel that I must firmly decline your offer of marriage as I feel that we could not be compatible under any circumstances. Furthermore, when I marry it will be to someone I love and who loves me. I have no wish to wed a bank balance, whatever conclusions you may have drawn to the contrary while you've been here. So would you please go now? It has been an ... experience, meeting you."

She walked to the door and stood holding it open, waiting for him to slink dejectedly through it as though utterly vanquished by her freezing tone and *grande dame* manner.

Very much to her surprise he got up to do as he was bid. She was so surprised her mouth fell open slightly as he paused on his way out to give her a slight bow. It was then she glimpsed the amusement in his dark eyes and she closed her mouth tightly to contain the angry words which were trying hard to force their way out. He looked at his

slender gold wrist-watch, and the passage of time must have startled him, for his rather indolent manner was replaced by an attitude of slight urgency. He spoke to Caroline hurriedly.

"I feel that we have much more to discuss, Miss Lindsay. But I have a very important business call coming through to my hotel in less than half an hour. I shall go there now, and after dinner I shall come back to see you both and to continue outlining our future plans. Meanwhile," he regarded her gravely, "you will have time to consider my proposition more carefully, and to weigh up the advantages to yourself as well as to the baby."

His sheer effrontery took Caroline's breath away and she was speechless as she watched him walk swiftly to his car and drive off without a backward glance.

The whole episode had taken no more than half an hour, and yet Caroline felt that she had lived through a lifetime and run through a gamut of emotions. Never before in her life had she met a man whose force of personality left her feeling as exhausted as a rag doll, as this man had. She checked to see that Vito was still playing contentedly in the garden with his menagerie of toy animals, and when she had made certain that he was not bored with his own company she went into the room which had been the scene of so much conflict such a short time ago and sank wearily on to the couch that Domenico Vicari had just vacated. His personality still lingered. The faint tang of his after-shave lotion and the aroma of the cigarette he had smoked wafted in her nostrils as she sat there going over the incredible conversation they had had. Her indignation was dying and she began thinking over the situation quietly and calmly without the antagonism of his presence to disturb her.

His last words still rang in her ears. Had she the right to deny Vito the advantages which the wealth of the Vicari family would bring to him? She bit her lip as she considered the precarious future which lay

ahead of him as the son of a man who could no longer be looked to hopefully as a provider, and the unwanted and abandoned child of a mother who had rejected him from birth. The bitterness which she had tried so hard to fight welled up in her once again as she thought of Dorinda's heartless action. The months which had passed since her flight had softened the blow somewhat, but Caroline, although she had tried hard to excuse her callous behaviour, still felt an overwhelming wave of hurt when she thought of it.

She had received one letter from Dorinda, telling her that she was leaving England the following day and that she would keep in touch. She had made no mention of the baby, or of how she, Caroline, would manage for money while she was away. The help she had promised in her first letter had not materialized and she had been at her wits' end with worry on the morning Mr. Wilkins had called. He had phoned the previous day asking her to Come to his office as soon as possible, as he had news for her, but upon hearing of her difficulties in respect of transport to town for herself and the baby he had immediately offered to call the next day.

He had bustled in, full of importance, and with an air of having pulled off a particularly clever deal. His satisfaction was evident in his voice as he addressed her in his old- fashioned pompous manner.

"A most fortuitous situation has developed, Miss Lindsay," he began. "You recall that I mentioned some shares which your late father," he paused for a moment in silent /ift tribute, "had amongst his effects? Well, I have great pleasure in informing you that they are now being very much sought after and I have had some excellent offers from interested clients. It is a truly amazing situation which has developed, in that the company in which your late father invested has suddenly come up with a product which everyone wants to use, and now the shares are leaping in value on the Stock Market. Given time, I think I can safely say that you will have a nice little income from your investment."

He had rubbed his hands with glee as he anticipated her good fortune, but his glee had turned to shocked amazement when, instead of being guided by him and leaving the shares in the company which was getting ready to expand at an enormous rate to meet the demands of the consumer, she had insisted upon selling them immediately. He had pleaded in vain for her to change her mind, but she had seen it as a heaven-sent opportunity of getting some ready money, which she was desperately short of, and she was adamant. He had reluctantly done as he was bid. The windfall had staved off the immediate need to sell her father's most treasured collector's items, and had bought new clothes for Vito. What little remained was now in her bank, and as she sat there with Domenico's words echoing in her mind she felt a wave of panic as she realized what an enormous task she would face in bringing up a small boy unaided, and with such a pitifully small sum at her disposal.

She glanced up at the clock and noted that it was almost time for Vito's bath. She pushed her problems to the back of her mind and began to prepare his supper, ready for when the ritual of bathtime was over and, sweet-smelling and contented, he would lie back in her arms and submit to her coaxing him with each spoonful of his supper while at the same time fighting the waves of sleep which overtook him at the same time each night.

He was chortling loudly and splashing water all over Caroline when Domenico Vicari returned.

They were both engrossed in their game, as on his first visit, when he entered the house for the second time that day. He heard the sounds of their laughter coming from the bathroom and in a few swift strides he mounted the stairs and walked in on them just as Caroline was lifting Vito from the tub. For the first time he seemed really to notice Vito and his face broke into a sudden, unexpectedly boyish smile as he watched her struggling with the squirming little bundle which she was trying to towel dry.

He lifted him from her lap, still smiling broadly. "Here, let me do that. It is time that he and I were better acquainted." He slanted a wicked look at her as he added, "I shall concentrate on bettering my acquaintance with you later."

Caroline, who was still a little out of countenance by his unheralded arrival, felt the beginning of a warm blush spreading to her hot cheeks as his bold laughing eyes travelled over her curves. His lingering look made her conscious of the tight-fitting jeans which she was still wearing and of the revealing gap in her blouse where Vito, in his struggles, had pulled off the top button. She could have stamped her foot with rage as she realized that he was deliberately trying to provoke her. He speaks to me as if he were Caesar and I were a slave girl whom he feels inclined to dally with for a while! she thought indignantly, and her dislike of him grew with every second.

The recipient of her thoughts was receiving a gratifying response from Vito, however. He was gurgling at him in his delight at having a strong pair of arms holding him, and he was making no secret of the fact that his new uncle met entirely with his approval. Domenico seemed to be enjoying himself-too, and with a look of triumph he handed Vito to her to be dressed in his nightwear.

The towel slipped from the baby's shoulders as he did so, and Domenico gave a start of surprise as he pointed out a little heart-shaped mole on the pink skin of the baby shoulder.

"That mole," he asked her, "has he had it from birth?"

"Why, yes," she replied. "Doctor Thomas was the first one to notice it just a few moments after he was born. He pointed it out to me, then remarked how perfectly shaped it was."

To her surprise Domenico sighed heavily and put his head in his hands for a moment as if he had received a body blow which he

needed a few moments to recover from. Then he looked up at Caroline's bewildered face and with a grim look he said:

"All right, Miss Lindsay, I am convinced. He must be Vito's child, for it would be too much of a coincidence for the child of any other man to be born with the mark which every male Vicari has borne on his shoulder throughout generations."

His implication was obvious. Until that moment he had been harbouring suspicions as to whether or not the baby really was his cousin's child, and the sight of the mole had convinced him. Caroline's indignation almost choked her. To think that he had been regarding her, in her role as Dorinda, as a loose character who could perhaps claim any of half a dozen men as the father of her child made her furiously angry for Dorinda's sake. His unjustified slur on her sister's character was a most unfair assessment of a girl whom he had judged and found wanting in a most peremptory manner. His intolerance was unbearable, and Caroline, at that moment, felt that the only thing which would give her any satisfaction would be to see his lofty ideals topple and for his arrogant Roman pride to be humbled in the dust. She had to be content, however, to glare at his grim countenance and to grind out with impotent rage:

"I think you're the most hateful man I've ever met!"

If her outburst surprised him he did not show it. His only reaction was a slight raising of his black eyebrows as he regarded her flushed cheeks and flashing, furious eyes.

With a cool nonchalance he indicated the drooping little body between them who was gallantly fighting the waves of sleep which were washing over him.

"I suggest that you take this young man to his bed, Miss Lindsay, and then perhaps you will change into a dress if you possess one, and we will then talk without interruption."

She stood up immediately and with burning cheeks began to gather up Vito and his belongings to take them upstairs to his room. She swept out of his presence with head held high, fortunately missing the quiver of amusement which passed over his face as he watched her.

Her cheeks were still burning as she rummaged through her wardrobe looking for a dress which did not show too many signs of hard wear. The only one which was suitable was a well-washed cotton of an indiscriminate colour which she had never liked and had always avoided wearing until she was so hard up for dresses that she had had to bring it into service. Nevertheless, it did not show any faded patches, as most of her other dresses did, and so, with faint misgivings, for she had no doubt that if it did not please him he would be quick to inform her, she pulled it over her head, gave her bright hair a quick comb, and then went slowly downstairs to where he was waiting.

His derogatory glance was enough to make her wish that she had ignored his impertinent request to change out of her jeans and blouse, for it told her that his opinion of the dress was not worth voicing.

She pulled herself up sharply. Caroline Lindsay, you're a fool! What on earth do you care what he thinks of you or of the way you dress? This man is your enemy and don't you forget it!

She threw herself inelegantly upon the couch and drew her legs up under her skirt, shifting a little until she was completely comfortable, and then she threw a look of disdain in his direction and waited for him to make the first move.

After asking her permission to smoke, which she gave with an impatient wave of her hand, he sat gazing at her thoughtfully for a moment through the blue haze of smoke which he expelled in a thin stream from his lips, and then surprised her by asking:

"Don't you think it's time I knew your name?"

As this was the last thing she had expected him to say, she was nonplussed.

"It's Caroline," she replied without thinking.

"Caroline? I like it. It suits you. As you only wrote what was obviously a nickname on your letter to Vito the only clues that I had to go on was your address which was on the envelope of the letter which was to tell him that the birth of your baby was imminent. From the terms in which the letter was couched I also gathered that there had been a previous letter which had remained unanswered. I therefore assumed that that was the cause of Vito's desperate need for haste in returning to England, and also the cause of his premature death," he added accusingly.

Caroline winced at the note of accusation. She remembered the hard thoughts she had had about the young man, how she had imagined him to be wining and dining some other woman while Dorinda had been giving birth to her baby, and a lump came into her throat as she realized how wrong she had been about him.

Domenico went on, "That letter was a great shock to me, Caroline." She hated herself for the small thrill it gave her to hear him speak her name for the first time.

"Naturally, when Vito was reported missing his mail was forwarded to his family. The last thing I expected to read was a letter from an English girl, signing herself 'his only true love', and of whom I had

never heard, pleading for his love for herself and for the child she was bearing." He turned towards Caroline. "You sounded so desperate in that letter," he said to her, "so heartbreakingly desperate, that I am almost glad he did not receive it." .

Once more the painful blush rushed to Caroline's face as she realized that he imagined that she had written that letter.

He seemed to hesitate before asking her a question. "Have you any reason to think that Vito was involved with any other girl besides yourself while he was in this country?"

She cast her mind back feverishly to her conversations with Dorinda in an effort to remember whether any other girl had been mentioned in connection with Vito, and couldn't.

""No, I don't think so," she stammered.

"The reason I ask," he said thoughtfully, "is that rumours reached me of an affair which he was supposed to be having with some ravishing model in London. I did not find out her name or her place of employment, but I believe that they were seen together practically every day of his visit in this country. You are sure that you know nothing of this girl?" he shot at her.

At this point Caroline felt that her deception had gone far enough and opened her mouth to tell him the truth, but before she could so do he bit out angrily:

"Do you wonder I had suspicions? I hear of this affair with a girl described to me as being as dark in complexion as one of my countrywomen and come here to find an English rose with golden hair and skin like white velvet, claiming to be the mother of his son."

While he was describing her his eyes travelled over her face and the shining nimbus of her hair. Caroline was thrown into confusion and the words she had been about to speak stuck in her throat as his glance seemed to take in everything about her.

His look was not a gentle one, but rather estimating. He was weighing her up and did not seem to find her wanting, judging from the rather lazily mocking smile which played upon his lips as his eyes assessed her.

His next words startled her out of her confusion.

"That was the reason that I suggested that we marry. It was a - test, if you like. If you had jumped at my offer of marriage I should have known that you were merely after a rich husband and treated you accordingly. But since your refusal was so unequivocal, and I now have proof that the baby really is Vito's son, I can only offer you my apologies and hope that you will forgive my suspicions. I also wish you to know that my offer of marriage still stands."

Caroline gasped. "But why should I wish to marry you? From the very first moment we met you've deliberately tried to provoke me. You look at me as if I were one of the slave girls which your ancestors delighted in carrying off to Rome in the chariots. Believe me, Signor Vicari, I have no wish to become Caesar's wife. Although I thank you for the honour you accord me." This last remark was accompanied by a mocking curtsy as she jumped from the couch and gracefully swept the carpet at his feet with an imaginary trailing skirt.

He laughed a trifle vexedly and his eyes narrowed as he drawled, "Then I hope that you will have no objection to my taking my nephew to his rightful home?"

She stopped in her tracks. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Caroline, that I have every intention of seeing to it that my nephew is brought up in the same environment as his father. He will have the same advantages as his father had, and the security which comes from being a member of one of the richest families in Europe. That much I can do for his father's sake, and for his. Do you deny that I can offer him far more than you can?"

"Yes, I do deny it!" she retorted swiftly, fear adding sharpness to her tone. "You may have more money than I would ever wish to have, but that doesn't mean you can make him happier than I can. I love him. He's mine, and nothing you can say or do will ever part us!"

"I would not be too sure of that," he answered her in a dangerously quiet voice. "Money has its uses and no one in their right mind will deny that Vito will be better off in my care than he will in yours. Oh, I know you are his mother. But what visible means of support have you? I warn you, Caroline, I shall fight you with every means in my power to get custody of the child. So why not reconsider my proposal? Let me take you both back to Italy. As my wife and son you will know security for the rest of your lives. Vito will be amongst his father's people and they will love him, even though they will not know him as Vito's son, for if you agree to marry me I shall adopt him. That way he will get to know his grandmother, too. I can think of no other way in which to bring him into her life without causing her pain by telling her the truth. Couldn't you bring yourself to accept, if only to bring a little light into an old lady's life?"

The thought of being parted from her beloved baby was more than she could bear. Desperately she tried to think of a way out of the impossible situation which he was outlining. She was cold with the cold of despair which struck right into the heart of her being. He would fight her for the custody of her child, he had said. How much easier his job would be if he ever found out that she was not Vito's mother. What court in the land would give custody of an abandoned baby to his penniless aunt rather than to his rich relative? She knew

she was beaten. She would face anything, bear any burden, to keep Vito with her.

She jerked up her chin and met his eyes as he sat waiting for her answer. With her hands clenched in her lap to stop their trembling and a determination not to let her voice quiver, she gave him her answer.

"Very well, I will marry you."

He gave a sigh of satisfaction and leaned forward to touch her ashen cheek with his finger.

"Don't be afraid of me, Caroline. I shall look after you both, I promise. There is just one other thing —"

"Yes?"

"I want you to realize that there can never, under any circumstances, be any question of divorce. This is very important Caroline. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she replied flatly. What did it matter? she thought. The only reason she could think of for wanting a divorce was to be able to marry someone else and, at the moment, she was sick of men.

The next few days proved to her that the decision not to fight Domenico was the right one.

Was it, she wondered, his air of expecting his every demand to be met, not as soon as possible, but immediately, which made everyone excel themselves in an effort to meet his wishes? Or was it his undeniably affluent appearance which impressed them?

Whichever it was, it resulted in her affairs being settled in an unbelievably short time. Arrangements were made to store her most treasured pieces of furniture until such time as they could be

despatched to Italy. The house was put into the hands of an agent who assured Domenico that it would be sold almost immediately. Passports were obtained and the wedding date, fixed, of course, by Domenico, was drawing alarmingly near.

When she thought of it, which was as little as possible, Caroline's heart began to flutter and she broke out into beads of perspiration as panic threatened to overwhelm her. One look at Vito, however, was enough to dispel any thought of backing out, for nothing that might happen to her could be worse than being parted from her beloved baby.

Panic rose in her now as her ears caught the sound of Domenico's car stopping at the front of the house. She was sitting at a window overlooking the garden when he walked in through the open door. She flung the window wide open to the night air in an effort to fill her lungs with the scent of the old-fashioned cabbage roses which clustered around the framework, and to alleviate the suffocating sensation which clutched at her throat.

"Good evening, Caroline." He spoke to her unwelcoming back.

She did not turn. "Good evening."

He caught hold of her shoulder and turned her gently to face him. "Something is wrong?" he asked quietly.

She twisted away from his touch and the concern in his voice. She had discovered that Domenico, when he wanted to, could charm the birds from the trees. At times he seemed to forget the antagonism between them and gave her a glimpse of the charming person he could be when he forgot to don his mask of cold arrogance. She had to keep reminding herself that she hated him in case her guard should slip and she, too, succumbed to his devilish attraction, as she had no doubt many other unfortunate women had.

"I'm a little tired, that's all." She strove to keep her voice cool as she answered him.

He looked sharply at her rather wan face and, reaching her in one stride, he placed his hands upon her shoulders and bent his dark head until he could look into her pansy-soft eyes.

"Poor little love," he murmured. "You are beginning to feel the pace a little, no?"

His nearness and the unaccustomed caress in his slightly accented voice was nearly her undoing. She swayed towards him slightly and he folded her into his arms with an indistinct sound which could have been a breath catching in his throat. He leaned his cool tanned cheek against the velvet smoothness of her face and the contact of his warm lips against the corner of her mouth jerked her to her senses. With a feeling of self-disgust she pulled herself from his arms and stepped back until she was as far away from him as the confines of the small room would permit. She rubbed the back of her hand across the part of her mouth which had a moment ago felt his kiss and her eyes when she looked at him were dark with anger.

"Don't you dare to touch me like that again!"

He shrugged his shoulders and gave a rather wry smile which did not reach his eyes. "You have been kissed before, I take it? Surely it is not such a novelty to you that you find the need to play the outraged heroine? "

The meaning of his words was obvious, and Caroline's humiliation was complete as they fell like a challenge between them. He thought she was cheap. He was making it clear that although he was willing to marry her he had no illusions as to her exclusiveness. She was to be a plaything with which to while away an odd hour or two and then discard when the notion took him. Anger and disgust with herself for

the treacherous feelings which had swept through her at the touch of his lips made her clench her fists tightly as she fought for composure. With a gallant effort she looked him straight in the eye and, to her everlasting credit, the words she spoke were without a falter.

"Don't judge me because of my love for your cousin, Domenico. I bore his child and I don't regret it. Because of the love I had for him I can contemplate marriage with you, knowing that although I may wear your ring he will always hold my heart."

Domenico showed no sign of emotion until she spoke the last few words. Then a muscle twitched in his cheek and he seemed to fight to control his feelings. His jaw clenched with anger and his eyes sparked with the intensity of his wrath, but he held himself in iron reserve, his lean body seemed to embody all that was primitive as he fought the anger which her words had aroused. Caroline drew a sob of relief as the tension left his body and he relaxed his grim expression to one of suave displeasure as he gazed down at her. His demeanour was, once again, that of a provoking Roman gladiator as he began arrogantly to speak.

"I have no wish to usurp my cousin, and were he here at this moment I should be more than thankful to hand over to him his responsibilities. But as it is, I have no choice but to take over from where he left off. Perhaps my advances are repugnant to you at the moment, but I shall improve upon acquaintance, I assure you. One thing I must admit, Caroline..." She looked at him quickly, for his tone had changed from the mocking one she was so used to hearing from him, to a soft, almost caressing sound. "I must admit," he went on, "to finding you, very much against my will, almost as attractive as Vito must have found you. Your charms are irresistible."

This was too much for Caroline. He could treat her as he did and still have the effrontery to say that he was attracted to her!

"Then I can only hope," she said frigidly, "that you don't find I improve upon acquaintance, for nothing is more repugnant to a woman than a man's unwelcome attentions and I can assure you, signor, that yours are most unwelcome."

He was not one whit disturbed by her crushing rejoinder. With a quick movement he bridged the gap between them and his arms closed around her with a vice-like grip. She tried to struggle, but her strength was puny in comparison to his and he held her firmly until she was tired and stood passive in his arms. She felt a wave of dejection sweep over her and she acknowledged his superior strength by relaxing her tension, and there was a weary droop to her shoulders as she waited for him to make the next move. Surprisingly, he made no effort to kiss her. Instead, he pushed a strand of hair which had fallen over her forehead back from her brow and with a determined expression he told her :

"Vito is dead. Nothing can bring him back however much we may wish it. But we are young and alive, and when we are married I shall expect you to forget all other men and to be faithful only to me. And remember this, Caroline, I am no celibate. I admit that I want you. I have fought against the attraction which you hold for me, but each time we meet it grows stronger. You puzzle me greatly. You are obviously not without experience, yet each time I try to get near to you you shy away like a young colt. Is it a game you are playing with me - one minute cool and sophisticated and the next innocent and frightened? I want a wife, Caroline, a wife in the full meaning of the word. Do you understand?"

She understood only too well, and a shudder ran through her at the import of his words. He made no mention of love. He wanted her body because she attracted him, but at the same time, he despised himself for his weakness. She faced him bravely as she asked him in a voice not far from tears, "Surely you wouldn't expect me to become your wife in that respect after having known you for such a short

time? I agreed to marry you, for the baby's sake, but won't you give me a little time before ... before —" The colour rushed to her face as she stammered and could not find words to finish her sentence.

"Before I make you mine?" he queried softly. The pressure of his arms tightened a fraction as he saw the glint of a tear, Avhich she determined not to let fall, brighten her eyes, then he relaxed his hold upon her and walked away as if he could not trust himself to stay calm while he was near to her. He stood by the window looking out into the garden and for quite a few minutes he was silent, as if thinking deeply. Caroline waited. He turned when she made a slight movement which disturbed his reverie and said decisively:

"I have to be honest with you, Caroline. Deceit is abhorrent to me and I have to say what I feel. I cannot guarantee that I will not try to make love to you, for even now, your coolness tempts me to take you in my arms and make you forget that you ever knew any other man. And I *could* make you forget," he said softly, his eyes openly caressing her. "I can only promise you that I will endeavour to give you time to know me better before I claim a husband's privileges. Will that satisfy you? Will you marry me on those terms, bearing in mind that it will not be a cold Englishman that you will be married to but a normal warm-blooded Italian?"

He watched her confusion as she tried to overcome the shyness which swept over her at his words. She could not talk as frankly as he on such an intimate subject. To Domenico, loving and being loved was as natural as breathing and not in the least embarrassing, but Caroline had all the inbred inhibitions of her race, in that respect, and found it difficult to find words with which to answer him. She wanted to shout out, No, I will not marry you! - but she was committed to a marriage with him for the baby's sake. She could not think straight, for his first words had struck a chord within her and they were reverberating through her mind insistently. Deceit is abhorrent to me! How would he react when he discovered, as some day he surely must, that she had

practised the greatest of deceits upon him? Divorce her? No, he had stressed that there could never be a divorce. What, then? What other way out would there be?

Suddenly, as if seeing light through a dark tunnel, she remembered. Of course! An annulment!

The relief was tremendous. Why hadn't she thought of it before? Her train of thought brought her back to the subject which they were discussing and she realized that Domenico was still waiting for her answer. She wondered, ironically, what he would say if he could read her thoughts. He was waiting for her to say that she would marry him and gradually get used to the idea of being his wife in the fullest sense, while she was, at that very moment, determining that she would marry him but that the circumstances would be such that, in time, they would have the marriage annulled.

How she was going to bring about this state of affairs in view of Domenico's confessed feelings towards her, she had no clear picture. But she thought, grimly, if it means my fighting him every day of the week then I shall! It will only be until Dorinda returns for the baby, for then we shall go home, the three of us, and forget that the Vicari family ever existed.

Having settled things in her mind to her satisfaction, she turned a composed face towards Domenico and answered him.

"Very well. If you will agree to give me time to know you better before making any demands upon me, then I shall carry on with the wedding."

CHAPTER IV

As the great silver aircraft soared into the air Caroline's spirits lifted with it. Up until that moment her heart had felt as heavy as the broad golden wedding ring which weighed down the third finger of her left hand. From the moment Domenico had placed it there that morning it had seemed like a manacle symbolizing that she was now his possession, his captive.

He looked down at her as she sat avidly watching as the ground was left hundreds of feet below them, and when she could no longer see the earth miniaturized into tiny patches of green with toy trains running along silver threads of track, she turned her attention to the inside of the aircraft and to the man who sat watching her excited face with an amused smile.

She was so uplifted by the adventure of their journey that she gave him a radiant smile and spoke to him without a trace of animosity.

"Oh, Domenico, it's wonderful!" She waved her arms to indicate everything in sight. "It's all so wonderful I shall have to pinch myself to make sure that I'm not dreaming."

"Is this the first time that you have travelled abroad?"

"Abroad? This is the first time I've been more than fifty miles away from home. I simply can't believe it's all happening to me!"

He was surprised by her disclosure and wondered, not for the first time, how much more there was that he did not know about her. She had so many facets to her nature that he was continually being surprised by the little bits of knowledge which she casually dropped and which he was trying to piece together to form a clear picture of her and of her life before he met her.

"Have you travelled by air often, Domenico?"

To a man who belonged to the International Set and who used planes as most people use buses there simply was no other way to travel, and he told her so. She looked downcast for a moment as she remarked:

"How silly you must think me. I'm afraid you may find me a very boring companion, for I shall probably rave with enthusiasm over each new sight I see."

"Don't apologize for being fresh and sweet, Caroline. It's I who have become rather blase, and seeing things through your eyes will be like discovering them afresh."

He leaned over to look at Vito, who was sleeping peacefully through all the excitement of his first flight, and said to Caroline:

"I think you would be wise to follow this young man's example and have a nap before we reach Paris. You have had a busy morning and I don't want you falling asleep on me tonight when I show you the sights. We have quite a programme to get through before leaving for Rome tomorrow, and buying you a new wardrobe is not the least of it. Lean back and close your eyes. I will waken you before we land."

With an obedience quite foreign to her nature she did as she was bid, revelling in the unaccustomed luxury of having every decision made for her, every obstacle removed from her path before she even realized that it had existed.

Sleep would not come, however, and inevitably her thoughts drifted back to the beginning of the most eventful day of her life.

She had wakened this morning with a feeling of impending doom, and when the realization broke upon her that this was her wedding day she had had to fight to stem the waves of panic which threatened

to overwhelm her. I can't go through with it, she had thought in terror. I'll phone him and tell him to cancel everything! Her hand had been hovering over the phone when Aline and Jim had arrived to help her with her preparations. At least, Aline was to help her. Jim had merely dropped her off at Caroline's on his way to Domenico's hotel where he had arranged to meet him before the ceremony. Aline and Jim had been pressed into service as witnesses, and after their slight feeling of awe, which Domenico inspired in most people out of his immediate circle at first meeting, they had become firm friends.

He called out to them to get a move on as he drove away to his rendezvous with Domenico. "I will be back for you in less than an hour to take you to the church," he had called.

After that there had been no opportunity to call Domenico. Aline would have been no use as a confidante, for she thought Caroline was the luckiest girl in the world to be marrying him, and had said so on numerous occasions. She had assumed, since they had been out of touch with each other for a while, that Caroline and Domenico had known each other for some time and had teased her for being a "sly puss" and for keeping him dark instead of telling her about him on the day that they had had their long gossip.

Caroling had concentrated on getting Vito ready for the wedding and had left herself with only fifteen minutes in which to bath and change into her wedding outfit. Aline had shooed her into the bathroom and urged her to hurry. Her fingers had been all thumbs as she tried to fasten the tiny buttons which ran halfway down the back of the cream- coloured blouse which partnered the pale blue suit that she had bought for the occasion.

Domenico had been puzzled when she had insisted upon buying her own wedding outfit. He had wanted to buy her a fabulously expensive dress which she had been looking at wistfully in one of Dorinda's fashion magazines. But she had been firm.

"I have money of my own," she had said in a dignified manner, "and I can get something suitable in Newham. There are some quite good shops there."

"But I thought that it was to be one of your perks in this marriage of ours, to have money to spend on clothes and anything else you desire?" Domenico's black eyebrows lifted in enquiry.

"Do you think for one moment that I would be marrying you for any other reason but to keep Vito with me?" she asked him bitterly. "If you would promise me that you will go away and leave us both in peace I should gladly relinquish the life of luxury which you seem to think is important to me."

He hadn't promised, of course. And so the wedding preparations had continued.

The actual ceremony had seemed like a dream to her. One thing which had impressed itself upon her mind was that the little church was a veritable bower of white roses. Banks of them had decorated the altar where Domenico stood waiting for her as she walked towards him on the arm of Mr. Wilkins, her solicitor, who was to give her away. He was another of Domenico's conquests, for, after being closeted with him in his office for a matter of minutes, he had come out rubbing his hands and with a sickly ingratiating smile upon his face, or so it had seemed to Caroline, had forgotten himself so far as to congratulate her on her forthcoming marriage instead of proffering the usual good wishes to the prospective bride.

She had made her responses in a low voice, not daring to look at Domenico, whose responses had been steady and concise, and when he had slid the heavy gold ring on to her finger her heart had given a sudden jolt at the contact of his firm brown fingers. She had made to draw her hand away, but he had gripped it firmly and refused to let it go.

He had still held on to it even when they walked into the hotel, where he had arranged for an excellent lunch to be prepared for them, and had only laughingly relinquished his hold upon her when she had protested, in a whisper, that her fingers were becoming numb.

Aline and Jim had insisted upon seeing them off at the airport -and had waved them off until the plane was a mere speck in the sky.

"Will all passengers please fasten their safety belts?"

The sound of the stewardess's voice brought back Caroline's thoughts to the present and she fumbled as she tried to obey the order she had been given. Domenico's hand came to her assistance and with a quick movement of his wrist he adjusted it, smiling at her as he did so.

When the plane finally landed they gathered up their belongings and said goodbye to the charming hostess who had been more than conscientious in her endeavours to please them. Caroline wondered, a little unfairly, whether she would have been as helpful if her passenger had not been as handsome as Domenico, for she had noticed the flattering looks which she had given him as she had tended to their needs. Domenico, to do him justice, had seemed oblivious to these looks, for his attention had never once wandered from his young bride.

Not that I'm jealous, thought Caroline; she's more than welcome to him!

The hotel, when they arrived, was a revelation to her. The unashamed luxury of their apartment was in keeping with the overall munificence of what she was to learn later was the most expensive hotel in Paris.

Her room was a study in white and gold with touches of deep pink in the white carpet and in the heavy velvet curtains which swept from

the height of the enormous windows to the floor below. Her face, when she turned to Domenico, was enraptured.

"You like it?" he asked her smilingly. Her face proclaimed her answer before she gave it. "It's simply beautiful!"

"Then I am glad. I think it is important to have everything just right on one's honeymoon. Don't you agree?"

She shot him a suspicious glance as his teasing voice went on to say, "Paris is the city of lovers, Caroline. Given the proper surroundings and a relaxed atmosphere it should not be too difficult to get you into the mood for love." His laughing face disappeared into the room adjoining hers before she could think of a crushing rejoinder and she bit her lip anxiously as she wondered how long she would be able to keep him at arm's length while he was in this mood of mild devilry.

His gay mood continued throughout the rest of the day. After arranging with the hotel manager for a young member of his staff to look after Vito for a few hours he made a few short telephone calls and then hustled a bewildered Caroline into a taxi.

"Where are we going?" she queried.

"We are going to do some very necessary shopping, my dear. You had your way about your wedding outfit, but I have no wish to see you ever again in that khaki monstrosity which you wore on the first day we met, nor anything similar to it. And I intend to give myself the pleasure of throwing it into the Seine at the very first opportunity!"

Caroline decided to be contrary. She hated the dress herself but defended it fiercely. "It's not khaki! It's beige. And I have no intention of letting you throw it away. I like it." She knew that she was being

deliberately perverse, but this was one small battle which she determined he was not going to win.

The taxi stopped outside of a row of unpretentious houses and as Domenico ushered her up the steps to the front door it was opened by a doorman who stepped aside with deference when he saw Domenico and gave a slight bow and touched his cap as Caroline walked past him. The room they entered was furnished in pale grey with a mere touch of white to soften the sombreness of the decor.

A small stout woman of uncertain age pushed past Caroline to throw her arms around Domenico and as he returned her enthusiastic embrace she burst into a flood of French which sounded to Caroline like a maternal scolding. Domenico answered her quickly in French and indicated Caroline, who was standing waiting, a little uncomfortably, for recognition.

"I want you to meet my wife, Caroline. She does not speak French, Brigitte."

Brigitte turned amazed eyes upon Caroline. "Your wife? *Mon dieu!* But you are the dark horse, Domenico. This news will prostrate half of the fond mammas in Rome. You, married! This I can hardly believe!"

Her small black eyes appraised Caroline. She missed nothing, taking such a time in weighing her up that Caroline felt acutely embarrassed. Domenico was openly amused and said nothing as Brigitte walked around Caroline as if she were a judge at a cattle show, looking intently for faults. I shall expect her to ask me to open my mouth while she examines my teeth, in a moment, thought the fuming Caroline. She was touched, however, when in a much softer tone, Brigitte turned to Domenico and said:

"Ah, but you are the lucky man, Domenico. She is quite perfect," and then she spoiled it by adding, "or at least she will be when I have finished with her."

"And that," answered Domenico, "is the very reason we are here. Beautiful though she is, the English rose needs a little polish before she is presented to the Roman socialites. Don't you agree, Brigitte?"

"I do. But only a very little sophistication, Domenico. We do not wish to spoil her natural beauty. I know exactly how she should be dressed. Will you leave her in my hands for an hour or two? I cannot supply a complete wardrobe in that short time, of course, but I can fix her up with something for this evening and perhaps an outfit in which to travel to Rome tomorrow, as you asked. The rest we shall send on to you as they are ready."

"Good. I knew I could rely upon you, my old friend." And then to Caroline's utter consternation he added, "Please see to it that there are some glamorous negligees included in her trousseau, Brigitte - particularly something in black lace, I think."

In the midst of Brigitte's howl of appreciative laughter he departed, leaving Caroline, in her mortification, feeling as if she had been stripped naked.

She soon found out, however, that she was in the hands of a master, when it came to clothes. When Domenico had left, Brigitte's salon became a hive of activity. Models appeared, as if from nowhere, and in response to Brigitte's terse commands they began displaying one mouth-watering creation after another. Caroline's head began to swim in her efforts to choose from the fabulous collection of clothes which were paraded in front of her until, without demur, she accepted Brigitte's decree. Her choice of evening gown for her first evening in Paris made Caroline breathless. It was a superbly cut sheath in white taffeta with a high regal-looking collar studded with rhinestones. The

skirt fell quite straight and simple to her feet, and the bodice folded itself lovingly around Caroline's firm young breasts. But it was the collar which highlighted the gown, for the beautiful thing framed her face with glistening splendour and gave her the dignity of a young princess. Her heart leaped as she visualized Domenico's reaction to this masterpiece and she took fright at the knowledge that he would probably become a little more ardent and difficult to handle when he saw her in her unaccustomed finery. Brigitte was well satisfied.

"You will do him justice, *ma petite*," she beamed. "Tonight, Paris will enjoy the sight of two of the most handsome lovers it has ever known."

Caroline blushed slightly and gave the little Frenchwoman an impulsive hug. "Thank you," she whispered shyly. "Thank you for everything."

"It was a pleasure, my dear. A pleasure, at first, to serve my dear Domenico, but now a pleasure also to serve you."

She turned away briskly and gave orders for the dress to be packed, ready to be given to Domenico when he returned. The outfit which she had chosen for Caroline's journey to Rome was to be sent to the hotel later, for it needed a slight adjustment. She directed Caroline, "There is just one more thing which needs to be done. I shall call my own hairdresser and insist that he personally does your hair to match the style of the gown. Then you will indeed be perfect."

After a slight altercation on the phone with her hairdresser Brigitte gave a small grunt of satisfaction and indicated to Caroline that she had got her way and that her appointment was fixed.

"Do not worry about keeping Domenico waiting. I shall entertain him until you return," she told Caroline as she handed her into a taxi which was to take her to the hair-dressing salon.

It was evident that the little Frenchman who had been bullied into finding a space in his already overflowing appointment book to dress Caroline's hair was flustered and rather annoyed by the peremptory summons from Brigitte. But when he saw the colour of her hair and had exclaimed about its texture he set to work with a gratifying concentration. The finished product was a compliment to his skill and to the precise accuracy of Brigitte's description of the dress which she was to wear. He had swept up her hair from the nape of her neck to give prominence to the collar which was to be the focal point of her ensemble, and had coiled it on top of her head where the lights caught its golden highlights. The rather severe style accentuated her slender neck and it added to, rather than detracted from, her youthful appearance.

He waved away her stammered thanks and expressed himself charmed to have had the honour of her patronage. "It is a rare pleasure, *madame*, to dress hair of such natural beauty."

Domenico and Brigitte were having a glass of sherry together when she returned. Brigitte gave a coo of delight when she saw the artistry which had gone into Caroline's coiffure, but Domenico said nothing, contenting himself with a lazy smile of satisfaction at her appearance. He looked closely at her.

"Are you tired, Caroline? I think it would be wise if you were to have a rest before dinner so as to be refreshed before I take you out to sample some of the night life of Paris."

"Tired, *alors!*" exclaimed Brigitte. "How can you speak of a child of her age being too tired to enjoy a night in the most romantic city in the world *i* And on her honeymoon!

Shame on you, Domenico! I shall begin to think that you are becoming an old sobersides if you continue in this strain. Tell him, Caroline, that what I say is correct."

With eyes shining with excitement she affirmed Brigitte's statement. "I'm not the least bit tired, thank you, Domenico. I've never in my life felt less like sleep."

Nevertheless, he insisted upon her finishing the drink which Brigitte had given her when she came in, and when she had done so and had again expressed her gratitude to Brigitte for all the trouble she had taken on her account they left for their hotel.

Vito had just begun to miss Caroline when they got back, and although the young girl who had entertained him during the time they had been away assured them that he had been a perfect angel, he had become a little fractious in the last ten minutes before their arrival. Caroline dropped her parcels and gathered him into her arms to comfort him, and as soon as he heard her familiar voice he was pacified and the pouting little lips began to smile.

"Do you think I should leave him again tonight?" she asked Domenico, a trifle anxiously.

"Oh, certainly, Caroline. You know he sleeps like a top once he is in his cot. How many times have you told me he is almost impossible to waken once he gets to sleep? The young girl who watched him earlier is the eldest of twelve children, so the hotel manager tells me, and is quite capable of coping in the unlikely event of his awakening while we are out."

"But will she be available tonight?"

"It is -all arranged, my dear. She is more than willing to sit with him for as long as we wish her to. I shall get her some chocolates and a few magazines to while away the time. It must be a more enjoyable task than her usual duties. In fact, I think we are doing her a favour in asking her."

Convinced, Caroline began to get Vito ready for bed and, as was usual with him, as soon as she began to feed him his supper his little head began to roll on her shoulder and his eyes glazed with sleep. He fought it gallantly, but in a matter of moments he had succumbed to the waves of sleep which washed over him.

Domenico gently lifted him from Caroline's lap and walked into the dressing-room next to his bedroom which had been utilized as a nursery for that one night. He tucked the bedclothes around the sleeping little form and tiptoed out of the room.

"He will be all right now. We can get ready for dinner with an easy conscience," and then, as an afterthought, he added, "I wonder how many men have taken a baby along on their honeymoon?"

Caroline gave a gurgle of laughter as the novelty of the situation struck her, and Domenico's eyes lit up as he noted her gay carefree demeanour. For the first time in their acquaintance she had forgotten that he was an enemy to be guarded against and was smiling with him as they shared the humour of the situation.

He walked over to her and put his hands upon her shoulders in a sudden impulsive gesture, which she seemed to recognize as such, for she did not immediately draw away as she had always done before when he had offered to touch her. Rather tentatively, for he did not want to break the spell of the moment, he asked her:

"Just for tonight, Caroline, let us call a truce. Let us be two people in search of a good time in the most lively capital in Europe. Forget the circumstances which brought us together and let us pretend that we have just met, and that we knew nothing whatever about each other until this moment."

His dark eyes probed hers as he waited for her answer. She did not hesitate. Tonight she would be a young girl out on the town with an

attractive man. She dared not think where it would lead, for she knew that, with Domenico in this mood, she was courting danger. She just knew that she was wildly excited at the thought of an evening in Paris with him and she could not wait for it to begin. He caught his breath as he glimpsed the recklessness in her brilliant eyes, and his face lit up as she answered eagerly:

"All right, Domenico, I would love to."

Caroline's first impression of Paris at night was a bewildering kaleidoscope of beautiful shops and floodlit parks, entrancing cafes and tree-lined boulevards all seen through dazzled eyes and the window of a swiftly moving taxi which was taking them to a restaurant with a renowned gastronomic reputation which Domenico patronized frequently on his visits to the city.

He patiently answered all of the excited questions which poured from her as her enthusiasm mounted. She twisted one way and then another as the taxi flashed past some point of particular interest in an effort to see a little more of the fascinating sights which abounded in the city of dreams which was Paris.

Domenico laid a restraining hand on her arm and, as she turned her glowing face towards him, he indicated that the taxi had reached their destination. His eyes, when Caroline's met his, were still burning with the strange light which had leapt into being at his first sight of her in all her finery.

Caroline dropped her eyes in confusion as she met his smouldering look and remembered the scene which had taken place in her room before they had left the hotel.

They had adjoining bedrooms in the hotel suite, with a sitting-room and separate bathrooms. Caroline had had her bath and had dressed and made up in front of the luxurious dressing table in her bedroom. She had been sitting gazing unbelievably into the mirror at the elegant stranger who stared back at her when, with a peremptory rap of his knuckles against her door, Domenico had walked in.

It was then, as he beheld the dazzling vision of loveliness before him, that the twin fires had lit in his dark exciting eyes and Caroline's pulse had begun to race as he looked her over from the crown of her regally-dressed hair to the tips of the rhinestone-encrusted evening shoes which were part of her evening ensemble. She had waited, rather breathlessly, for his comments.

He had walked over to her and placed a firm brown hand on either side of her slim waist.

"Princess Caroline," he had said with mocking deference, "I am almost afraid to take you out this evening for fear of being slain by all the envious men in the city. When Paris sees you tonight it will be at your feet in worship." He had then bent his head and placed his lips upon hers in a searing kiss which had left her feeling as if her bones had turned to water, and he had whispered, "As I am, my darling wife."

She had fought desperately the rising tide of passion which his kiss had aroused within her, and had struggled to free herself of the hands which were clamped firmly upon her waist.

Reluctantly he had let her go, and with forced indignation she had derided him.

"Domenico, that wasn't fair! You promised me you would behave as if we had just met this evening. If you intend to carry on in this manner I shall have to refuse to go out with you!" She was still

shaking with the force of the emotions which, in her wildest imaginings, she had never dreamt she possessed. Warning signals had exploded in her mind, alerting her to the dangers of his touch and to the folly of allowing her guard to slip, even for a moment, in his disturbing presence. She had fought to control her traitorous feelings, her wild longing for that which she knew was barred to her. The idea of being his wife had suddenly appealed as a sweet unattainable notion which she thrust out of her mind hastily, lest dwelling upon the possibility should weaken her resolve. There were so many obstacles between her and the sweet dream which had flashed through her mind at the touch of his demanding, possessive lips. The deceit which she was practising in pretending to be Vito's mother was an insurmountable barrier, and the thought of his anger when he found out about it had made her heart freeze with fear of the retribution which, she had no doubt, would be swift and merciless. For one reckless, mad moment she had toyed with the idea of telling him the truth, but the fear that he might take the baby and disappear out of her life altogether gave her heart an agonizing twist and she had willed herself to be strong enough to resist the temptation to throw herself upon his mercy by telling him the whole story.

Domenico had thrust his hands into the pockets of his immaculate evening dress and turned away from her savagely.

"You ask the impossible, Caroline I How can you expect me to act as if I were a statue when you look as utterly desirable as you do? I know now," he added bitterly, "why Vito lost his head over you. Never again need I condemn his actions!"

She had smothered the small cry of hurt which his words had wrung from her, but he heard it. He swung around quickly and moved towards her.

"No! Go away! I don't want you to touch me. I don't even want you to speak to me!" At that moment she had hated her body, and all the

synthetic trappings of adornment which emphasized its beauty, for the way in which it attracted Domenico's purely physical emotions. She did not want lust to be the common denominator which would bring them together.

He had ignored her plea and had grasped her shoulders and forced her to look up into his eyes, which were penitent and pleading. "I am sorry, Caroline! Will you please forgive me? I must be the most selfish brute in all Paris, to treat you in this way. I know how you have looked forward to this evening and I have managed to spoil part of it for you. But I will make it up to you. Please, Caroline! Let us do as we planned originally and forget everything but the fact that we are here to enjoy ourselves. Please?"

His coaxing voice and anxious expression had succeeded in bringing back the light into her eyes, and as he smiled, a sweet almost loving smile, she had been lost. In a small voice she had asked him:

"You will behave, Domenico?" And gravely he had placed his hand upon his heart and a smile had twitched at the corner of his mouth as he had affirmed that he would.

The taxi stopped outside the brilliantly-lit facade of the restaurant which Domenico had chosen as their eating place. As they entered the dining-room all eyes were focused upon them. Then men were quick to show their appreciation of the lovely young girl with stars in her eyes and the bearing of a princess, and the women were openly envious of her escort. A deferential head waiter showed them to their table and as they seated themselves the orchestra began to play and the lights dimmed to a rosy glow. The music was languorous and romantic and one or two couples were swaying in time to it as they danced on the minute dance floor.

Domenico ordered a bottle of champagne with their meal. The waiter seemed to know his preference and ministered to their wants in a respectfully friendly manner. When he had taken his leave, and as they waited for their first course to arrive, he urged her to try the champagne.

She sipped it cautiously and gasped as the bubbles burst under her nose, causing her to sneeze.

Domenico handed her his pristine white handkerchief and laughed as he asked her, "Is this another first, Caroline? The first time you have tasted champagne? What a child you are in some respects!"

With a small dignity she refuted this. "It's not the first time I've tasted it. I had some at Aline's wedding and it had the same effect then." She had no idea that the vintage wine which she was drinking at that moment bore little or no resemblance to the sparkling wine which had been in evidence at Aline's wedding. After the first two tentative sips, however, she began to enjoy it and when she had almost finished what was in her glass, Domenico filled it up again. The wine coursed through her veins and she began to feel marvellously gay again. She chattered to Domenico all through their delicious meal and he responded with a gaiety to match her own. To onlookers they presented a picture of two young people completely engrossed in each other, for Domenico's eyes never left her face and her shining eyes could have been the eyes of a young girl romantically exchanging look for look with her lover.

By the time their meal was over Caroline's feet were itching to dance. She loved to dance. The highlights of her life with her father had been the infrequent dances to which she had been invited at Christmas time, and before her mother had died both Dorinda and she had been allowed to attend a dancing school at Newham where Caroline's natural grace and sense of rhythm had made her the star pupil. Her alacrity when Domenico asked her if she wished to dance startled him

rather, for he had been wondering whether she had ever learned how. When they began to dance he was agreeably surprised to find that she melted into his arms without a trace of nervousness and their steps matched perfectly as they moved to the slow romantic tune which the orchestra was playing.

"You will never cease to surprise me, Caroline," he murmured. "You are as light as thistledown in my arms. You dance divinely."

She did not answer him. She was so enchanted by the magic of the moment that she was afraid to speak in case she broke the spell. His arms folded her still closer as they danced and his cheek rested upon the living gold of her hair. The music throbbed sensuously and the muted colours of the lights played gently upon the smooth planes of her cheeky and cast a slight shadow, now and then, in the deep blue of her eyes. Imperceptibly, she relaxed against him, and they danced on, oblivious of everyone but themselves, lost in the enchantment of their first dance together.

When the music finally stopped they had a slightly dazed look, as if they had been in another world and had been brought back to reality with a jerk, as indeed they had. Domenico smiled down at her, his arm still around her waist, and she returned his smile as she slid her arm from his neck and made towards their table. The tolerant smiles of the couples at the nearby tables as they watched them leave the dance floor hand in hand embarrassed Caroline slightly, and when she was seated at their table, Domenico remarked upon her heightened colour with an amused grin. "Don't you know the saying 'All the world loves a lover',

Caroline?"

"But we are not lovers," she blushed painfully. "I'm afraid I was rather carried away by the music. Please don't imagine that I was

flirting with you, Domenico. I wasn't conscious of dancing with any particular person," she lied gracefully.

"Then if that is the case, I shall have to remember that you are always more receptive on the dance floor and to see to it that we do a lot of dancing in the future," he answered her wickedly.

He poured her a glass of champagne, which revived her spirits considerable, and when she had finished it he signalled for his check. "It's been a simply heavenly evening, Domenico. Thank you so much."

"But the evening is young," he replied. "We are not going back to the hotel yet. Paris still has a lot to offer. Wait until you have seen the floor-show at the Casino de Paris, or perhaps you would prefer the Folies Bergere?"

"Oh, anywhere you choose, Domenico. I don't mind in the least. But first, would you mind if I phoned the hotel to make sure that Vito is all right? I'm worried in case he has wakened and has begun to miss me."

"I already have," he assured her, "and he is sleeping peacefully. So you can enjoy yourself with a clear conscience."

Caroline gave a sigh of relief and pleasure and thought, not for the first time, how considerate Domenico was. Being in his care was like being cosseted and cared for as a priceless treasure would be cared for by a zealous collector. He thought of everything. Her mind sped back to the days, so recent, when every problem had to be resolved by herself, and she revelled in the unaccustomed luxury of being treated as a precious piece of porcelain.

Their gay mood carried on right through the wonderful evening which Domenico had planned for them. After dinner he took her by

taxi, slowly this time, around the city, so that she could see some of the sights, at least fleetingly, of which she had heard so much. Then they began a round of gaiety and laughter which was so easy to find in the gayest capital in the world.

They found that they had so much in common. They liked the same things, laughed at the same jokes, enjoyed the same type of music. They even found that their dislikes were similar. Domenico was determined that she should enjoy her evening, and Domenico, when he was determined, left nothing to chance. The best seats were made available to him. A taxi was always to be found to take them wherever they wished to go. Every door opened at his command.

It was a heady experience for Caroline who, up until then, had always been at the back of the queue when favours were being granted. She mentioned this fact to him and saw a return of his former arrogance in his reply.

"As my wife you will be accorded every consideration. And if you do not get it I shall want to know the reason why!"

Each time he called her his wife she felt a sudden thrill run through her, for although she was wearing his ring and the remembrance of the wedding ceremony, which had been only that morning but which seemed aeons ago, was still with her, she did not feel married to him. She felt as if she were bound to him with many ties but not with love. He could never love her, she thought; he was a man who would have to possess a woman wholly and she would have to be faithful only to him. Domenico would never share. The fact that he..thought that she had belonged to Vito was the biggest barrier between them. He had married her, and he admitted that he wanted her, but he would never love her as she wanted to be loved. As she loved him!

Her breath caught in her throat as, at last, she admitted to herself the knowledge which she had been fighting shy of for weeks. She loved him!

From the very first day that they had met she had felt a strong physical attraction which she had refused to recognize. In the weeks which had followed she had fallen deeper and deeper under his magnetic spell, but had closed her eyes and her reason to the thrill she felt when he touched her, and to the way she had eagerly awaited his coming, anxious when he was a little late, and had struggled to put on a mask of composure to hide the pleasure she had felt when he walked into the room. She loved him! She savoured the pleasure of admitting it to herself for a few seconds and then resolutely pushed it to the back of her mind. Domenico did not want her love. She knew now that the task which she had set herself had become an almost impossible one. To remain married to him in name only while acknowledging her love for him would be a feat of endurance which she did not feel strong enough to bear. But bear it she must, for his sake. He must never suspect that she felt any warming towards him, for that would be fatal to her plan. She must leave a door open for him to get his freedom when he found out the truth about her, as he surely must. She shivered slightly as she pictured her anger when he discovered that she had tricked him into marrying her. She felt sure that Domenico's anger would be a very terrible emotion.

With a determined effort she pushed this unpleasant thought out of her mind and glanced up at Domenico, whose attention had been captured by a chance acquaintance whose salute, from a nearby table, he was returning with a casual wave of his hand.

He turned back to Caroline and with a look of concern noted her slight pallor.

"You are becoming tired? What a fool I am not to have realized it! You have had a very long day and the excitement of this evening and

the travelling we have done is beginning to make its mark. Come, drink up your champagne and we will go."

They were sitting in one of the most exclusive night clubs in the city, in which Domenico had chosen to round off their evening. The warmth of the atmosphere and the dimness of the lighting was inducive to drowsiness and Caroline felt an overwhelming wave of tiredness sweep over her. Her eyes felt terribly heavy and it was with a tremendous effort that she managed to shake off the languor which held her.

He took hold of her hand and teased her gently, "You know, your resemblance to baby Vito is most pronounced at this moment. In just the same way he struggles to fight off his drowsiness. I hope that you will not succumb as quickly as he does, or I shall have to put you to bed when we get back to the hotel."

This warning was enough to startle Caroline out of her tiredness, and she sat up erect and willed her eyelids to stay apart.

"There will be no need for such a drastic step, thank you, Domenico. I shall be quite capable of seeing myself to bed."

"A pity," he shrugged laughingly, "but I still think you have had enough excitement for one day. We will leave now, and when we reach the hotel I shall have some sandwiches sent up to our room before we retire. You would like that?"

The idea of a cosy tete-a-tete with Domenico in the intimacy of their suite was a dangerous one to contemplate and she felt bound to protest. "I'm not the least bit hungry, Domenico. I think I would prefer to go straight to bed, if you don't mind."

"But I do mind," he replied. "I think it will round off our evening nicely. Don't worry, I won't keep you up too long."

He instructed the doorman to fetch them a taxi, and in a short time they were back at the hotel. The young girl whom Domenico had engaged to look after Vito was sitting, relaxed, beside his cot when they entered his room to take a peep at him. She assured them that he had been an angel and had not once wakened. She gave Domenico a grateful look when he pressed a note into her hand, and as she went out she professed herself honoured at being chosen to look after the baby.

Caroline began pacing about the sitting-room in her agitation at the prospect of the forthcoming ordeal with Domenico. I know he'll try to make love to me, she thought feverishly, he's in a reckless mood. I can sense it!

"Why don't you change into something more comfortable while we are waiting for supper, Caroline?"

To her overworked imagination his voice seemed charged with meaning and she answered him quickly, "I'm quite comfortable as I am, thank you, Domenico."

He smiled sardonically. "Then sit down and relax. I am not going to eat you!"

The tiny chicken sandwiches and the bottle of champagne which he had ordered were soon brought up to their suite, and when the door closed behind the waiter who had wheeled in the trolley and placed it beside their couch, Domenico poured out her drink and handed it to her.

He leaned back in an attitude of relaxation and raised his glass to her before he drank.

"The man who invented champagne must have had a moment like this in mind, don't you think, Caroline?" His eyebrows elevated in an enquiring gesture.

She gave him a quick nervous look under the sweep of her downcast lashes and did not answer. He put down his glass and reached over to her. Her body tensed like a coiled spring as his arm closed around her shoulders and her heart began to beat erratically as she withstood his dark brooding gaze. She swallowed the lump in her throat which was threatening to choke her and then found her voice.

"You promised me you would behave, Domenico!"

"I am keeping my promise."

"You know you're not. You said you would not attempt to make love to me. That was part of our bargain. You said that if I went out with you you wouldn't attempt to make love to me."

"Oh, no! What I promised was that we should be as two people who had just met this evening. We would go out and enjoy ourselves with no thought of what had gone before."

"But surely that's the same thing?" she countered.

"Indeed it is not," he answered lazily, his eyes caressing her as he spoke. "I am doing exactly as I would do were you any other girl with whom I had spent an enchanting evening."

She understood the cruel import of his words and the implication smote her. He meant, of course, that he held her in such small esteem that he did not consider it necessary to behave in any other way. He had cheated her. All through this evening, while she had been so happy and gay, he had been planning this finale. She wanted to hate him, but couldn't. All that she could feel was a dull sort of misery

which, when she had time to think about it, would bring intolerable pain. She tried to hurt him.

"And I thought you were a gentleman, Domenico!"

"Must I remind you, once again, that you are my wife, Caroline? What is ungentlemanly about a man who tries to make love to his wife? Did you not tell me when I asked you how well you knew Vito that you knew him only as well as any girl knows the father of her child, these days," he bit out savagely, "and yet, now that you have the respectability of a wedding ring upon your finger, you wish to act like a prude!" His fingers dug cruelly into her shoulders as he drew her towards him.

"You are under my skin, Caroline. I hate myself for it, but I cannot resist the urge to melt the ice that you have formed around that stony little heart of yours." His eyes were leaping twins of flame as they bored into hers. "Is the ice there just for me, Caroline? If that is so, then I know I can melt it! I can make you respond to me!"

She tried to jerk away from the caressing hands which were holding her, but they were like bands of steel. The pain in her weeping heart showed itself in the darkness of her eyes, but he did not notice, or if he did he had ceased to care. His lips came down upon the soft petals of her lips with a savagery quite alien to his nature. Caroline suffered the humility of his brutal caresses with a resignation born of the knowledge that he was hurting himself far more than he was hurting her. He was taking out on her the self-disgust which he felt at his own lack of control.

The fatigue which she had been fighting for the last few hours came over her again in a wave, and she felt herself encompassed by a lassitude which even Domenico's ardour could not hold at bay. She was falling deeper and deeper into the black pit and she could not resist any longer.

Domenico felt her relax against him. All the fight had gone from her and he felt a wave of triumph as he felt her body soft and pliant against his. He lifted his head to look exultantly into her eyes. Incredulously, he saw the soft fan of her eyelashes resting against her cheeks and listened to her soft breathing which told him that she was no longer conscious of his presence. She was nearly asleep! The weariness of an exhausted child.

His look softened as he looked down upon her innocent face. She looked so unutterably young and vulnerable that he felt ashamed. With a murmur of self-condemnation he lifted her gently and carried her to her bedroom.

CHAPTER V

DOMENICO'S car was eating up the miles between Rome airport and the centre of the city, which was their destination. It was the ultimate in automobile luxury. The sun shimmered and bounced from the shining bodywork and sent dazzling rays from the glistening chromium fittings.

It had been waiting for them as they disembarked from the plane in which they had flown from Paris earlier that morning, and Domenico's face, as he slid behind the wheel, had shown the satisfaction he had felt at leaving behind him the Paris taxis and the hired cars which he had used in England.

The upholstery was in cream-coloured hide which was restful to the eyes, and the interior was unbelievably comfortable. Caroline glanced around at Vito, who was cooing contentedly as he lay in his carry-cot, which was firmly anchored to the back seat, and when she had assured herself of his comfort, her glance slewed around to take an oblique look at Domenico's stern, unbending profile. She opened her mouth to speak, and then changed her mind. Her fingers were nervously shredding the dainty lace handkerchief which she was, quite unconsciously, mutilating in her anxiety at the thought of the ordeal which was coming nearer with every revolution of the car's wheels.

Would Domenico's aunt like her? Would his family accept her without question or would they show antagonism to the -girl who was being thrust within their midst without, so far as she knew, explanation of any kind? As she was debating how to open the conversation with Domenico he forestalled her by saying, with surprising foresight, "You need not worry, Caroline. Aunt Rina is one of the most lovable women I have ever known, and as for the rest of the family," he shrugged, "what they may think or say is hardly of consequence."

"How like a man!" she countered, in a voice which matched the coldness in his, which had shown itself from their first meeting at breakfast that morning, "to dismiss his family's natural curiosity and surprise at the advent of a new in-law, of whom they know nothing, as being of no consequence. How would you have reacted if Vito had sprung the baby and me upon you at such short notice, and in such an arbitrary manner?"

Without moving his eyes from the road, he manoeuvred a cigarette from the case in his pocket and lit it from a lighter which he flicked up from a concealed fitting on the dashboard. He seemed to deliberate before giving his answer, which, when it came, in no way alleviated her anxiety.

"I should probably have thought the worst, as no doubt they will," he told her unfeelingly, "but you have no need to fret; the only one whose opinion matters is Aunt Rina's, and she will be given an explanation which will satisfy her, and if it does not, she is far too considerate of my feelings to question it, or you. Indeed, I think you will find that the baby will more than recompense her for any hurt she may feel because of the secrecy of our marriage."

"Do you intend telling her how recently we were married?"

"That is the hardest decision of all which I have had to make." A worried frown creased his brow. "Never before have I deceived her. The idea of telling her a lie sticks in my throat and yet the truth would break her heart. So I am left with no other option but to have to tell her that we married last year and that we kept it a secret because of your family's objections to you marrying so young. Does that sound feasible, do you think?"

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "Won't she think it strange that you've waited until the baby is six months old before telling her about it?"

He ground out his cigarette with a gesture of distaste. "I suppose she must. She will then doubtless draw her own conclusions, but as I said before, she is far too considerate of my feelings to cross-examine me about my private affairs. She will be hurt, of course, but nothing like as much as she would be if I were to tell her that the baby is Vito's. And my back is broad enough to bear the small amount of displeasure which she may allow herself to show."

Yes, but is mine? Caroline wondered. Surely it was ordeal enough for any bride to meet her in-laws for the first time with a loving husband at her side, without the added complication of a six-months-old son present at the introduction, and a husband whose attitude had changed from that of the gay companion who had presented Paris to her on a plate, to the once more arrogant Roman of their first meeting. She would not let her mind stray to the dreadful climax of last night when Domenico had shown her his true colours. The humiliation of his contemptuous behaviour was as nothing to the shame she had felt when she had awakened this morning, dazed and bewildered by the strangeness of her surroundings, to find herself robed in the black nightdress which Brigitte had included in the box which had held the suit which she was now wearing, in which she was to meet Domenico's aunt.

She blushed, even now, as she thought of her feelings as she lay in bed this morning, wondering, not daring to think, who had undressed her the night before. She had hesitated for as long as she reasonably could before going into their sitting-room where they were to have breakfast. But she need not have worried. Domenico had been immersed in a pile of mail which had seemed to demand his complete attention and had merely given her a cold glance and a perfunctory "good morning" as she sat down to the breakfast which she felt would choke her.

His preoccupation had lasted throughout the air journey. He had spent most of his time, while airborne, scribbling notes ill the margins of

the letters which he had received that morning, and any conversation they had had was of the most impersonal.

The car was now travelling along the magnificent Autostrada del Sole - Road to the Sun, Domenico informed her - which ran along the same route as the old military road before it. She wondered, fancifully, whether the Anglo-Saxon slave-girls who had probably been driven along this very same route in the chariots of their Roman captors had felt the same trepidation upon entering Rome as she was feeling. Her nervousness increased with each second and she had to place her hands upon her knees to stop their uncontrollable trembling.

The moment which she had been dreading finally arrived. Domenico pulled up in front of a dignified, secluded-looking house with windows which seemed to stare at her like blank, unfriendly eyes. She stumbled, in her agitation, as she got out of the car, and was glad of Domenico's arm which supported her until she had regained her balance, and her composure. She straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath before she allowed him to guide her up the fan of shallow stone steps which led to the imposing front door. He rang the bell and, almost before it had time to warn of their presence, the door was opened.

"Domenico! Domenico! At last! At last!"

Laughing, and almost crying at the same time, the fragile-looking old lady, who had not waited for her manservant to open the door, enveloped him in her embrace.

After returning her embrace enthusiastically, he held her a little away from him. "Aunt Rina! You look as ravishing as ever!" He lifted her up in his arms and twirled her tiny figure around, her feet dangling inches from the ground, until she begged for mercy.

"Domenico! Domenico, put me down instantly!" she gasped.
"Whatever will your wife think of my behaviour? "

He set her down gently upon her feet and waited until she had recovered her shattered dignity before holding out his hand to Caroline.

"Aunt Rina, I want you to meet the only other woman I have ever loved," he said with convincing simplicity.

Caroline was amazed. She could almost have believed him herself if she had not known his honest opinion of her. But he was playing a part and he was relying upon her to back him up.

Diffidently, she held out her hand and looked into the warm brown eyes which were appraising her. She felt warmed by the kindness and sympathy which she saw there and her fluttering heart settled peacefully as she felt the trembling of the old lady's hand within her own. Why, she thought, she's as nervous as I am, and the relief that she felt showed itself in the brilliance of the smile which she exchanged with her.

Aunt Rina held up her face for Caroline's kiss, and she did not hesitate to place her cool young lips upon the almost transparent cheek.

"Thank you, my dear." She inclined her head towards Domenico. "I was worried in case we would not be compatible, but I should have known better than to doubt Domenico's impeccable taste."

"You approve of my choice, then, Aunt Rina? " he smiled.

"Was it not Gregory the Great who was reputed to have said, when he first saw the Anglo-Saxon children, 'Not Angles, but angels', Domenico? That is what Caroline brings to my mind. Such beautiful golden hair, such creamy skin, and eyes with the simplicity of a

cherub. Yes, Domenico, I approve of your little English angel," she answered.

He smiled down upon them both as they stood there, still holding hands, and when his aunt turned her towards the drawing-room he caught Caroline's eye and lifted his eyebrows with sardonic humour. She thought the shame would choke her. The deceit they were practising upon this dear old lady was abhorrent to her. Already the sweetness of her nature was apparent to Caroline, and she knew she could grow-to love her.

They entered a room of such proportions that it took her breath away. Although it was so huge, it had a lived-in look. The deep couches which were covered in white satin damask looked, for all their majesty, as if they were often made use of, for there were comfortable hollows which moulded themselves around the occupier and invited one to snuggle in and be quite at home. The crystal pendants hanging from the superb chandelier tinkled a little as the door was opened by a young maidservant who was bringing in a tea-trolley, and as Caroline glanced up the awe-inspiring paintings on the ceiling caught her attention. The colours were as bright and clear as if they had been done only that morning, but she knew that, in keeping with the rest of the treasures in the room, which so far she had only had a mere impression of, it was priceless. How Daddy would have loved the chance to prowl around this collection of antiques, she thought wistfully. How his eyes would have glistened at the sight of that carved wooden chair, for instance. She drew her mind away from thoughts of her father; she dared not think of him when she was feeling low, for even now, the tears would start to her eyes, and she had no wish to begin an elaborate explanation of why she should be feeling sad on her first day in the bosom of her husband's family.

Aunt Rina patted the space next to her on the couch as an invitation to Caroline to sit by her. Domenico sat opposite and watched indulgently as she poured out tea into eggshell- fine cups.

"You are being indulged, Caroline. It is not Aunt Rina's custom to drink tea, her favourite beverage is coffee. You should feel honoured that she likes you enough to join you in what she has been known to describe as a revolting concoction."

His aunt frowned upon him as he teased Caroline and leaned forward to tap him sharply upon his knee.

"Nonsense, Domenico. I often drink tea with my English friends. I shall be quite annoyed with you if you make Caroline feel that I am put out by her preference for tea. You ought to be endeavouring to put her at her ease instead of disconcerting her. But then you always were a tease. Many is the time," she said, turning to Caroline, "he has had my son Vito in a boiling fury because of his playful tricks. He teased him unmercifully, especially when they were children." Her lip trembled slightly when she had said this and they saw her make a brave attempt to keep the tears at bay.

A child's whimper broke into the poignancy of the moment. During the excitement of their arrival, Emanuele, Aunt Rina's manservant, had been bringing in their luggage and had carried Vito, who was sleeping peacefully in his carry-cot, into the hall, and had laid him gently upon a large chair until his turn came for recognition. Vito had obviously decided that the time was now, and when he gave his second, more lusty cry the response was gratifying.

Caroline and Domenico both hastened to lift him out of his cot and he was handed into another pair of arms which seemed to him to know how to hold a fractious baby exactly as he should be held to give the maximum of comfort.

Aunt Rina gazed down at him as he opened his big brown eyes to their widest extent and her breath caught in her throat with wonder. "Oh, Domenico," she whispered, "he is my Vito all over again, the likeness is incredible. My darling Vito!"

"We gave him your son's name, Aunt Rina. We thought that it would please you," Caroline said softly.

"You have called him Vito?" She held out her hand to Caroline and gave Domenico a grateful look. "Thank you, my children," she said with emotion. "You are both so considerate of an old lady's feelings. I am very gratified that you should think of me in such a way."

Domenico put a finger under her chin and raised her face so that he could look into her eyes. "You know that anything that we can do to bring you comfort, Aunt Rina, will be our pleasure. I owe you so much more than I can ever repay.-*And Vito, too, he shared his mother with me, and his home, and I shall be eternally grateful to you both."

"Nonsense, Domenico. You know there was never any question of sharing. You have been to me another son, and to Vito a beloved brother. Never again let me hear you say that word 'gratitude'. You have given us far more than you have ever received." Her eyes misted over, for her bereavement was still so recent that she could not yet speak of her son with equanimity, the wound was still too raw. She changed the subject abruptly, lest she should let her emotions overcome her.

"Your letter telling me of your marriage and that you were the father of a baby son was a great surprise, Domenico." There was no note of censure in her voice and her features remained composed as she spoke, but the hurt in her faded old eyes was unmistakable, and Caroline heard Domenico draw his breath sharply. But before he could speak she turned to Caroline, hastening to speak before he could break in, and continued as if the pain in her eyes had never been.

"For the past few years I have been expecting one, or both, of my boys to bring an intended bride to meet me. It surprised me that they

both took so long in making up their minds to marry, but I think they were both a little spoiled in that; the life which they led for the past few years succeeded in making them a trifle blase, perhaps. So much travelling, meeting so many beautiful women and having such a gay social life made them both a little wary of matrimony. Perhaps they thought that marriage would curtail their fun. Eh, Domenico?"

"Perhaps," he smiled, "but then again, perhaps we set too high a standard, for we had you to use as a criterion, remember, and so many of the women we met fell short of your perfections, Aunt."

"Flatterer!" she decried, but Caroline could see she was pleased, and she sensed some of the tension go out of Domenico as his aunt smiled again.

Emanuele entered the room, after giving a light tap on the door, and stood uncertainly beside Aunt Rina's chair. He was as old as she, and, as Caroline learned later, had been in service with the Vicari family, and his father before him, since he was a boy. His tanned, wrinkled face lit up as he observed the old lady's obvious happiness as she nursed the child, and a delighted smile creased his lips as baby Vito looked up at him and gurgled in his direction.

"He is a true Vicari," he murmured in a pleased voice. "A true son of his father."

Domenico reddened slightly. "Thank you, Emanuele. But I hope he will not give you as much trouble as I did."

"Trouble, Signor Domenico? Would that all our troubles be as pleasantly overcome as those small indiscretions of yours," he avowed. He shuffled his feet anxiously.

"Yes, Emanuele? What is it that troubles you?" Aunt Rina asked him impatiently.

He looked back at her defiantly, with the confidence of an old friend rather than that of a servant. "You know what the doctor said, *signora*. You are to have your rest each afternoon without fail. Would you not wish to retire to your room now? I shall call you in time to dress for dinner."

When he saw that Aunt Rina was about to argue he appealed to Domenico. "It is the doctor's express wish that she rest each afternoon, Signor Domenico. And all day she has been on tenterhooks waiting for your arrival. Please insist that she carries out the doctor's orders, for he has pledged me to see that she obeys them."

He waited anxiously for Domenico's reaction, and smiled gratefully when he took over. Domenico gently disengaged the old lady's arms from around the baby and handed him to Caroline, firmly ignoring her protests that she was not the least bit tired, and that Emanuele was an old fusser, and he lifted her up bodily and carried her towards the door which was being held open by a grinning Emanuele. He carried her, still protesting, up the stairs to her room and left her in charge of Emanuele's wife, Adelina, who swept her firmly inside and closed the door with a no-nonsense expression upon her face.

He was still smiling as he entered the room where he had left Caroline and the baby. She looked up at him as he stood watching the picture they made as the sun filtered through the trees outside the window and played upon their heads, one so small and black, and the other dazzlingly fair and beautiful. The cold arrogance had gone from his voice and he seemed to have ridded himself of this light shadow which had clouded his expression throughout the day. She knew that he had been as worried as she about his aunt's feelings being hurt by the secrecy of his marriage, and by the descent of a ready-made family upon her unsuspecting head, but the genuine welcome which she had shown to them both had set his mind at rest, at least for the moment. The day of reckoning was still to come, as he very well knew, for it was too much to hope for that once the initial

introductions were over she would not expect to have a detailed account of their wedding and what had gone before it. The largest hurdle was overcome, however, and the relief of it showed itself in the warmth of his gratitude to Caroline.

"Thank you for being so sweet to Aunt Rina," he said.

"You don't need to thank me, Domenico. I think she's one of the nicest people I've ever met. I only wish ..." she hesitated.

"Wish what?"

"I only wish," she went on slowly, "that we could have met without this shadow of deceit hanging over us. She's too nice to be deceived in this way. Surely she's big-hearted enough to accept her grandson without rancour? Even though his parents were not married she wouldn't hold it against the baby. I'm sure of it."

"You mean that you think that it was unnecessary for us to marry in order to bring him into her orbit?"

"Yes," she said quietly, "I think it was quite unnecessary."

"It is rather late to think of that now," he answered harshly. "In any case, how do we know how she would react if she knew that the baby was Vito's and not mine? She would not turn you or him away from her door, I know that, but the shock could very well kill her, and I am not prepared to risk that."

CK "It hasn't affected her adversely to know that the baby is yours, as she thinks, Domenico. And she must be suspicious of the time which has elapsed between her knowledge of our marriage and his birth, and the fact that she was told nothing of either. How can you tell her that we married more than a year ago and that you didn't think it imperative that she should be told?"

"I have already told you the reason I shall give her for my silence," he answered her coldly, "and if she is suspicious she will not question me. I know her too well for that. She will be hurt, but as you very well know, that cannot be helped. She has always treated me as her son, and everything Vito had in the way of love and affection was given to me in the same measure. But, just the same," he had a small look of hurt in the back of his eyes which tortured Caroline, "he was her real son and I was not. There is a difference, Caroline." He turned so that she could not see his face. "There is a bond between mother and son which nothing can breach, but which no one can share, either."

His words gave her an insight into his mind. She could almost hear the small boy crying out for someone of his own to love and to love him. He had not got around to telling her about his childhood in detail. All she knew was that his mother and father had both been killed in a car crash when he was about seven years old. He began to explain in more detail.

"My father was Vito's father's brother, and when I was orphaned Aunt Rina and Uncle Arturo opened their hearts and their home to me. Uncle Arturo died, suddenly, when Vito and I were nearly twelve — there was only three months' difference in our ages - and Aunt Rina bravely bore the burden of bringing up both of us without the help of her husband. She fiercely resisted the attempts of other relatives to take me from her, and insisted upon keeping our small family together, to my everlasting gratitude. So you see," he explained, "why I felt it incumbent upon myself to marry you. Vito was generous enough to share his father and his home with me. It is fitting that I should do anything within my power to help the girl who was to have been his wife. Nothing is too great a sacrifice to pay for the security and love which they gave to me."

He turned to her abruptly and looked hard at her. "We were never short of money, Caroline, there has always been plenty of that. But

money could not buy what I received from them. And money could never repay them."

The tightness around Caroline's heart worsened as he confirmed what she had thought a few moments ago. He had had to share love all his life, at least from the time his parents had been killed, and now he was, as he thought, again having to share with Vito what should have been the most personal and intimate love of all - the love of his wife. She wanted to go to him and throw her arms around him in an effort to assuage the awful hunger for a love of his own which he had unwittingly displayed. But she dared not. Domenico was a proud and arrogant man, not a wistful orphan hankering for his dead mother, and she knew that her overtures would be rejected in no uncertain manner. Her determination that he would be free, some day, to marry the girl of his choice hardened, and she vowed to herself that no matter what it cost her he would be freed from their mockery of a marriage as soon as possible.

If only I knew where Dorinda was, she thought. She had left instructions with Mr. Wilkins that any mail should be forwarded to her present address, but she had no great hope of hearing from her sister. She had not written for the last six months and could not be very worried about either her or the baby or she would have sent them some money, knowing as she did how desperately hard up they had been when she left. Caroline sighed deeply and shifted Vito to a more comfortable position on her knee.

He was getting to be quite a weight, and growing rapidly. Already he was showing signs of wanting to be on his feet, and his constant wriggling and bouncing was very wearing.

Domenico heard the sigh and saw her struggles with the baby. He bent down and lifted him from her knee. "Here, give him to me. He is wearing you out. I advise you to go up to your room and rest before you meet the rest of my family this evening at dinner. Now don't get

upset," he added at her look of agitation. "They are all quite human, I can assure you!"

He smiled his sympathy and her heart gave a great leap as their eyes met. He was holding Vito with a tenderness which almost all Italian men show to children, and she thought what a wonderful father he would be. If only ...

Impatient with herself for her wishful thinking, she rose to her feet to ring for Emanuele to show her to her room. She felt grubby and sticky with the heat and wanted to have a cool shower and a short rest before the ordeal of the dinner party which was to be held that evening in their honour.

Emanuele came into the room followed by his wife, Adelina, who held out her arms for the baby.

"I am to take charge of him, Signor Domenico. The nurseries have been prepared in readiness for the little *bambino*, and he is to be my special charge. How wonderful it is to have a baby in the house once more! Eh, Emanuele?"

"It is indeed, Adelina, but please remember that he is not to be spoiled as you spoiled his father and uncle."

"I spoil them? Why, you old rascal! You know very well that it was you who spoiled them," she answered him indignantly.

They went out, still wrangling, leaving Domenico and Caroline free to give rein to their amusement. When their mirth had subsided he held out his hand to her and led her to the door.

"Come," he said. "I will show you to our rooms."

With some trepidation she allowed him to show her the way.

Doifienico led her into the room which was to be hers.

When he opened the door to let her precede him into it she gave an involuntary cry of pleasure.

She walked on thick blue carpet which stretched from wall to wall. The furniture was of a pale silver-sheened wood with ornate silver handles on the drawers of the dressing table and tallboy. Two handles in the middle of a length of the same wood indicated that there was an enormous wardrobe running along the whole of one wall, and when she opened the doors concealed lighting flooded the aperture behind it. The great windows, draped with curtains the same shade of blue as the carpet, were the full height of the walls and each had a small balcony opening out from it. The centrepiece of the room was an elegant four-poster bed which had three steps leading up to it, and it also was draped with the same heavenly blue as the curtains and carpet. The blue and silver decor was enhanced with a touch of peach here and there. The ornate carving around the ceiling was picked out lightly and artistically in peach, and two massive silver bowls held peach-coloured roses which flooded the room with their perfume.

To say that Caroline was overwhelmed was an understatement. She stood speechless as she drank in the beauty of the room which Aunt Rina, in her kindness, had chosen for her.

"Oh, Domenico!" she whispered, then let her silence speak for itself.

"Aunt Rina has certainly done you proud, Caroline," he said dryly. "This room, as long as I can remember, has been used for only very privileged guests. To say that you have been given it permanently is indeed an honour, for she has refused many times to let it be used by the family."

"Does that mean she doesn't regard me as one of the family yet?"

"Certainly not. It means, my dear, that you are regarded as a very treasured member of it."

With shining eyes Caroline savoured his last remark. To be treasured by Domenico could be heaven, but to be a treasured member of his family was the next best thing.

She walked over to one of the windows and stepped out on to the balcony. She noted, with pleased surprise, that her windows overlooked the back of the house, and that there was a large tiled terrace which was set out with small tables and loungeable-looking chairs with sun-shades to protect the occupants. Gaily striped umbrellas shaded the tables from the hot sun. Down from the terrace was a large lawn, with a fountain playing in the middle of it, and it was dotted with two or three large trees which cast pools of coolness and shade. Ideal for Vito to play under, she noted delightedly.

She enquired of Domenico thoughtfully, "Is this your only home, Domenico? I mean, do you have a place of your own, or do you still live here with your aunt?"

"I have a villa in the hills which is used when the heat gets too oppressive in the town. Aunt Rina usually uses it at this time of the year, but since Vito's death she has stayed here to be near the rest of the family. I have never felt the need of a place of my own as I have always travelled a lot. Vito looked after the business here, in Rome, and only occasionally travelled, but now that he is no longer with us some other arrangements will have to be made. I shall have to stay here and run the business and, perhaps, I shall send my young cousin, Giovanni, who has been itching for the chance to show what he can do, in my place. In that case, I shall have to think of buying a house near here if you do not relish the prospect of living with Aunt Rina."

"Oh, no, Domenico, don't think that. I shall love being with your aunt. I'm just curious, that's all."

He still looked thoughtful, but said nothing more on the subject. He walked over to a door, which Caroline had been wondering about, and confirmed her suspicions.

"This is my room," he said. "You will notice that it is nothing like as sumptuous as yours, but my aunt knows that I prefer a room which is a little less ornate."

She flushed as she met his look and she thought of the last rooms which they had shared, and of the outcome of their intimacy. She hoped fervently that he would not continue with his practice of walking in on her when she least expected it, and toyed with the idea of turning the key, which she could see was in the lock, but thought better of it. The thought of the fuss which Domenico was quite liable to make if she locked him out was too embarrassing to contemplate.

"Lie down and rest for a while, Caroline. I will let you know when it is time to get ready. We are having a few friends in for cocktails, and to give them the chance to meet you. But only the immediate family will be staying on for dinner. I should wear the dress which you wore last night. It is extremely becoming."

"Thank you, Domenico, I will."

If Caroline had her way she would never have worn the dress again, beautiful though it was, for it brought back too many painful memories. But she had no choice, for the dresses which she had ordered from Brigitte had not yet arrived and, until they did, the white dress was the only evening gown which she possessed.

With a small salute, Domenico turned into his own room and closed the door. Caroline lay on the bed and tried to doze off, but her mind was too active. Her eyes wandered around the room in wonder, she still could not realize that this was to be her home. A temporary home, no doubt, but nevertheless the place where she was to spend

some time until she could find Dorinda. She shied away from thoughts of the future. She was beginning to find that the best thing to do, in this hopeless situation, was to live each moment as it came and to worry only when she had to. The peace and coolness of the room began to have its effect and her eyes became heavy with sleep. She turned slightly, and then, completely relaxed, she slept.

She awoke about an hour later feeling wonderfully refreshed. She could hear Domenico moving about in his room and when she looked at her watch she saw that it was time to begin preparing herself to meet the ordeal ahead.

Hastily she jumped from the bed and went into the bathroom to run her bath. She luxuriated in the sunken green marble tub for far longer than she ought to have done. The tempting display of toiletries which were arrayed on the glass shelf which ran alongside the large mirror on the opposite wall to the bath had been irresistible and she had deliberated which to choose before settling, finally, on an extravagantly made glass container which was filled with bubble bath liquid. The result had delighted her. The tub had been filled with fine soft bubbles which had a subtle, haunting fragrance and she had been loth to curtail her enjoyment of it.

Reluctantly, she stepped out of the tub and towelled herself dry with an enormous fluffy pale green towel which enveloped her almost entirely. She used the talcum powder, which had the same subtle perfume as the bubble bath liquid, lavishly, and as she tried to see through the bathroom mirror to attend to a few tendrils of her hair which had escaped the hairpins she had used to protect it during her bath, she found that it was steamed up. She decided to go into her bedroom to use the mirror on her dressing table, but she had forgotten her robe. Not to be deterred, she wound one of the large bath towels around her body, sarongwise, and walked into her room. At first she did not notice the figure who stood looking out of the window, but when he moved she gave a gasp of dismay.

"Domenico!" she gasped.

He returned her startled gaze with an appreciative grin and deliberately let his eyes wander over her naked shoulders and down to her feet which were peeping under the ends of the voluminous towel.

"Charming," he drawled infuriatingly, as she tried, unsuccessfully, to draw the towel higher over her bare shoulders.

She blushed fiercely. "What do you want?" she asked indignantly.

He walked over to her, his eyes never leaving her face, and stood so close that she had to lean her head back to look at him.

"What have you to offer?" he whispered in her ear.

She drew back as if she were stung. "Oh, you're despicable! You love to humiliate me, Domenico."

His nearness was having the usual devastating effect upon her nerves. She willed herself to stop trembling and with a tremendous effort she managed a look of nonchalance which seemed to amuse him, for he laughed and said:

"You are no sophisticate, Caroline. So do not attempt to play the part."

Angrily, she whipped around. "You have no idea what I am. You don't know me well enough to judge. Didn't you say, only a short while ago, that I puzzled you?" She jerked up her chin defiantly. "How do you *now* what I am, Domenico?" she challenged.

His eyes narrowed as she shot this question at him. He made as if to retort angrily, then hesitated and changed his mind. He smiled, but his smile had no warmth, and he moved close again, so close that his breath fanned her cheek and she tensed, waiting for his next move.

She felt his hand on her back and an electric current ran through her. She did not move and showed no trace of the emotion which was chasing through her veins. His hand caressed her bare skin and, horrified, she felt the other one loosening the end of the towel which she had tucked into the top of her self-made sarong to hold it firm. He wouldn't dare!

But Domenico would dare anything when he was trying to prove a point, and she knew that he had won.

Furiously, she jerked away from him, and hated him for the triumphant laugh which he gave when she did so.

"I think I have proved that I am right, Caroline. You are anything but a sophisticated woman of the world," he mocked. To her chagrin he walked towards his own room, still laughing, and told her, "I shall come back later when you have recovered your composure. I have something for you which I wish you to wear this evening, but somehow I don't think you will appreciate it at this moment."

As his door closed behind him she dropped down on the stool beside her and let the waves of anger which he had aroused wash over her. She was trembling violently. Never in her life had she been made to feel such a fool. "I hate him! I hate him!" she avowed. But a small voice deep inside her was denying the words even as she spoke them aloud.

Anger with herself because of her weakness as far as he was concerned made her hands shake, and she had to sit quite still and will them to stop shaking before she could continue to make herself ready for her meeting with the other members of his family.

When he returned to her room, a little later, she had schooled herself into a more composed state of mind and felt able to face him with calmness, so long as she avoided looking into his eyes. He was

carrying a small box and he handed it to her to open. She took it, wonderingly, and pressed the catch, which caused the lid to fly open. Inside, nestling on a bed of dark red velvet, was a most exquisite brooch. It was encrusted with diamonds and shaped into the likeness of a rose with petals just unfurled. The great delicacy and intricacy of design was a triumph of artistry, and she gave a cry of wonder as she marvelled at it.

"But, Domenico, I couldn't possibly wear it! It's far too valuable. Please," she thrust it back at him, "take it and put it in a safe place. I should be terrified to lose it."

He took the brooch out of the box and pinned it on to her dress, where it glistened with a thousand facets of light as she moved to look at it in the mirror.

"I want you to wear it, Caroline." He hesitated. "It was my mother's."

She put up her hand and gently touched the edge of one of the petals with a tentative finger. "Your mother's? And you wish *me* to have it, Domenico?"

"Yes," he answered brusquely.

His hand went to the pocket of his coat and he brought out another box, smaller this time, and took out the contents. He reached out and caught hold of her hand. He looked down at her long slender fingers for a moment, then slid a ring on to the finger which bore his heavy gold wedding ring. It was a fine diamond, tastefully set, and was an exact match for the brooch. "I did not buy you an engagement ring because I hoped that you might like to wear this one."

She looked down at it. "Was this your mother's engagement ring, Domenico?" she asked softly.

"Yes. Do you like it? If you would rather I bought you another one just say so. Perhaps you would prefer some other stone?" His expression was quite serious as he waited for her answer. The mocking amusement of the last hour had gone completely and he waited, almost anxiously, for her reaction.

She could not help herself. She went to him and put her lips to his cheek, her eyes swimming with tears for the little boy who was parting with his mother's treasured possessions, and whispered huskily, "Thank you, Domenico, for the great compliment you've paid me. I shall be honoured to wear your mother's ring."

For the first time since she had known him, Domenico was at a loss for words. His hand reached up to his cheek and touched the spot where her lips had glancingly touched.

"Why, Caroline ...!"

Hastily she moved away, already regretting her impulsive action. If he guessed that she was in love with him her plans would come to nothing. He needed restraint, not encouragement, and, fool that she was, she had let him glimpse a little of the feeling which she had for him.

"Signora Vicari!" Thankfully Caroline heard the voice of Adelina outside her door.

"Signora Vicari!" Adelina called again. "It is time for you to go downstairs to meet your guests."

"Thank you, Adelina," she replied with great relief. "I'm coming."

Without looking in Domenico's direction she made towards the door, but before she could reach it he stepped in front of it, barring her way.

"Caroline," he said urgently.

"Please, Domenico, I must go downstairs. Aunt Rina will be waiting."

"She can wait for a few more minutes, darling. I wish to speak to you."

It was the "darling", spoken with such tenderness, as much as the glint in his eyes, which made her panic. Hurriedly she called out:

"Adelina! Adelina!"

"Yes, *signora*?"

"Would you please come in for a moment? I... I should like your help with my zip."

"But certainly, *signora*." The door handle was turning as Domenico called out:

"It's all right, Adelina. I shall be of assistance to the Signora. You may tell my aunt we shall be down in ten minutes."

"Certainly, Signor Domenico."

They heard Adelina's soft footsteps padding along the corridor to her mistress's room.

"And now," he took her chin between his fingers and turned her head so that she had to look up into his eyes, eyes which had a determined glint and a hint of questioning in their depths. "Now, you will tell me how I managed to bring about the miracle of your actually taking the initiative and voluntarily kissing me."

His hand reached up again to the place where her lips had touched as if he still could not believe that it had happened, and a small smile of satisfaction played upon his lips as he waited for her answer.

What could she say to allay his suspicions? What explanation could she give him which would convince him that her feelings had not changed? The only one that she could think of would bring back that cold look of dislike to his face, the icy disdain back in his manner. She could not say it! But for his own sake she must! She turned away, white to the lips and, hating herself, she lied:

"I always reward my admirers in that way when they bring me diamonds, Domenico! I adore them. You've heard the saying 'diamonds are a girl's best friend'? I've always lived by the maxim, for when the admirer has gone the diamonds are there as a consolation."

She could hardly believe that the harsh, brittle voice was coming from her lips. A wave of sickness engulfed her as she waited for the condemnation which was bound to follow her words.

They had begun to find each other, in a way. He had softened a little towards her and, she had hoped, to change his first tolerant opinion of her. But now--! What must he be feeling? She heard no movement from him and dared not look around, for she knew that what she would see in his face would turn her heart to stone.

When he did speak her worst fears were realized. He did not offer to come near her, nor did he raise his voice even a little.

"You little tramp!" he said quietly.

She flinched as if he had hit her and, against her will, she had to look at him. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his trousers, leaning negligently against the door-jamb. He was rather white under his tan, but his expression did not show disgust, only indifference. But his

eyes gave the lie to his expression. They were cold and bleak and deeply pained. They might never have known the mischievous sparkle and teasing glints which she had come to love.

Oh, Domenico, my love! her aching heart cried out. Why do I have to keep on hurting you in this way?

She was not deceived by the look of indifference or by the quietness of his voice. She knew that she had killed a small kindling of regard, which had held the promise of something much warmer to come, that had blossomed into being against his will. Well, he would have no need to fight against his feelings for her now. She had killed it stone dead. He had paid her the great compliment of giving her his mother's jewels to wear, and she had disgusted him by the way in which she had shown greed and avarice in her acceptance of his gift. How he must loathe the idea of her wearing his mother's possessions! But, knowing Domenico, he would not retract his gift once he had given it.

Instinctively, she moved towards him with an unconscious plea for forgiveness. At that moment she would have given the game away completely by telling him that she had never known any other men, that the only diamonds which she possessed were the ones which he had just given her, and that she loved them, not because of their value, but because he had given them to her. But before she could find words he broke in:

"If it gives you any satisfaction to know it, you almost had me deceived into thinking I had been wrong about you." The absence of anger in his voice was belied by the tightness of his lips and the effort he was making to hide the bitterness in his eyes.

"When I went to England to look for you I must admit that I expected to find a good-time girl who knew all the answers, and I acted accordingly. When I saw you, however, and began, as I thought, to know you better, I was foolish enough to doubt my judgement and,

against my better nature, you began to attract me. In Paris," he went on wryly, "I was convinced that you were not the type who would lead a man on for what you could get out of him, and that for reasons of your own you had deliberately given me an altogether wrong impression of your character. In fact," he admitted openly, "I was ashamed of the way in which I had treated you that night and," with a bitter laugh, "could hardly bring myself to look at you the next morning because of the self-contempt which I was feeling. But now," he swung towards her and caught her shoulders in a vice-like grip which hurt her so much it was all that she could do not to cry out, "now in Rome, I have found the real you. A woman- without honour of any kind - mercenary, cheap, out for all that you can get from any man stupid enough to be fooled by the simplicity and goodness which you can turn on like a tap. And stupid enough to think that a woman like you is fit to be brought into the heart of this family and to be treated as an honoured member of it by a woman whose shadow you are not fit to walk in!"

The floodgates of his anger were now open and he spared her nothing. He did not once raise his voice, but the bitter words which he lashed out found their mark each time. She did not attempt to answer him or to justify herself. With a dull acceptance of the futility of trying to break in on his angry recriminations she accepted all that he charged her with, without protest. Wasn't this the result she had tried to achieve? Hadn't she deliberately tried to set him against herself in an effort to achieve her object? There was no doubt in her mind that she had succeeded only too well. She need never again fear that Domenico's attentions would become too ardent, or that his charm would pierce her guard. He despised her. She had hurt him too much for her ever to have to fight off his advances again.

She stood there straight and slim in her lavish evening gown, the collar framing her face, which was as white as the gown itself, and accepted, unflinchingly, all that he said to her. Her calmness infuriated him and his fingers, which were digging into the soft flesh

of her shoulders, tightened their pressure even more until she could bear the pain no longer and she gave a gasp as the agony became unbearable. His grasp eased a little, but he did not let her go.

"Answer me one thing!" His face could have been carved out of granite as he bit out the words.

The constriction in her throat was threatening to choke her. She swallowed painfully and managed to whisper:

"If I can."

"Did you love Vito? Or was he just another gullible fool who fell into your trap?"

She did not know what to answer. She hesitated as she tried to gather her scattered thoughts into some semblance of order. But she was too late. Her hesitancy told its own story, at least to Domenico, for he flung her away from him as if touching her had scorched him. He turned his back to her and fought to subdue the terrible heat of his temper. She dared not move, dared not speak. She had known that Domenico's temper would be a violent emotion, but she could not have imagined the extent to which his wrath could engulf him. She wanted to run away out of the presence of his contempt and disgust, but her feet were rooted to the spot.

When he eventually turned to her he was in complete control - an icy, calm control which was being maintained only by a great effort of will. She dropped her eyes to the carpet at her feet, anywhere rather than meet the cold disdain in his eyes. She waited.

"You have played your game just once too often." The menace in his voice was unmistakable. "At this moment I could not bear to touch you, but remember this, Caroline. In the past you have been paid for your favours. Well, I have paid with my honour, with my family

name and, to a lesser extent, with my mother's jewels. God forbid that she should ever have known the type of woman who would wear them!" he added savagely. "I intend to see to it that you pay dearly for your indiscretions. It may be some time before I can bring myself to collect what is owing to me, but collect I shall. So prepare yourself to be called upon at any moment to honour your debt."

Her eyes had not left the carpet all the time he had been speaking. She was frightened, badly frightened, by the deadly intent in his voice. The blue of the carpet became a heaving sea which threatened to swallow her in its gyrations. She took a deep breath and the ground steadied for a moment. With supreme courage she lifted her head and gave him a look of scorn.

"You dare to touch me, Domenico, and I shall tell your aunt everything. I will not be made a whipping boy for your frustrations!"

He uttered an imprecation, but she ignored it and went on, fearful lest her courage should desert her.

"You've wanted me since we first met and you've been angry because of it. You hate yourself for being attracted to a woman whom you despise. Face up to the truth. Domenico!" she challenged him. "It's not me whom you despise, but yourself, and you wish to make me suffer for it. But I won't let you make me a slave to your whims!" Her voice faltered as her courage left her and she bit her bottom lip to stop it from quivering.

Domenico looked down at her from his great height, his black eyebrows drawn together in anger, giving him a satanic look. His breath hissed between his teeth as he menaced softly, "We shall see, Caroline! We shall see!"

CHAPTER VI

THEY reached the door of the great salon in which the cocktail party was to be held just as the first guests arrived. Aunt Rina gave a sigh of relief as she saw them coming down the stairs and greeted them eagerly. "There you are, my dears. I was afraid that I should have to make your excuses to our guests. What delayed you?"

She looked enquiringly at Domenico and then at Caroline. The ravages of the last few minutes could not have been apparent, for her face registered approval and a hint of pride as she held out her hand to Caroline and exclaimed:

"Domenico, how beautiful your wife is! You will be the envy of all your kinsmen tonight!" She turned to Caroline. "I see that you have paid a visit to my dear friend, Brigitte, while you were in Paris. No one else has the exact flair for judging what is best suited to one particular person as she has, and that dress is a masterpiece. Nothing could suit you better, my dear."

Hurriedly she ushered them into the salon and they stationed themselves just inside the doorway where they would be the first to greet the guests as they arrived.

Domenico's demeanour was suave and contained as he accepted the good wishes and congratulations of his friends and family as they were introduced to his wife. Caroline shook hands and exchanged polite kisses with a bewildering parade of aunts, uncles, cousins, some of whom were two or three times removed, and despaired entirely of ever remembering their names or their degree of kinship. She had the feeling, however, that they were all genuinely pleased to meet her and to welcome her to the heart of the family. Not that it would have mattered if they hadn't, for nothing could have penetrated the hard cocoon of hurt which had encased her since the scene with Domenico. The agitation which she had felt at the thought of meeting

all these people had gone completely, leaving in its place an utter indifference to what they might think or say. Nothing could transcend the searing ordeal of fire which she had so recently undergone, and the experience had left her with an armour of quiet self-confidence, in that she felt that no one could ever hurt her quite as much again.

At last, the first of the guests not invited for dinner began to drift away and, as if a signal had been given, the room quickly emptied of all but the members of the family who were to dine there. Aunt Rina began directing them into a smaller room next door which was laid out with an enormous table set with silver candelabra, snowy napery and tastefully arranged flowers and dishes of fruit. The chandelier above sent spears of light which were caught up by the sparkling crystal goblets that were arranged periodically down the length of the table.

When-everyone was seated to Aunt Rina's satisfaction she gave the signal for dinner to be served. Domenico sat on his aunt's right and Caroline on her left, facing him. The chair by his side remained empty and she saw him pick up the card, which was on the table in front of the empty space, and when he had read the name printed on it raise an enquiring eyebrow to his aunt in silent interrogation. She replied with a shrug of her shoulders and a frown of annoyance. Caroline wondered who it was that was missing and she turned to the young man at her side, who turned out to be Domenico's young cousin Giovanni, to enquire of him. But before she had the chance to ask him the door of the dining- room was thrown open and a laughing, apologetic girl swept through it, followed by a man who looked as if he would much rather be anywhere else at that moment than in that precise spot.

Caroline caught her breath as she, and the rest of the family, caught the full effect of the girl's impressive beauty when she paused for a moment to wave gaily to the assembled party before going up to Aunt Rina in a rush and tendering her apologies for being late.

"Darling Aunt! Forgive me for my bad manners. I did intend to be on time, for I know how you hate to be kept waiting, but I've had a terrible rush!"

The displeasure on Aunt Rina's face did not diminish when she turned to Domenico, who had risen as the rest of the men had when she appeared, and threw her arms around him with a cry of pleasure.

"Domenico! My darling Dom! How I have missed you!"

Caroline felt an unfamiliar pang of emotion as she watched the little tableau enacted in front of her eyes. She would not admit, even to herself, that it was jealousy, but she took an instinctive dislike to the girl with the raven-black hair and green predatory eyes of a jungle cat, dressed in an almost indecently daring gown of a violent flame colour, who had thrown her arms around her husband in a most possessive embrace.

Domenico seemed to be enjoying it. He smiled down at her indulgently and his hands spanned her minute waist as he bent down to return her kiss.

"Candida! As impulsive as ever!"

Aunt Rina's tart voice broke through their absorption of each other and stopped the speculative buzz which had begun after the short surprised silence which had heralded the dramatic entrance.

"Would you introduce your companion, Candida?" she asked icily.

"Oh! Jeffrey darling, I am so sorry. Everyone, this is Jeffrey Graham! Jeffrey, I shall introduce everyone individually later." The young fair-haired man gave a wry smile and a slight bow to "everyone" and advanced up the table to meet his hostess. He murmured apologetically as Aunt Rina gave him a frigid smile and explained

that as all the places were taken at the head of the table she could not seat him beside his companion, but would be honoured if he would take the place which Emanuele was setting for him further down and join them for dinner.

She waited until he was seated before giving a sign to Emanuele to proceed with their interrupted meal. Everyone started to talk at once as if to cover up an embarrassing incident and more than one speculative glance was thrown in Caroline's direction, as the meal progressed. She tried to look unperturbed and chatted, seemingly unconcerned, to Giovanni, who was a balm to her wounded spirits as his admiring looks and attentive manners proclaimed a bad case of calf-love in the offing.

She treated him kindly, not just because of his obvious signs of infatuation, but because he looked so much as she imagined the young Domenico must have looked before he had gathered his veneer of blase sophistication. She gave him her undivided attention and tried to forget the way that Domenico's eyes had lit up at the sight of the girl opposite and that, even now, he had forgotten his manners so far as to omit to introduce her to his wife.

Aunt - Rina had not forgotten, however. Her puzzled glance went from him to Caroline as she sensed the coolness between them and her annoyance grew as Domenico made no effort to include Caroline in his conversation.

Candida, too, showed no interest in anyone but Domenico, although she must have been aware that the purpose of the dinner party was to effect Caroline's entry into their family circle.

Aunt Rina broke into their conversation determinedly and Domenico's head jerked up from his companion's face as he heard the unfamiliar note of censure in her voice.

"Domenico, you have not yet introduced Candida to Caroline. She will be thinking that as a family we are totally bereft of manners. Will you remedy this or shall I?" Her displeasure was obvious, but Domenico was not put out. He smiled across at Caroline as if nothing untoward had occurred between them and said:

"Sorry, darling, but I have not seen Candida for a long time and we have a lot of mutual acquaintances to enquire about. Forgive me." He glinted at her across the table, daring her to show animosity, and seemed satisfied when she returned his glance with equanimity. "Candida is a very distant cousin, but she has always been a special favourite. We played together as children - she, Vito and I were inseparable." He turned to Candida. "I should like you to meet my wife, Caroline. I hope that you will become friends."

The green eyes that were turned on Caroline did not augur friendship. There was a hardness in their depths which could not be disguised and the smile which she forced to her lips as she acknowledged Caroline twisted slightly at the corner of her mouth, giving the lie to the warmth of her answer.

"But of course we shall become friends, Domenico. I should like nothing better than to become better acquainted with your wife. We must come to some arrangement after dinner, Caroline, whereby we can meet to allow me to show you the best places to shop and so on. And you simply must meet my friends. They are all dying to meet the girl who has captured the wildest bachelor in Rome."

This last remark was accompanied by a look which was seen only by Caroline and Giovanni, and it had the effect on Caroline of making her feel dowdy and insignificant. The insolent glance seemed to take in everything about her and to find her wanting. She stiffened. She had too much spirit to be cowed by the jealousy of a woman who was obviously out to deride her without waiting to get to know her well

enough to see if she deserved such treatment, and her answer showed that she, too, had claws when she found it necessary to use them.

"Perhaps he was exhausted by the chase when I *captured* him." The small emphasis she laid on the word was enough to indicate plainly her contempt of females who made all the running, and Candida flushed with anger as she recognized the implication.

Giovanni, who was an interested spectator of this crossing of swords, almost choked on his soup at Caroline's rejoinder and he caused a minor diversion as he tried to control the bout of coughing which overcame him. Caroline was glad to minister to him and for the rest of the interminable dinner she studiously avoided being drawn into conversation with Domenico or Candida again.

Aunt Rina, when she entertained, did so on a lavish scale. On this particular occasion she offered to her guests nine different kinds of hors d'oeuvres, and choice of three soups, two kinds of fish, three types of omelette, two entrees and a vast selection of salads besides dessert and fruit. She explained :

"We are such a large family, Caroline, and all have their eating fads. Candida, for instance, merely plays with her food and refuses starches of any kind, while the men, as is usual with Italian men when they are indulged, will eat a gourmet's feast. And so I cater for all tastes."

"But isn't there an awful lot of food wasted?"

"My dear, nothing is ever wasted from our kitchen. Emanuele and Adelina have a huge family of grandchildren and they will be in the kitchen at this moment demolishing everything which is returned from the table untouched."

Hours later, it seemed to Caroline, the meal was finished. The older members of the family sat around, comfortably replete, content to sit in groups exchanging chit-chat. The younger ones, however, began to get restless and someone suggested that they put on the record player in the smaller salon which was often used for dancing. The suggestion was enthusiastically received and they all trooped out.

Caroline was sitting with Aunt Rina and her contemporaries and trying hard to resist the temptation to look for Domenico, who had not left Candida's side since the dinner had ended. She was beginning to feel very angry. It was becoming obvious to all that he was quite content with his beautiful cousin's company and to ignore his wife. She looked up with relief as Giovanni came towards her.

"Will you dance with me, Caroline?"

"I should love to, thank you, Giovanni."

He led her towards the small salon where the others were already enjoying themselves immensely and swept her on to the floor. He was an excellent dancer and the old magic of dancing acted upon her as a balm. Gradually she relaxed and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the music. Someone dimmed the lights and the slow romantic strains of a waltz echoed sweetly around the room. One or two of the younger couples were dancing cheek to cheek, hardly bothering to move from the spot where they stood. She averted her eyes from them as she danced past in Giovanni's arms. She did not want to remember with nostalgia the heaven of her first dance with Domenico on their evening in Paris.

Giovanni turned as a hand tapped him on the shoulder. Caroline saw with surprise that it was the man, Jeffrey Graham, who had arrived with Candida.

"May I cut in?"

Giovanni was not pleased, but gave in with as much grace as he could muster and she was guided gently away from him by the tall fair-haired Englishman.

"Do you mind?" he murmured.

"Why, no. I... I'm flattered," she stammered.

His bold eyes travelled over her face and lingered on the perfectly shaped lips which were parted to give a glimpse of pearly white teeth. Their steps matched and they moved as one. The tempo of the music changed from the languorous mood of the waltz to the quick pulsating beat of a primitive latin tune, and Caroline felt a heady excitement as she was twirled and led impeccably through the intricate movements of the dance. The music went to her head. Her feet followed his unerringly and he drew her closer and closer as the tempo quickened, and when the climax came, with a clash of cymbals and a long-drawn-out throbbing of drums, he pirouetted her around the floor until she was dizzy and they collapsed, laughing, on to a convenient couch at the side of the dance floor. With an unselfconscious gesture she held out her hand, still laughing, and said:

"Oh, thank you, Jeffrey. That was marvellous!"

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. His look was naked in its admiration as he watched her animated face which was still glowing with the excitement of the dance. Her breast rose and fell quickly as she strove to regain her breath and her pansy-coloured eyes were shining with happiness.

Suddenly, as if a cloud had gone over the sun, the light went out of her eyes and a slow blush suffused her lovely face. He looked over his shoulder to see what had caused the quick change in her manner and

saw Domenico, with a brow like thunder, glowering down at them. He rose quickly and spoke before Domenico found words.

"I must congratulate you, Signor Vicari. Your wife dances magnificently."

"There is nothing that you can tell me about my wife that I do not already know, Mr. Graham!" The ice in his voice was unmistakable.

Jeffrey was unperturbed. He was used to jealous husbands. Still, this one looked a sight more dangerous than any he had met up with in the past and he thought it expedient to soft-pedal a bit. He smiled at Domenico a little apologetically and moved away to where Candida was standing a few feet behind Domenico.

She had heard Domenico's remark and looked thoughtfully at Jeffrey as he sauntered up to her. "Why can't you behave, Jeffrey? Must you make yourself conspicuous with every woman who comes into your orbit? And such a choice! I don't know what you men see in pale insipid creatures such as she!"

"Sour grapes, my love," he answered with the intimacy of long acquaintance. "You know she is divinely beautiful, and I envy the man who melts the ice around the furnace which I feel sure is burning away under that cool exterior." She gave him a furious look and flounced away in Domenico's direction.

But she was too late. Domenico was leading his wife on to the dance floor and she watched jealously as he disappeared with her into the middle of the floor where they were alone in an oasis of space where they could be unheard. "What do you mean by your disgraceful behaviour?" he asked her through gritted teeth.

"My what?"

"Must you make such a display in front of my family, and with a man who is a complete outsider?"

"How dare you! To accuse *me* of disgraceful behaviour when you have behaved all evening like a lovesick calf mooning over your *very* distant cousin. From what I have observed this evening she is only as distant as you wish her to be. In fact," she added recklessly, "it would not surprise me to know that she has been anything but distant in the past!"

"That is unforgivable P The arms which held her gripped painfully and she sensed his temper rising. "Candida is, and always has been, a very dear friend, but that is all. How can you think otherwise? Did she not offer you her friendship also?"

Caroline took a deep breath and wondered at the gullibility of men where a woman was concerned. She drew herself up to her full, if insignificant height, and looked at him scornfully.

"I would rather be friendly with a rattlesnake!" she said.

A muscle twitched in his cheek and she knew that she had gone too far. He was fanatically loyal to his family and she had insulted one of them in no uncertain manner. But she did not care. The evening had been an intolerable strain on her nerves. The scene in her bedroom and the ordeal at the dinner table had been bad enough, but to add insult to injury he was now accusing her of the very thing of which he was "the most guilty. One innocuous dance with a stranger was classed, in his eyes, as disgraceful behaviour, while he, who had been the cynosure of all eyes because of his obvious interest in his exotic cousin, had the gall to censure her as if she was[^]uilty of a heinous crime.

"You will apologize for that disgusting display of childishness."

"Never!" she threw back at him.

No one could see, beyond the dimness of the dance floor, the sparks which they were striking off each other. To the onlookers who watched the dancers idly, they were merely dancing around in a normal manner and exchanging a few words now and again. They could not see the cold fury in Domenico's eyes, nor could they tell the indignant expression on Caroline's face as she answered him back defiantly.

With relief, Caroline saw that Candida and Jeffrey were making their way across the floor towards them. They were dancing together in their direction with a look of fixed purpose on their faces. She gave a frantic signal in Jeffrey's direction which did not go unnoticed by Candida, and a smile of satisfaction curved her lips as she reached them.

"Dom, darling, shall we change partners? We have not danced together for months and I am sure that your wife will not mind dancing again with Jeffrey. They are so well matched, don't you think?"

Caroline's relieved smile obviated the need for a reply and she moved eagerly away from Domenico's encircling arms and slipped into Jeffrey's before he had realized her intention. His grim smile as Candida changed places with her boded no good to her at a later date, but she ignored his obvious displeasure. He could do nothing without making a scene which she knew would be distasteful to him; as for later - well, that could look after itself!

The dancers were thinning out. It was very late and Aunt Rina and her companions had long since excused themselves, pleading fatigue, and left the younger members to make their own way home. Arrangements were being made to give lifts to the ones who had no car at their disposal and the party began breaking up as one group

after another said farewell and made their noisy departure in whatever transport was available.

Jeffrey danced Caroline towards the open french windows and led her on to the terrace outside. She breathed deeply of the night-scented air and they walked, as if by mutual consent, down the shallow steps which led to the garden. The path ran parallel to the lawn for a short way and then took a course through bushes and shrubs to a sunken garden which had seats placed at convenient intervals. Caroline sank down upon one of them with a sigh of satisfaction and drank in the beauty of the garden which was bathed in moonlight. Jeffrey placed a tentative arm around her shoulders.

"No, Jeffrey," she said without emphasis, but her meaning was plain. He shrugged negligently and removed his arm.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't go in for promiscuous relationships. I can offer friendship, but if that is not enough then you had better go."

"Do you think that Candida will be offering your husband friendship?" he asked wryly.

She turned sad, pain-filled eyes to him and said simply, "I suppose not."

"Oh, Caroline, you little fool! Can't you see what her game is? She is as jealous as hell of your marrying Domenico. For years she has looked upon him as her exclusive property, and she won't let a little thing like a wife get in her way."

"Do you think Domenico loves her?"

"You ask me that! Don't you think that your husband loves you, then?"

Too late, she realized that she had slipped up. Jeffrey was looking at her with surprised astonishment, waiting for her answer.

"Yes... I suppose he does," she stammered.

He laid a gentle hand upon her knee.

"Look, Caroline. It is plain that all is not as it should be between you and Domenico. Don't bother to deny it!" as she tried to interrupt. "I have been involved in too many unhappy marriages not to recognize the signs when I see them."

His voice was bitter, as if the pictures conjured up by his words were not pleasant ones.

"But I can also tell," he gave her a keen look, "that in this instance it would take very little for you to fall into each other's arms. Candida," he said flatly, "is a bitch. She will do anything to get Domenico. No other man has a look in as far as she is concerned. And I should know!"

His bleak look informed her that here was a kindred spirit. He was in love with Candida and she did not want him. She touched his arm lightly, in sympathy, and they sat wrapped in their own thoughts, silently consoling each other in their unhappiness.

Jeffrey continued where he had left off. "Whatever has gone wrong between you two I advise you to try to put it right as soon as possible, if you want to keep him. For my part, I shall do all I can to spike her guns ... for both our sakes."

Caroline shivered slightly and he pulled her to her feet and urged her back to the house. The windows were still blazing with lights, but there was a stillness which indicated that the last of the dancers had left. They walked towards the french window to enter the room where they had left Candida and Domenico. Jeffrey caught hold of Caroline's arm as she would have walked right in, and pulled her into the shadows where they were unseen by the two inside the room who were so engrossed in each other.

Caroline did not intend to eavesdrop, but surprise kept her silent. She looked through the window and her heart seemed to turn over.

Candida had her back to them and Domenico's face was framed in her cupped hands, his eyes upon her face. She was speaking urgently.

"Why did you do it, Dom? I know that it is I that you love - have always loved! Why did you marry her?" She did not wait for his answer but threw her arms around him and kissed him passionately.

Caroline did not wait to witness any more. With a distressed cry she turned and ran from the window. She saw that the window of the dining-room was still open and, thankfully, she slipped through it and ran up the stairs to her room.

CHAPTER VII

CAROLINE was stretched out on one of the sun-chairs on the terrace. A writing pad rested upon her knee and she held a pen slackly between her fingers. Baby Vito was playing happily in the shade of a tree on the lawn and she watched him idly as he amused himself with the toys that Domenico had bought for him. Each day a small parcel was left for him in the nursery when Domenico came home from the office.

She had seen hardly anything of him in the days that had passed since the night of the party. She knew that work had piled up during his absence and that double pressure was being put on him now that Vito was no longer available to play his part in the managing of the business, but surely, she thought, he had some time off?

He paid a flying visit to his home each evening, but merely to bathe and change before hurrying out again. He went to his office each morning before anyone in the house was awake and did not arrive back from his evening engagements until the small hours of the morning. On the rare occasions when she had chanced to meet up with him he had given her no more than a cursory glance and a terse greeting and had made no excuses for his absences.

Aunt Rina was outraged. She spoke of remonstrating with him because of his neglect of his family, but Caroline had dissuaded her. She, too, needed a breathing space in which to sort out her feelings and to plan out a course of action.

One thing she knew. She must get away! Anywhere where she might get some relief from the heavy aching of her heart. Somewhere where Domenico would not find her.

But first of all she must find Dorinda. Once that was done she would be able to tell Domenico the truth and he would be free to go to

Candida. She shied away from thoughts of that night when she had discovered that they were in love. The passion of the kiss which they had exchanged had told its own tale and she had since bowed to the inevitable and accepted the fact that her wistful dreams that Domenico would some day come to love her enough to want her to stay, even when he was told the truth about the baby, vanished. She had played her part too well. Nothing would ever erase the opinion which he now held of her. Especially now, when he had Candida to console him.

She picked up her writing pad and began to write. Her first, and most important, letter was to Mr. Wilkins, asking him to employ someone to find Dorinda. She underlined the urgency of her need by telling him to spare no excuse in his search. She justified this by telling herself that although she had vowed not to touch the money which was in the account that Domenico had opened for her, he would be the one to benefit from its use.

The second letter was to Jane. This was a harder letter to write and took much thought. In the rush before her marriage she had penned a hasty note to Jane telling her the bare outlines of her sudden departure from England. She had promised to write more fully when she was settled, but now she did not know where to begin or how much to tell. Jane was so astute and, besides that, she had no wish to deceive her. The mountain of deceit which she had had to practise since her marriage sickened her, and she had no intention of lying to Jane. At the same time, she could not enlarge upon the whole incredible story without breaking Dorinda's confidence. She chewed the end of her pen as she deliberated what to put in and what to leave out. Finally, she contented herself by writing a cheerful letter which gave no indication of her present misery and gave her friend a promise that she would pay her a visit as soon as she possibly could and that she would then fill her in with all the details. Hoping against hope that it would satisfy Jane's anxiety about her hasty marriage to a man of

whom she had never heard, she pushed the letter inside an envelope and sealed it quickly in case she should change her mind.

She heard footsteps tapping against the tiled floor and turned as Aunt Rina appeared from inside the house to join her on the terrace. She had been visiting one of her many friends and, as was usual when she omitted to take her afternoon rest, she looked a little tired.

Caroline jumped up to help her into a chair beside hers and chided her gently.

"Darling, I do wish you would rest more and obey the doctor's orders. You look washed out. Sit there and rest and I'll ring for Emanuele to bring you some refreshment."

Aunt Rina accepted her suggestion gratefully and subsided thankfully into the chair which Caroline had pushed forward.

"Thank you, Caroline. That would be lovely. You are such a comfort, child." She caught hold of Caroline's hand and gave her a look of genuine affection as she spoke. Caroline felt her eyes prick with tears as she returned the kind look and thought, not for the first time, how fortunate she was to have the old lady's love.

"Why do you tire yourself in this way, Aunt Rina?"

The old lady closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Her finely veined hands seemed weighed down by the enormous rings which she delighted in wearing and they struck an incongruous note as she plucked nervously at her stole.

"Why? I don't really know. I find it impossible to relax. Always I have to be doing something, or going somewhere. I think," the tears were not far away now, "I think it is because I cannot get thoughts of

my son out of my mind. If only I knew what had happened to him - how he died, and where! Then I might get some peace of mind."

Caroline went to her and pressed her hand in sympathy. She felt so inadequate in the face of the old lady's grief. This was the first time that she had let slip the guard which she put up at the least mention of Vito's name and she didn't quite know how to cope.

"Would it help to talk about him P" she asked her gently. "I don't think anything would help," Aunt Rina answered with heart-rending simplicity. Presendy, however, when the silence between them began to make itself felt, she began to speak of him.

"He was our only child. For years we had prayed for a baby and when he arrived it was as if he were a living miracle. I can't tell you the joy which his coming brought to his father and myself, and when, eventually, Domenico came to live with us it was as if our cup of joy were running over. Both of my boys were so handsome, so devil-may-care. I was so very proud when the mothers of the girls whom they escorted to parties and dances came to me and praised the way in which they behaved with their daughters. For years I half hoped for, half dreaded the day when they would come to me and say that they had chosen the girls who were to become their wives."

She patted Caroline's head which was near to her knee. "Flow happy it would have made me to see Vito with a wife such as you, my dear. But that can never happen now." She took out a wisp of lace and dabbed her eyes. With a brave effort she managed to smile and she shook herself as if determined to shake off the depression which held her in its grasp.

"Did they resemble each other?" Caroline asked curiously.

"In looks they did. They were both Vicaris. Domenico's father was my husband's brother and they were both very dark and handsome

men, so it was not surprising that their sons should resemble each other. But in temperament they were very dissimilar, and so it was with their sons. Vito was a more volatile boy than Domenico, although I sometimes think that the tragedy of his parents' death had a lot to do with the solemn manner which Domenico sometimes has. He adored his parents and, of course, he was able to remember them and to remember the happy times they all had together. We tried our hardest to take their place, but I don't think we ever completely succeeded. Even in his most carefree moments Domenico's eyes can become overshadowed as if he still feels his loss, even now. I was hoping, my dear," she hesitated a little as if wary of offending, "that you would succeed where I failed and that you would have managed to chase those shadows away for ever."

Caroline looked away from the wise old eyes which saw too much, and when she did not answer her unspoken question Aunt Rina sighed but did not attempt to force her confidence.

Baby Vito caused a diversion by falling over one of his toys, and as his woeful voice reached them they both sprang up to go to his aid. He was not hurt, but Aunt Rina, who loved a chance to fuss over him without appearing to spoil him, gathered him up in her arms and carried him to her seat on the terrace. Caroline was relieved. The moment for confidences was over. She had been near to spilling out all of her misery and fears into the ears of the wise old lady who had seen through the pretence which she and Domenico had shrouded around the discord between them. Aunt Rina knew that all was not well with them, but Caroline had no doubt that, in her wisdom, she would not attempt to pry. She would wait until they were ready to confide in her.

A peal from the door bell sent Emanuele hurrying to answer it. For fully five minutes there were sounds of feet coming and going in the hallway and down the shallow stone steps which led to the pavement

outside. Curiosity overcame them both and they got up from their seats and went into the hall to discover the cause of all the activity.

Pile upon pile of grey boxes with a distinctive white scroll across one corner were being stacked against the wall by Emanuele and a man in a uniform of the same grey as the boxes. Caroline gasped as realization hit her. Her clothes had arrived from Brigitte! She turned a puzzled face to Aunt Rina.

"But there must be some mistake! I didn't order all these things! I must explain to the carrier that they can't possibly be mine."

But the man was insistent. "Each box," he said, "was marked on the invoice. There is no mistake, *signora*. They are all for you."

In a daze, she put her signature on the invoice that he handed to her to sign and thanked him as he made his exit.

She looked again at the staggering amount of clothes which were contained in the mountain of grey and white boxes. She had ordered six day dresses, two evening dresses, some beach wear and a quantity of lingerie and nightwear, a fraction of the amount that had just been delivered, which would fill her massive wardrobe to overflowing!

Then she remembered the interval which had elapsed while she had visited the hairdresser and Domenico and Brigitte had been alone. The slight air of conspiracy which she had sensed between them when she had walked into the room had not really penetrated the air of excitement which had surrounded her at that moment. But now she thought of it, and wondered. Could this be Domenico's doing? Was he responsible for this extravagant gesture?

Emanuele carried the boxes upstairs to her bedroom. Excitedly she began unpacking the contents and Aunt Rina joined her to give her opinion of Brigitte's creations. One dress after another was taken

from its swathe of soft grey tissue paper and held up for approval. Every colour, and variations of each, was presented to Caroline's bemused gaze. Wonderfully soft velvets, dreamy chiffon, cool linens, all superbly cut and tailored, each one a dream on its own.

Two large boxes she left to the last. Tentatively, she opened one and a gasp of delight escaped her as she beheld the supple smoky-coloured skins of a magnificent fur coat. She held it up to her face and delightedly stroked the rippling texture, revelling-in the sheer unadulterated luxury of it. She could hardly bear to put it down while she opened the other box which was still a tantalizing mystery. It, too, held a fur — a white, madly expensive fur evening stole which looked as if it had been made for a princess.

Caroline was speechless with wonder. Aunt Rina patted her hand gently, laughing openly at the expression of incredulity and awe on her face. "I see Domenico's present has pleased you. You must thank him in the nicest possible way," she twinkled.

"Oh, Aunt Rina! He must have spent a fortune! I've never seen such an amount of clothes in my life before, not even in a shop. I can hardly believe they're all for me. When will I wear them all?"

"You will have ample opportunity to wear them, child. As the wife of one of Rome's most prominent business men you will be called upon to entertain and to be entertained. Have no fear! You will be surprised how quickly you will tire of them when you find yourself in the middle of the social whirl. And again, you owe it to Domenico to be one of the foremost leaders of fashion. It is unthinkable that the Signora Vicari should be regarded as dowdy."

Some of the pleasure of the gift was dispelled as Aunt Rina, unthinkingly, pointed out the reason for Domenico's extravagance. He had not bought her the clothes to give her pleasure but to impress his business associates and their wives. She was to uphold the Vicari

prestige with her fabulous wardrobe and priceless jewellery — a mere statue on which to hang the trappings of wealth with which to impress his competitors.

When Aunt Rina had gone she began placing her trousseau, for that was what it was, in the capacious wardrobe. It looked satisfyingly full when she was finished and, instead of closing the doors, she began picking out dresses at random just for the sheer pleasure which it gave to her. The jeans and T-shirted girl whom Domenico had deplored was lost in a dream where a startled Domenico was confronted by a dazzling vision wearing a different dress each time he turned to look at her, his face a picture of abject devotion as her charms were displayed to their best advantage by the wealth of breathtaking materials and costly furs. She amused herself in this way for quite some time, and a tap at her door came as an anti-climax which brought her back to earth with an abruptness which chased away the bemused look that her day-dreams had brought to her face. "Come in!" she called out.

It was Adelina. "There is a gendeman on the phone, *signora*. He wishes to speak with you."

"Thank you, Adelina. I shall be right down."

Hurriedly she closed the doors of her wardrobe, and shut in with the fabulous collection her fanciful dreams. She sped down to the telephone in the hall.

"Hello?"

"Caroline? This is Jeffrey. I wondered if you were doing anything special. If not, would you be a darling and take pity on my lonely state? I'm bored to distraction and need a playmate."

"Oh, I... I don't think so, Jeffrey."

"Why not? You're not frightened of what your lord and master might say, are you? The only reason I'm at a loose end is the fact that he has pinched my best girl. Every time I call for her she makes the excuse that she's meeting Domenico."

The note of chagrin in his voice was very marked as he spitefully volunteered this information, but Caroline ignored his implication and said, more firmly this time:

"I'm sorry, Jeffrey, but I have such a lot to do, just now. I couldn't possibly come out with you."

She would not listen to the voice inside her which was whispering, Domenico is enjoying himself! Why don't you? She wanted to be here when he came home this evening to thank him for his present. The warm aura of well-being which her self-induced day-dreaming had brought still clung to her and there was no place for Jeffrey in her thoughts.

A sigh reached her from the other end of the phone as he realized the futility of pressing her further. "All right, then. I know when I'm beaten. But I'll call again later to see if you've changed your mind."

"Oh, but..." Caroline was about to protest, but the line went dead. Jeffrey had hung up.

She forgot about him, however, as she went back upstairs to decide what she would wear that evening when she confronted Domenico. She knew she would have to be quick to catch him before he went out to his evening engagements, but she intended to listen for him as he ran his bath and to waylay him before he could run swiftly down the stairs and race off in his car, as he usually did.

She spent a long time deliberating on her choice of outfit. Aunt Rina insisted upon changing for dinner, even when there was just the two

of them, so she looked through the evening dresses with a speculative eye. Most of them were in pastel shades, but there was one delectable creation in black which Caroline finally decided upon.

It had a top made of finest lace with a scooped neckline that left her shoulders bare. Her skin looked like white alabaster against the contrasting black bodice. The skirt swirled around her feet as yards of finely pleated black nylon fell from the tiny nipped-in waist. Her delicate black lace evening shoes felt like wings on her feet as she twirled in front of the full-length mirror to see the effect in full and her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she looked at her reflection and knew that she had never looked lovelier. As a finishing touch, she pinned on the brooch which Domenico had given her, and felt a thrill of satisfaction when she saw how beautifully it became its black lace foil. When she was satisfied that everything was perfect she took off the dress and donned a soft pink negligee to begin her preparations to her hair before having a bath. She liked to do her hair, for she could manage it to her own liking. Aunt Rina always went to a hairdresser, for special occasions, and had Adelina dress it each day, but Caroline had refused Adelina's offer to do the same for her. She had merely to wash it and set it in pin curls while she had her bath and then use a hair dryer for a few moments, after which she could comb it to any style she wished without trouble. She had been thankful many times, when she had been hard up, that she had such manageable hair which needed so little professional attention.

She did not ask herself, as she bathed and made up her face with hands which trembled with anticipation, what she wanted of Domenico. Nor did she stop to wonder why she should be taking such pains for a man whom she had done her best to alienate. The past few days had brought with them a feeling of unrest which she did not recognize as loneliness. With only an old lady, sweet as she was, and a young baby to keep her company, the days had passed slowly, and she felt frustrated and misused each time Domenico swept in and out of the house as he went about his business with hardly a look or a

word to spare for her. This evening she was feeling young and full of life and she wanted someone young and eager to share it with her. Someone like the Domenico of Paris who had laughed and joked and even flirted with her.

At last she was ready. Her hair shimmered under the lights of her bedroom as she moved her head from side to side to place a light daub of perfume behind each pink shelllike ear. There was nothing left to do now but to wait for Domenico's arrival, so she sat, her hands clasped lightly in her lap, listening for the bang of his car door and for the light, quick footsteps which would announce his homecoming.

She was still there, much later, when Angelina tapped on her door to tell her that Aunt Rina was waiting dinner for her. Being pleasantly engrossed in her thoughts, she had not realized that the dinner gong had sounded a good ten minutes before, without her hearing it, and she apologized for her lateness as she hurriedly seated herself at the table.

"That, is quite all right, dear," Aunt Rina replied. "You are well worth waiting for. You look ravishing tonight, Caroline. I shall insist that Domenico takes you out after dinner to see something of the city. It is disgraceful to think that you have not been out of the house since your arrival, and I shall be very angry with him if this state of affairs continues for another day."

Her mouth set in a mutinous line, waiting for Caroline to demur, but this time she did not make any attempt to dissuade her.

They dawdled their way through dinner, each busy with her own thoughts and speaking hardly at all. Even when they arose from the table to take their coffee on to the terrace Domenico had not arrived home. It was only when everything had been cleared away and the dusk had begun to creep in that they heard his car stop at the front of the house.

His aunt rose swiftly with a determined look upon her face and went out into the hall to meet him. Caroline heard her speak and then give a small cry of what sounded commiseration. Domenico spoke only once, but she could not hear what he said; his voice sounded different, somehow, without his usual vigour and command. His footsteps sounded on the stairs and Caroline jumped up to follow him to thank him for his presents, but Aunt Rina came into the room and held up her hand to delay her.

"No, don't, Caroline!"

"But I just want to speak to him for a moment, Aunt Rina."

"Some other time, my dear. Leave him for a while. He is not feeling well, just now."

The blood drained from Caroline's face. "What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"Nothing that a few hours' rest and quiet will not mend, I assure you. Don't look like that, darling. It is nothing serious, just a migraine which he has been cursed with since he was seven years of age - just after his parents' death, in fact. I have often wondered if there could be some connection."

"Migraine?" Caroline repeated. "Oh, poor Domenico!"

"You have suffered from it, then, Caroline? "

"No. But I have often nursed my father through an attack. He was a martyr to it. Sometimes he prayed for death while the pains in his head were at their worst, and I could only comfort him by putting ice-cold towels upon his brow and by massaging his neck lightly. After that he would fall asleep for a couple of hours and when he wakened he was full of life. I often used to think that the pain must

have been so tremendous that the relief when it passed made him feel twice as well as before the attack I"

"I wish you could do the same for Domenico, my child. But when he is like this he will not allow anyone in his room. He draws the curtains and lies waiting for the pain to ease, but sometimes I hear him moving about for hours. He has been given tablets, of course, but they give him no ease, so he refuses to take them now. The doctors say that it may be an allergy, or that it may be caused by overwork or strain, but whatever the reason they have not been able to cure him of it."

Caroline wanted to go to him, but Aunt Rina persuaded her not to. "He would be very angry," she said. "We know now that it is better to leave him alone. He prefers it."

They sat a little longer before deciding to retire to their rooms. Aunt Rina was upset because of Domenico's illness and was glad to go upstairs to rest. She kissed Caroline good night outside her bedroom door and begged her not to worry as he would be perfectly fit the next morning.

Caroline returned her kiss and left her. She walked into her own room and began to undress. She could not hear a sound from Domenico's room and she hoped that he had managed to fall asleep. She tiptoed gently across to the door between their rooms and put her ear to the panel in an effort to hear a movement which would tell her that he was not sleeping, but there was no sound. She looked at the key in the door and wondered if she dared open it. Her hand hovered over the handle and dropped to her side as she remembered Aunt Rina's words, "Leave him alone. He will be very angry if you go to him."

She knew that she could ease his pain. Her father had said that if she had not been by his side when the pain was at its worst he would have been tempted to shoot himself. But she and her father had been very

close. Domenico, on the other hand, would hate her to see him showing what he would consider to be a weakness. She turned away from the door, slowly.

CHAPTER VIII

HOURS had passed since Caroline's decision had been made. She lay in her great canopied bed and stared unseeingly at the ornate ceiling. How was he? Had he fallen asleep at last?

She could not sleep for thinking of the agony which he would be going through in the next room. And she could help him. She knew that she could.

A thump as something fell to the floor in the next room brought her swiftly to an upright position and she listened keenly for any other sign that he was still awake. Her heart was racing furiously as she jumped out of bed and went over to the communicating door. All was quiet. She could stand it no longer! Her negligee was spread across the foot of her bed and with one quick movement she slipped her arms into it and fastened the belt at her waist. Without further thought she went over to the door and turned the handle. Thank goodness, it wasn't locked!

The bedroom was dim. The curtains were drawn across the windows to shut out as much light as possible. As she tiptoed over to the bed she saw that a glass lay by the side of it and a pool of water was spreading over the thick carpet. Her glance went to the bed. He must have attempted to get a drink and had spilled the water. She went forward to ask him if he would like her to get him some more water, and gasped „with sympathy when he opened his eyes as she looked down at him. They were mirrors of pain. His eyes, always dark, were deep pools of pain. It had creased furrows in his brow and his skin had a pallor which showed through his deep tan. His black hair, which was usually scrupulously groomed^ was a damp tousled mop where he had run his fingers through it in an effort to try to ease the tight band of pressure which was sending waves of pain coursing through his head. The bedclothes were a tangled mass of sheets and covers and were half on, half off the bed.

He tried to insert command into his voice as he saw her standing there, but his voice echoed the pain in his eyes.

"Go away," he said weakly. "Leave me alone!"

Caroline moved towards the door. "I'm going downstairs, Domenico. But I shall be back in a moment."

He lifted his hand to wave her away, but she had already turned her back on him, and anyway, she would not have taken notice if she had seen him.

In a matter of minutes she was back carrying a bowl of water in which ice cubes floated. She put it down at the side of the bed and dipped a clean white hand towel into the icy water. Gently she pressed him back against his pillows when he would have sat up to remonstrate with her, and with a dull groan he gave in to her insistence.

She knew better than to try to rearrange the bed covers and pillows, for the least movement would cause the slivers of pain to stab away at his defenceless head.

She wrung out the towel which was by now thoroughly impregnated with the chill from the ice and smoothed it on to his corrugated brow. A sigh escaped him and, on a long- drawn breath, he sighed, "Oh, the relief, Caroline. The blessed relief!"

Patiently, she ministered to him, smoothing the cold towel across his brow until it began to feel warm and then changing it for another one which she alternatively soaked in the bowl. He did not speak again, but she knew that her treatment was having the desired effect, for he was lying quite still and the lines of pain were not as deeply etched in his face. She could not see his eyes, for his lids were closed as if in sleep, but he was not sleeping, for now and again, when she would

have withdrawn the cold compress, he lifted his hand to hold hers where it was for a few seconds longer.

She sat upon the edge of his bed while she was bathing his brow and, presently, she left the towel where it was and began to massage the side of his neck where the muscles were bunched into knots with the tension which the pain was causing. Gradually he relaxed and his breathing began to get deeper as he slipped into pain-free sleep. She continued with the massage until her arms were stiff. She was sitting in a most uncomfortable position, with her feet on the floor and her body screwed around to enable her to reach the basin if it was needed again, and yet to continue massaging his neck. Her muscles began to protest at their ill-treatment and she stopped the massage for a moment to see if he was really asleep.

As she waited he murmured and moved on to his side, flinging his arm around her waist and effectively pinning her down. She dared not move for fear of waking him and starting up the dormant pain once again, so she sat very still and waited until he should move again, when she would make her escape.

Domenico, however, was now sound asleep, a deep motionless sleep. His arm began to feel as heavy as a log against her slim waist and the beginnings of cramp numbed her toes. She wriggled them in an effort to send the blood circulating through her feet, but her toes stiffened ominously. Desperately she tried to slide out of the confines of his arm, but he moved his head and murmured something indistinctly when she disturbed him. She could not risk moving again, so cautiously she lifted one leg up on to the bed. That felt much better. She then managed to get herself positioned so that she could lift the other one, and as she lay prone beside his sleeping figure the dreaded cramp eased away and she settled herself comfortably against the pillows. Domenico's breath fanned her cheek and her heart swelled as she looked at him. How he would hate the thought of her seeing him defenceless, as he was now! There was no trace of the arrogant

Roman in the face beside her own. Now that the pain had eased away he looked pale and very vulnerable. The dark crescent of his thick lashes lay against his cheeks and his mouth, which of late had been stern and uncompromising, was almost boyish in response.

Daringly, she moved her head and placed a whisper of a kiss against the side of his mouth, and smiled down at him for the first time with all the love which she felt for him visible in her eyes.

As the first fingers of light began making their way through the curtains and on to the bed, she moved stealthily from his encircling arm. He slept on, oblivious of her presence. Silently, she moved across the room to the door and slipped through into her own bedroom.

Her eyes were gritty with lack of sleep and as soon as she laid her head against her pillow she fell into a sound slumber.

Hours later she was awakened by the sound of a rattling breakfast tray, and was amazed to see Adelina smilingly advancing towards her bed.

"Good morning, *signora*. You have slept well?"

"Goodness, Adelina! Why are you bringing me my breakfast up here? You know I always eat downstairs. What time is it?" .

"It is ten o'clock, *signora*. And Signor Vicari insisted that you were not to be wakened before now, and that you were to have your breakfast in bed."

Caroline blushed a rosy pink. "Signor Vicari? Is he better?"

"Better? He was up with the lark and off to work before eight o'clock, and he was whistling all the time before he went out. Better? Yes, I should think so!"

Adelina's eyes were twinkling gaily as she answered Caroline's questions, and she blushed even deeper as she wondered just how much the faithful old servant knew about her master's business. Judging from the knowing look in her eyes there was not much that she did not know. But she would keep her own counsel, as would her husband Emanuele. Their loyalty to the family they served was fanatical.

She enjoyed her breakfast enormously. When she had finished it she had a shower and dressed in a gay sundress which was as bright as a burst of sunshine and went downstairs to join Aunt Rina on the terrace where she was watching over Vito as he played in the garden. She wondered how much Aunt Rina knew of the previous evening's happenings, and she was a little shy as she approached her chair.

She need not have worried, for the old lady's eyes were guileless and her first words relieved Caroline's shyness.

"You will be pleased to know that Domenico's migraine has left him, my dear. Didn't I tell you he would be as well as ever this morning?"

"Have you seen him, then, Aunt Rina?"

"No. But Adelina told me that he was up early and that he was singing in his bath, so he must be well." She looked a little thoughtful as she added, "I must admit I have never known Domenico to *sing* after one of his attacks. But perhaps it was not so severe this time. Yes, that must be the reason."

Caroline smiled a slow secret smile. Poor Domenico, she thought, if that was a mild attack then heaven help him when he has a severe one!

The day passed on leaden wings as she waited impatiently for him to return home. She filled in her time playing with Vito and she spent a little time in the kitchen with Adelina, who loved an audience as she worked, and was more than willing to tell Caroline tales of the mischief which the young Domenico and Vito had got up to when they were boys. She had a willing listener, for Caroline loved to hear about him, what illnesses he had had, the things he had said and done to amuse the household and, most of all, how many girl-friends he had brought to the house before his marriage. Adelina was a mine of information in this respect and Caroline began to build up a picture of a Domenico who bore no relation to the grim-faced man which he had become since the night of the dinner party. It did resemble, however, the Domenico she had known for a few short hours in Paris, and she felt a pang when she realized that if he had changed for the worse it was only since he had met her. But perhaps after last night they could declare a truce. Perhaps he would come home from his work and tell her to get dressed in her prettiest dress as he was taking her out to see some of the night-life of Rome. The Eternal City! How she longed to explore it!

She dressed with care in the same dress which she had worn the evening before, but which he had not seen, and went down to dinner. She had not heard the car, but perhaps he had arrived home while she was in her bath and she had missed the sound of the car braking in front of the house.

She looked into the small salon where they generally spent half an hour chatting and drinking a glass of sherry before going in to dinner. It was empty.

Aunt Rina's voice echoed down the stairs as she spoke a departing word to Adelina when she left her room to come downstairs. Caroline's heart sank. If Domenico were home he would have joined them by now for a pre-dinner drink. Tears pricked behind her eyelids and she swallowed the lump in her throat in one self-pitying gulp. Two nights in a row she had dressed up, willing him to come home and to take her out for the evening. Even if he wanted to be cold and distant she wouldn't mind. The frustration of actually living on the doorstep of some of the world's most phenomenal sights without seeing anything of them was more than she could bear. She would have it out with him! She would wait, all night if necessary, for him to come home and then she would tell him that she did not intend to stay cooped up any longer!

In a short while she hoped to hear news of Dorinda, and when she had contacted her, she would be leaving Rome for ever, but not, she hoped, without first storing up some memories of the city in which Domenico lived and worked. She badly needed something to look back on when she had left him for good, some happy memories to sustain her in what would be an empty, aimless existence.

She waited for hours for the sound of his car drawing up outside of the house. Aunt Rina had long since gone to bed and Caroline was listening to music which she was playing on the record player. The haunting strains of a particularly beautiful piece still lingered in the air as she heard the sound of his key turning in the lock. As it was so late, she had dismissed the servants and had assured Emanuele that she would get anything which Domenico might require when he arrived home. She shook herself slightly to disperse the drowsiness which had overtaken her during her long wait and got up from the floor where she was sitting, her head on a cushioned chair, as she listened to the music.

Domenico's footsteps seemed to be going up the stairs and she quickened her pace in order to reach him before he disappeared into

his room. When she reached the door he was already half-way up the stairs and he turned with a start of surprise as he heard his name.

"Domenico!"

"Good heavens, Caroline! What are you doing up at this hour?"

She hesitated for a moment and then gathered up her courage. "I've been waiting for you to come home, Domenico. I wish to speak to you."

He took in the picture she presented in her black gown which belied its sophisticated style and gave her the look of a young, beautiful, but rather wistful child. His voice was irritable as he turned away from her anxious gaze.

"Won't it do in the morning? I am rather tired."

"No, Domenico," her voice surprised her by its firmness. "I want to speak to you now."

He gave a shrug of his shoulders and turned to come back down the stairs to where she stood. He followed her into the-salon and as she seated herself upon the couch he walked over to the fireplace which dominated the room and stood, rocking on his heels, and waited with barely concealed impatience for her to speak.

Now that he was actually here in front of her all the carefully rehearsed speeches she had prepared fled from her mind and she cast about frantically for an opening. He gave her one, for as he groped in his pocket for his cigarette case he said casually, "By the way, thank you for your kindness last night."

Just that! Nothing more! She had not expected overwhelming gratitude, but his casual attitude hurt out of all proportion and she

masked her tell-tale eyes lest he should see the hurt he had inflicted with his impersonal dismissal of her efforts on his behalf.

She tried again, after murmuring a non-committal answer to his thanks, to open the subject of her incarceration in the house, and remembered, with relief, that she had not yet had the opportunity of thanking him for the clothes which he had bought for her. In her eagerness the words tumbled out in a torrent.

"I want to thank you for the clothes which you bought for me. They arrived yesterday and I waited up last night to thank you for them, but," she faltered, "you were ill, so I had to wait until tonight. They're so lovely, Domenico. I could hardly believe my eyes when I opened all the packages. The fur coats! They took my breath away, and all the other things! I really can't thank you enough."

The look of cynicism which passed over his face at her outpouring dampened her enthusiasm in a moment. She had day-dreamed herself into thinking that they could be friends for the short time that she intended to remain in his house, but his look said as plainly as any words that his attitude towards her had not changed. He had no intention of allowing her ministrations of the previous evening to change his mind about her.

"Is that all you wish to say to me?" He ground out his cigarette with an air of finality and moved towards the door as if the interview was at an end, as far as he was concerned.

"No, Domenico - wait!"

He turned, one black eyebrow lifted in interrogation. She stumbled on. "Please, Domenico, I should like to go out some time. Do you realize," her voice rose a little with indignation, "that I haven't been out of this house *at all* since our arrival?"

"Ah, so now we come to the crux of the matter! You are bored with your own company. Perhaps you are pining for the attentions of your fellow Englishman, Mr. Graham?"

"Jeffrey? Why should I pine for him? I hardly know him."

"You seem to know him well enough to be on Christian name terms with him," he countered angrily.

"Oh, that! He asked me to call him Jeffrey that first night and somehow I just slipped into it. Perhaps it's because we're both exiles from home," she said confidently, "or maybe it's just that he's so easy to get along with. Anyway, there's nothing to it, I can assure you."

"I don't need your assurances," he answered stiffly. "I intend to see to it that nothing comes of your unfortunate friendship with this man. His reputation is notorious. No woman is safe with him and in future he will not be welcome in this house. I have given instructions to the servants to that effect, so, if he should call, do not be surprised if he is refused admittance."

She gave him a look full of indignation. "How could you, Domenico? What has Jeffrey done to deserve such treatment? He has been a perfect gentleman always and has done nothing to warrant such a snub. As for his reputation, I might remind you that it was your cousin who introduced him to me in the first place. You don't seem to object to her seeing him!"

Domenico looked thoughtfully at her as she voiced her indignation on Jeffrey's behalf. He took another cigarette from his case and lit it before answering her.

"Candida is answerable to no one," he replied haughtily, "whereas you are my wife and your conduct reflects, favourably or unfavourably, upon me. If you cannot be trusted to act in a discreet

manner then it is up to me, as your husband, to see to it that your activities in that respect are curtailed."

"Act in a discreet manner?" Her puzzlement was obvious as she queried his last remark. "When have I not acted with discretion? Will you kindly elaborate on that last remark?" she asked coldly.

A chill of fear was beginning to creep into her veins. This was not the way that she had expected their conversation to go when she had waited up so patiently for him to come home. She had intended offering him an olive branch, to appeal to him, indirectly, for a truce and for an easing of the tension between them. But he was as implacable as ever, and she felt a wave of futility wash over her as she looked up at his grim face. She was still waiting for an explanation, and began to tap her foot impatiently when he showed no sign of answering her.

He glanced down at the tapping foot and seemed amused by it and by her haughty demeanour, for he smiled, at least his lips twisted a little, but there was no humour in his dark eyes. His magnificent dark eyes, which were like deep pools in which she felt she could sink fathoms deep, were shadowed by the moody troubled thoughts which oppressed him.

"You deny that your exhibition with Mr. Graham on the night of the party was indiscreet?"

"My exhibition?" She began to laugh with genuine amusement. "But you can't possibly be serious, Domenico? We enjoyed our dance together, Jeffrey and I, but to call it an exhibition!" Words failed her and she gurgled with laughter at his description of what had been, at most, a fairly lively and very enjoyable dance.

Domenico was not amused, and in a few seconds her laughter faded and anger began to take its place.

"You really do mean what you said about my being indiscreet, don't you, Domenico?" she said quietly.

His only answer was an impatient flick of his fingers as he sent the butt of his cigarette spinning into the fireplace. He did not bother to look at her and her anger grew as his silence confirmed that her surmise was correct. He thought her incapable of dignity and the injustice of his condemnation stung her to retaliate.

"Caesar's wife must be above suspicion. Is that the way of it, Domenico? It doesn't matter that Caesar himself leaves a lot to be desired, in that respect, but his wife must never be guilty of the smallest digression."

"What does that mean, exactly?" he asked with dangerous quietness.

"It means just this - that although I may be guilty of enjoying a dance with an excellent partner I did not lose myself in his arms to the extent that you were able to with Candida! You, perhaps, didn't realize that you had an audience on that occasion? Or perhaps her charms are such that you didn't care?"

There was no doubt that she had flicked him on the raw with her counter-attack, for his face betrayed his feelings when the colour began to rise beneath his tan. He turned to face her, a torrent of angry words trembling on his lips, but then he pulled himself up with a great effort of will and bit off what he had been about to say with a snap of his white teeth. He made a visible effort to regain his composure, and his next words showed that he had decided to ignore her accusations and treat them as unsaid.

"You will remain in this house until I give you permission to leave it. That is part of the plan which I have formed in order to educate you in the ways of decent people who live with honour and whose motives are above suspicion." He ignored her gasp of horror and went on, "I

can think of no better tutor for your lesson than my aunt, and I am hoping that living in close contact with her will show you the error of your ways and that perhaps some of her qualities will rub off. .on you. When, or rather if, I am satisfied that you are able to take your place in our society without disgracing the name that you bear, then, and only then, will I allow you to take your place at my side and to entertain and be entertained a wife should. You are to be what I might call... on probation. So if you learn your lesson well your release will come earlier than it would if you were to decide to resist my plan."

Caroline listened with growing amazement to this arrogant decree, and when he had finished she still sat quiet, for the words which she was groping for would not come. Sheer anger and shock made her inarticulate, and Domenico waited with patent unconcern while the emotions chased across her face. She found her voice at last and choked out her words.

"Why, you insufferably arrogant prig! How dare you speak to me in such a way? How dare you even think of me in such a way? I shall never forgive you for those remarks. Never!"

He shrugged his shoulders negligently and turned to go.

"If that is to be your attitude, then so be it. I do not intend to argue. But I can assure you that the longer you take to recognize who is master and that my orders are to be obeyed then the longer your self-imposed confinement to this house will be." As he turned to go out of the door she asked him sharply,

"Does Aunt Rina know of this diabolical plan of yours?"

She waited with bated breath, she felt that she could not endure it if Aunt Rina had the same low opinion of her as he had. She loved the old lady dearly and she felt that her love was returned; she had to know if she was a partner in his degrading scheme.

To her great relief his answer was an emphatic "No. Indeed, she has been taken in by you to such an extent that she would not listen to anything said against you. And I do not want her to be upset by the thought that all is not well in our marriage. Although," he said with feeling, "she must have an idea, for she is no fool, and I have had some bad moments with her lately with regard to my so-called neglect of you."

"And do you honestly think that I'm going to allow you to dictate to me in such a manner, Domenico? Because I can promise you I shall fight you every inch of the way. Good heavens," her indignation burst from her, "do you think that this is ancient Rome and that you are Caesar and I a slave girl? If the situation were not so tragic it would be comical! You must be mad!"

So saying she picked up her stole and hurried out of the salon and up the stairs to her room without another look in his direction.

She could not be sure, but she fancied she heard the sound of soft mocking laughter following her until she had closed her door.

CHAPTER IX

CAROLINE'S fingers trembled as she dialled a number on the telephone. It was nearly midday and the house was deserted except for herself and the servants. Aunt Rina had taken baby Vito with her on a visit to some of her friends. They had been gone about half an hour and were not expected back until late afternoon. Aunt Rina's friends had their grandchildren staying with them and they had begged her to bring along the baby, who would be looked after by the children's nurse while they lunched and exchanged friendly gossip.

Caroline had been invited too, but she had declined; she had other plans which she was at that moment putting into action.

"Hello,' is that you, Jeffrey? Caroline here."

"Caroline, my sweet! How nice of you to call me." His enthusiastic tones were a balm to her bruised spirit and she put more feeling than she knew into her voice as she returned his greeting.

"Jeffrey, are you doing anything special today?"

"Not a thing. Dare I hope that you require my presence as an escort?"

Her heart thudded violently as she realized that this was the moment to retreat before the die was irretrievably cast. She hesitated for only a moment before answering determinedly :

"If you're still available."

Jeffrey was a great one for seizing his opportunities and his reply was typical of him. "Get your glad rags on, darling. I shall be around for you in ten minutes!"

She slammed down the phone and ran upstairs to her room. Hurriedly she surveyed her wardrobe and chose a leaf-green dress of cool linen

with a scooped-out neckline and white strap shoes and a handbag to go with it. A hasty shower helped to cool her down, for the heat was oppressive, and a very light touch of make-up and lipstick completed her toilet. She looked sweet and very appealing to Jeffrey's jaded eyes as she opened the door to his summons. She had not forgotten Domenico's statement about his being refused admittance if he should call, and that was the reason she had rushed through her toilet; she wanted to be the one to open the door to him when he arrived.

She had forgotten nothing of the previous night's conversation, for it had buzzed around in her head all night and had chased away all pretence of sleep. She had been awake when the first fingers of dawn's light had fallen across her bed and it was then, in the cool hours of the early morning, that she had made up her mind to defy Domenico.

Two or three times that morning, before phoning Jeffrey, she had nearly backed out, but then she had recalled Domenico's hard and unyielding tone as he had dictated his terms and her resolve had hardened until she had finally rushed to the phone before her reason urged her, once again, to change her mind, and had made her plan concrete. Now she was committed. There could be no turning back.

A sharp whistle of appreciation from Jeffrey disconcerted her for a moment, but then she smiled at him and held out her hand in a warm gesture of friendship. He took it and lifted it to his lips, his eyes suddenly serious, and kissed it lightly. Then he led her down the shallow stone steps and handed her into the smart little sports car which was standing at the kerb. She settled herself into the bucket seat and was driven off for her first real glimpse of Rome.

Unfortunately, Jeffrey's idea of sightseeing was very different from her own. It mattered nothing to him that twenty-seven centuries had gone into the building of the mother of cities, for his car went whizzing past the imposing buildings and cool tinkling fountains, the

majestic churches and picture galleries, and he handed her out of the car in front of a restaurant which proclaimed itself to be the Castello dei Cesari.

Caroline turned to him with a small frown of disappointment as he urged her into the restaurant.

"But, Jeffrey," she protested, "I thought we would be going sightseeing. There are so many things I want to see - the Colosseum, the Baths of Caracalla. And I should simply love to hear the sacred music in the Sistine Chapel."

He looked at her with horror. "But, my love, only the tourists go there. Surely you don't want to be smothered in a crowd of gawping foreigners all jabbering away in different languages and flashing their cameras in every direction?"

"Why not? I'm a foreigner and I don't speak Italian, so I should feel quite at home in their company. You don't know how I've longed for the opportunity of seeing all the wonders of Rome, and now, when I'm in the very heart of the city, I'm whisked through it and scooped into yet another restaurant!"

Jeffrey had to smile at her indignation, but his resolution did not falter. He put his hand under her arm and propelled her gently through the door. "How will it do if I promise faithfully to take you on a conducted tour tomorrow if you'll come with me now and meet some of the crowd that I hang around with?"

"Well -" she pondered.

"Good," he answered hastily. "It's a promise, then," and urged her inside before she changed her mind.

Once inside, Caroline's eyes were drawn to the magnificent view from the restaurant window. Her delight was obvious to everyone, for she could barely manage to tear her eyes away from it to greet the many friends and acquaintances which Jeffrey introduced to her while they had a pre-lunch drink and waited for the waiter to indicate that a table was ready for them. In a short space of time she had enough invitations issued to her to keep her entertained until Christmas, if she had wished it, but she prevaricated with her would-be hosts, telling them that she must first find out whether Domenico would be free on the dates suggested. She refused to let herself think of Domenico's reaction when he found out about her digression. It was enough to live for the moment and to enjoy herself while she could.

And she was enjoying herself. To her surprise the time simply flew past. Meeting and talking to new people revived her flagging spirits considerably, and she was astonished when Jeffrey said it was time for them to go. But before they were allowed to leave two young friends of Jeffrey's insisted that they must have a promise from Caroline that she would attend a fancy-dress party which they were throwing that night. The small dark Italian girl, whose name was Maria, pleaded with her young husband to make them give their word that they would be present.

"How about it, Caroline? Will your lord and master allow you to go?"

Caroline stiffened. She had not intended to accept the invitation, pressing though it was, but Jeffrey's words needled her.

"Of course, I shall be delighted to come to your party," she told Maria, and then, for some reason, a shiver ran through her which brought with it a feeling of foreboding.

It was only when she was in the car and speeding back to the house, at her insistence, for she wanted to be there when Aunt Rina and Vito

arrived home, that she remembered that she had nothing to wear for the party. She gave a gasp of dismay which caused Jeffrey to turn and look at her.

"I've just remembered! I don't possess a fancy dress I"

"Is that all?" laughed Jeffrey. "Just you leave that to me. I'll hire one for you. As soon as I've dropped you off I shall attend to it. Will you trust me to choose something suitable?"

"I suppose so," she answered a little doubtfully, "but how will you know my size? And when will I get it?"

With a wicked glint Jeffrey sized her up and he gave a shout of laughter as he noted her confusion. "You are a little prude, aren't you, Caroline? I was merely checking your measurements. Don't worry, I think you can safely leave it to me to see that the size is correct. I'm good at weighing up vital statistics; as for the other matter, I shall ask the firm who hires out the costumes to deliver it to your home in time for the party."

Caroline had to return his cheeky smile and she thanked him as she got out of the car.

"Don't mention it, my sweet. I shall be around for you later - and see to it that you're ready, for I don't relish meeting that grim-faced husband of yours any more than is absolutely necessary." With a wave of his hand in her direction he shot away from the house with a roar from his exhaust which would have wakened the dead.

Everything combined to smooth Caroline's path that evening. Shortly after her arrival home Aunt Rina brought the baby back and handed him over to Adelina to be bathed and fed before he was put to bed. She had just done this when the phone rang and she picked it up to answer it. Caroline heard her say, "Very well, Domenico, if you must,

you must. But I have arranged to go out to dinner this evening, and that means that Caroline must either come with me and be bored to tears listening to a lot of old cronies reminiscing or be left to dine alone. I really do think that you are treating her abominably!" She slammed down the phone, leaving Domenico, at the other end, in no doubt as to her disgust with him. She turned to Caroline.

"You heard?"

"Yes, Aunt Rina. But please don't worry about me. I've been invited to a party this evening, so you can go out and enjoy yourself without worry about me."

"That is wonderful, darling. But who will be your escort? Domenico is tied up with a business partner for the rest of the evening."

"It's all arranged, Aunt Rina. Mr. Graham is taking me - you know, Candida's friend."

A small cloud passed over Aunt Rina's face at the mention of Jeffrey's name, and Caroline thought that she was going to raise some objection to her partner. Then suddenly she smiled and gave her a knowing wink. "He is a charmer, that one. What a pity Domenico will not be at the party. A little healthy jealousy might be the very thing to nudge him out of his tardy ways."

Caroline ran up to her and kissed her. "You really are an old mischief-maker, Aunt. But I love you for it!"

The old lady returned her kiss and then shooed her up the stairs to get ready for her party. On her way upstairs she passed Adelina coming down and asked her to bring the box which she was expecting up to her bedroom, as she was going for her bath, and Adelina smilingly agreed to do so.

Caroline had a long luxurious bath and when she strolled into her bedroom she was happy and relaxed. She saw immediately that her dress had arrived for a large box was placed in the centre of her bed. As she opened it she stood aghast.

At first glance the contents seemed to consist of nothing more than a few wisps of nylon and a bikini-type costume encrusted with sequins and with two jewelled shoulder straps. She lifted it out. It was obviously meant to be some kind of harem girl outfit, for a yashmak lay in the bottom of the box, and a large selection of paste jewellery. With growing dismay she tried it on. A heavy jewelled band clung to her slim waist from which the wispy nylon skirts fell to just above her ankles. Her midriff was left bare and the brassiere clung revealingly and outlined her firm young breasts. Flat single-strapped sandals went with the costume, and an ankle bracelet which was hung with tiny metal discs which tinkled when she walked. She tried on the overwhelmingly ornate necklace and earrings and then stood back to judge the effect. "It's barbaric!" she gasped. "Jeffrey must be mad! I simply couldn't wear this!"

She jumped as the phone shrilled its summons and tore her eyes away from the mirror. As everyone was out the call had been put through to the extension in her room and automatically she walked over to answer it.

Domenico's strong, vibrant voice came over the wires and she instinctively grabbed at her negligee to cover up her costume, almost afraid that by some psychic process he would see it.

"Aunt Rina?" he asked.

"No," she stammered, "it's Caroline. Aunt Rina has gone out."

"Oh? Well, it doesn't matter. I shall contact her later. Are you alone?"

"Yes," she answered a trifle resentfully. She waited hopefully for him to say that he would come home rather than have her sit all alone for the evening. But even as she waited she heard Candida's voice urging him to hurry with his call, and the cloying possessiveness in her voice revolted Caroline. Domenico started to say something else, but she put down the phone carefully on its rest and walked over to her dressing table to begin determinedly to make up her face in the mirror.

When she had done so she did not once look into the mirror again, for the dress which she was wearing embarrassed her dreadfully and she did not want anything to deter her from going on with her plan.

She slipped on a cloak and walked down the stairs just as he rang the doorbell. She quickened her steps and almost ran out into the night and Jeffrey's arms. He took one look at her face and decided to say nothing for the moment. When he had driven a little way he asked her tentatively:

"Was the dress all right, Caroline?"

"But of course, Jeffrey. It's just perfect!"

He gave a sigh of relief. "You're a little sport, Caroline. I would have thought no less of you if you had refused to wear it. Not that it isn't suitable," he hastened to add, "it's just that some girls wouldn't have the poise to carry it off. Besides that, I had the devil's own job to get you fixed up. I think everyone in Rome must be going to Maria's damned party tonight."

He looked down ruefully at his own rather mundane pirate outfit and Caroline began to smile. Her smile turned to a giggle and finally to helpless laughter which was so infectious that Jeffrey was caught on its wave and he joined in. He pulled up his car, for safety's sake, and they laughed like children. Tears came to their eyes and they held

their sides as their laughter rocked them. It was a marvellously gay and happy moment and it made them both feel young and light-hearted and full of fun.

Jeffrey was the first to sober up. He looked down at her and said, with shining eyes, "Thank you, Caroline. Thank you for making me feel that life is suddenly worth living. I feel marvellous! Blooming marvellous!" With a happy grin he started up the car and moved on.

The house where the party was being held was a blaze of lights when they arrived, and Caroline's heart beat faster with happy anticipation as she heard the sound of music and the sound of laughing voices floating out to where they were endeavouring to park the car. When Jeffrey had managed it to his satisfaction, they walked through the wide- open door to be greeted by their host and hostess who were dressed to represent Antony and Cleopatra. Maria's gown was as insubstantial as Caroline's, and as she looked around she felt her shyness leave her, for, compared with some of the dresses on view, her own was positively puritanical.

Maria directed her to a room where she could leave her cloak, and when she had done so she walked out, rather shyly, to join Jeffrey, and was gratified by his involuntary gasp of admiration.

"Wow! You look simply gorgeous, Caroline! That outfit is a knockout!"

Before he could say another word they were swept into a crowd of happy, boisterous people, all intent on having a good time, and from that moment the party, for Caroline at least, went with a swing. She saw very little of Jeffrey, for she was very much in demand as a partner and as the party progressed she felt herself riding on the top of a wave. Her exotic costume, her flashing deep blue eyes and her lovely flushed face, which was a picture of animated enjoyment,

drew a multitude of partners, and for the first time in months she felt utterly and gloriously free.

After a while Jeffrey made his presence felt. His indignation at being pushed into the background while she danced every dance with a different man knew no bounds, and he pushed his way through her throng of admirers with a strong look of purpose on his face. "I say, you lot, it's a bit much, I must say! I bring the most attractive girl in Rome to the dance and I haven't been able to get near her. Just push off and find your own partners! The next dance is mine!"

She went willingly into his arms and gave a gay wave of her hand to her disappointed admirers. As they circled the floor there was a tremendous clash of cymbals and the music stopped suddenly so that the bandleader could make himself heard. "*Signore! Signori!* Attention, please!" Everyone was quiet as they waited for his announcement. "The next dance will be a musical forfeit!" There was a cheer of delight from the crowd and Jeffrey explained to the puzzled Caroline that a man would walk in given directions amongst the dancers and when the music stopped the couple nearest to his right hand would be asked to answer a question. If they were not able to answer it when they would be asked to pay a forfeit.

The band began to play once more and the excited couples tried to dodge the man, who was taking so many paces to the right, so many to the left, and so on, in case they were left standing beside him when the music stopped. It was all great fun and the couples who were unfortunate enough to fail to answer the questions asked were all sporting enough to endeavour to carry out the forfeits which they were given. A young man who looked as if he should have been able to sing an operatic aria went up on the stage and croaked out the first verse of a popular tune to a chorus of cat-calls and good-humoured boos, while his partner, a young, attractive girl, had the misfortune to be asked to conduct the band, to the detriment of everybody's eardrums.

Caroline and Jeffrey were enjoying it so much that they were unwary, and to their chagrin, they were the next couple to be caught. The question which they were asked was one which a university don might have balked at and, although they tried a few panic-stricken answers, they failed to get the right one.

Jeffrey's friends were delighted when he was told to dance a hornpipe, of which he did a creditable imitation, and, to Caroline's dismay, her forfeit was to dance any dance appropriate to the costume which she was wearing.

"Oh, no, I couldn't!" she protested. But the crowd were adamant. Jeffrey gave her a push into the middle of the dance floor and they all gave her encouraging shouts and wolf whistles as they waited for her to begin.

The band began to play, or rather, just the wind instruments, and the air was reminiscent of eastern potentates in desert palaces being entertained by dusky maidens while they lounged on silken cushions and snapped their fingers for attention. One could almost imagine the handsome desert princes waiting for the dancing to begin.

With a laughing, resigned shrug of her shoulders, Caroline fastened her yashmak across her face and stepped into the circle of laughing onlookers. She began swaying to the almost hypnotic music, and as she danced the voice of her old dancing teacher echoed in her ears. "Listen to the music! Forget yourself in the rhythm and let your body tell the story that the music is meant to convey. Relax, girl! Relax!" She was carried away by the musical fantasy and when the music stopped suddenly she was aware, with a jerk, that above the heads of the wildly applauding guests a pair of dark, contemptuous eyes were boring into hers. She stood as if mesmerized and her eyes dropped beneath Domenico's coldly furious gaze.

He was lost to sight in an instant as the congratulatory crowd merged upon her. Thankfully she lost herself in their midst and tried not to show the sick feeling of dismay which knowledge of Domenico's presence had brought to her. Desperately, she tried to lose herself in the melee, but she felt no surprise when a hand with a grip of steel closed around her elbow and began edging her firmly towards the door. She caught a glimpse of Jeffrey's consternation when he saw that her escort was Domenico, but she had no opportunity to speak to him.

In a matter of seconds she was propelled into the hall. Her cloak was produced and laid across her shoulders and a suave, implacable Domenico made their goodbyes to her host and hostess and escorted her grimly to his car which was standing in front of the house. Only when he had ensconced her safely in the front seat of the car did his grip relax, and subconsciously, she rubbed that part of her arm which had felt his savage grip, with fingers which were cold with fear.

He walked around to his side of the car and got in. Still without speaking, or even glancing at her, he started up the car and drove swiftly down the drive and on to the open road. She dared a look in his direction and the stern outline of his profile caused her to turn away quickly and to look, unseeingly, out of her window, her heart thumping like a mad thing as she waited patiently for the storm to break over her head.

He drove on. The ribbon of road was eaten up by the tremendous power of the car which was being driven at a speed much in excess of that at which Domenico generally drove. She was not frightened, for strangely enough she had the utmost confidence in the strong brown hands which were settled so competently on the steering wheel, but she felt uneasy. The speed at which he was going and the long empty road which was climbing upwards all the time was not, she felt sure, the way home. Houses began giving way to open country and panic

began to rise in her as she realized that, wherever he was taking her, it was not to the comparative safety of his aunt's house.

Still he did not speak. The frivolous piece of nonsense which had been her yashmak was twisted out of recognition in her agitated fingers as the oppressive silence grew. This is ridiculous! she thought. Why am I so frightened? He wouldn't do anything to harm me. Even if he does look as if he could murder me, he won't!

She gave him a startled look as he suddenly pulled in at the roadside. He switched off the engine and took out a cigarette. Not until he had taken a few quick draws from it did he turn to look at her, and when he did, her mouth, all at once, went dry and she had difficulty in swallowing.

His eyes raked her, missing nothing of the costume which now felt cheap and gaudy and, out of its environment, much too revealing. She dropped her eyes, not daring to meet the savage assessment in his, and a deep painful blush rose to her cheeks as she felt his contempt as a living thing which filled the small confines of the car until she felt stifled by the force of it.

His voice when he spoke made her jump, for it had a silky controlled tone which unnerved her. Blazing anger she had expected and was prepared to meet, but he was not merely angry, he had gone two or three stages past that.

"Would you care to explain how you forgot yourself far enough to make me the laughing stock of all my friends and an object of pity to my family? And why you flouted my express instructions that you were to see nothing more of Jeffrey Graham?"

He waited, seemingly patiently, for her answer. But she could sense the temper which he was holding in check with amazing control.

With a cowardice of which she was later ashamed, tears filled her eyes and she began to cry softly.

She made no attempt to disguise the sobs which caught in her throat or the fear she felt at the bite in his voice and the unleashed violence which showed itself in the whiteness of his knuckles as his hands clenched on the steering wheel. She flinched at the fury in his black eyes as he turned on her.

"Tears won't help you now, Caroline, so save them for later. I am sure you will need a safety valve when I have finished with you!"

Her wet lashes flew up from her tear-filled eyes as his words penetrated her misery. Panic showed itself in their depths as she asked him:

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," and there was an immovable determination in his tone, "that the time has come for me to collect what is owing to me. Time for you to pay your debt, Caroline! I will have something from you in exchange for the disgrace which you have brought upon me. And I will have it tonight!"

Horror-stricken, she watched him as he turned the key and started up the engine. He edged the car out on to the open road and she knew, with the knowledge of fear, that this time he had been driven too far!

The car swept on, climbing all the time, through vineyards and past solitary villas which Caroline could just distinguish in the deepening gloom of the evening. Domenico had not spoken again since starting up the car and she still had no idea where he was taking her. She had a wild impulse to fling open the door and jump out, taking a chance that

she would not be badly hurt, but she knew that it would serve no good purpose, for he could quite easily catch up with her and bring her back again. The night was warm and she had let her cloak slip backwards from her shoulders, but now a chill of fear ran through her and she fumbled for the warmth of the cloak as a fit of shivering caught her.

Domenico made no attempt to help her, and when she had managed to cover her shoulders with her wrap she snuggled down into her seat and tried to control the trembling of her limbs. She was badly frightened, and however hard she tried to reassure herself that Domenico was, first and foremost, a gentleman, the grim look of purpose on his face and the frightening import of his last words killed the faint flicker of hope which had lit within her.

The car seemed to be slowing down. Domenico turned into a driveway and drew up in front of a pink-washed villa surrounded by flowers and shrubs. In the dim light she could not see the full glory of the garden, but the scent of the flowers was overpowering. The moon came out from behind a cloud and bathed the villa in an eerie glow. No light shone from the windows and no welcoming footsteps came to greet them as they stepped from the car.

So she waited silently while Domenico took his keys and inserted one of them into the lock of the front door. She did not move as he swung the door open and stepped to one side for her to precede him, so he took her elbow and guided her firmly into a hall with a black and white tiled floor. In the centre of it stood a wrought iron and glass table with a telephone standing upon it. Caroline's eyes immediately swung to it. This might be her means of escape! If she could manage to put through a call to Jeffrey he would come and fetch her. Then she realized that she had no idea where she was, and if she did manage to phone Jeffrey she could not tell him how to reach her.

She stifled the sob of panic which rose to her throat and fought the tide of hysteria which threatened to overcome her when she dared to think why Domenico had brought her here. Her nerves jumped when he spoke.

"Come in here and sit down," he said curtly. "I will make some coffee." So he *had* noticed her shivers!

Mechanically, she moved forward and followed him into a tastefully furnished room lit only by two lamps which Domenico switched on before disappearing into what she supposed must be the kitchen. She subsided gratefully on to a colich near one of the large windows which looked out on to a garden. The curtains were not drawn and she could see the moon sailing across the night sky and the dark shadows of the trees and shrubs outside gave her a cut-off feeling, as if she and Domenico were the only two people in the world.

The door opened and Domenico came into the room carrying a tray with the coffee. He set it down beside her on a low table and proceeded to pour out.

"I'm sorry there are no biscuits. The villa has been unoccupied for some time and there are very few provisions. Still, this will warm you."

He sat next to her and handed her her cup. Her hands still trembled as she took it from him and she spilt some of it on her cloak. Hastily she rubbed it off before he could touch her and his mocking smile made the blood run to her face as she read his thoughts.

"I see I am to be subjected to another of your shy maiden acts," he drawled hatefully. "Still, it might add savour to the chase." His black eyes dared her to challenge him, but she did not rise to his bait. The hot sweet coffee was burning her throat, but she gulped it down in an effort to chase the frozen apprehension from her limbs.

Gradually her coldness dispersed and a hot flush began to envelope her. Her palms began to sweat and her cheeks flamed as^v his eyes, which had not left her face, began to glow with a strange light. Confused, she made a move to stand up, but he put out his hand to detain her. She jerked away from him and her cloak fell from her shoulders to lie in a crumpled velvet heap on the floor. He reached out and caught her and left her helpless to resist as he pulled her into his arms. She closed her eyes, waiting for the kiss of hate which she knew was to come, but instead she felt his hands at her throat and her eyes flew open in time to see the gaudy paste necklace, which she had forgotten about, lifted and flung into the far corner of the room.

His eyes bored into hers, sending out a message of unspeakable contempt for her costume and for her actions that evening, and his kiss, when it eventually came, carried the same message.

A hot searing flame devoured her as his mouth forced hers to respond. His hands caressed her as his kisses drew the soul out of her body, but he did not speak one word of love. He was methodically and cold-heartedly breaking down her resistance to his lovemaking, not even trying to mask the fact that it was an exercise of planned and devilish punishment.

She began, frantically, to struggle. The wave of passion that he had aroused left her when she sensed his purpose, and a sick feeling of shame was all that she could feel, at that moment.

His arms tightened around her, holding her a prisoner, and her struggles only served to make him more determined to hold her.

"Please, Domenico!" she managed to gasp. "For the love of heaven, don't!"

His brooding eyes looked down at her as she held herself as far away from him as his restricting arms would allow and his answer came through clenched teeth, as if his patience were almost exhausted.

"Why shouldn't I? Am I such a fool as to allow every other man to enjoy your favours while I am rejected at every opportunity? You are my wife, remember? And I have paid in advance for the favours which I am about to receive! Did you seriously expect me to stand by and watch you flirting with any man you fancy without making my presence felt?"

"I haven't flirted with anyone, Domenico," she pleaded. "I went to the dance tonight with Jeffrey because I was so terribly lonely and because you tried to dominate me by making that ridiculous decree that I should be a prisoner in the house. You surely couldn't expect that I should take you seriously when you said that! We're not living in the Dark Ages. You couldn't have expected me to obey that ridiculous request f"

"Enough! I do not wish to hear any more. You knew that what you did would anger me, so now you can reap the fruits of that anger. You are a mass of contradictions, Caroline! Frftm the first day that we met I have not been able to tell which is the real you. On the one hand, I see the happy young mother with a child who adores her. Then, to confuse me, you tell me that you did not love Vito, and I can only surmise, therefore, that you are a woman of very loose morals. Again, you confound me by saying that you accept diamonds from your men friends as an insurance against poverty and you disgrace me by dancing like a harlot in front of everyone in Rome who knows me. What surprises me most is the way in which you have managed to ingratiate yourself with my aunt; of all people I would have said that she would have seen through you. If she had seen you tonight in that costume," his eyes flickered over her with contempt, "she would have felt as I did. I could have killed you!"

The next moment he swept her off her feet and carried her over to the couch. The flicker of light which she had seen in his eyes earlier was now a smouldering fire which reflected her terrified face as she gazed into them. She knew that it was useless to say any more and deep despair filled her heart. She loved him so much - so much that she had been willing to let him go to Candida even though the thought of it was enough to break her heart. She desperately wanted him, for the first time in his life, to have someone who was wholly his. Someone whom he would not have to share as he had had to share a mother with Vito, and a wife and child with Vito.

As she thought of Vito the solution she was seeking presented itself. The one person who had been the cause of his marrying her might help her to save him for Candida. If she could only convince him that she had loved Vito then the way would be left open for the annulment. With the speed of light the thoughts flashed through her mind.

She stopped fighting him and closed her eyes as his warm, demanding mouth claimed hers. Gradually, so as not to arouse his suspicions, she began to respond to him. His kisses changed from savage intensity to warm passion as she surprised him by her surrender, and for one infinitely sweet moment they clung together as lovers lost in each other's arms.

Weeping inwardly, Caroline caressed the back of his neck and, with closed eyes, she whispered, "Vito, my darling! I love you so much!"

Domenico was so still that she had to open her eyes. A look of shocked bewilderment chased across his features and then, dawning realization. He placed a hand on her shoulders and asked her dully, "You loved him?" and, hiding the heartbreak of her twisted heart, her answer so low that he had to bend to hear it, she forced out a whispered, "Yes ... I think I always will!"

She was alarmed by his stillness. His shocked immobility frightened her and tears of misery filled her eyes. She turned her head away to hide them from him and her movement seemed to bring him back to reality. He lifted his hand to her wet cheeks and stroked away the tears with a gentle hand. He was about to speak when Caroline, who was just about at the end of her tether, jerked her head away from his touch and cried, almost hysterically, "Don't touch me!"

Quickly, he withdrew his hand and walked away from the couch. He stared out of the window where the dark shadows in the moonlit garden seemed to hold his attention for a long while. When he turned around to face her his face was stern and a white line around his firmly compressed lips was the only indication of the shock which she had given him. He spoke gently to her, the passion he had felt earlier completely gone, his eyes grave and rather sad.

"Come, Caroline. I will take you home!"

He did not ask her why she had lied to him about her feelings for Vito. He had accepted unquestionably the fact that the truth had been forced out of her by the passion of the moment and that his arms had brought him poignantly back to her as being the only man she could ever truly love.

He helped her up and folded her cloak around her shoulders. His fingers touched her lightly as he did so and again a shiver ran through her. He took it for a shiver of revulsion and dropped his hands to his sides. He looked long and deeply into her tortured eyes with a flicker of the same pain reflected in his own. He gave a sigh and told her:

"You need never again worry that I shall force my unwelcome attentions upon you, Caroline. And please accept my apologies for my behaviour in the past. If I had known that you had loved Vito so much it would never have happened. Can you forgive me?"

She could not trust herself to speak, for the gentleness of his voice tore at her heart and she broke down completely. He laid his arm across her shoulders, protectively, and led her to the car.

The journey home was swift and silent. Domenico seemed lost in thought as he drove skilfully along the winding roads and Caroline was too tired with emotion to take any interest in the passing countryside. It was the early hours of the morning when they drew up in front of Aunt Rina's house, but the lights were still blazing at the windows. Domenico gave a startled look at the signs of activity within the house and when he had helped her out of the car he ran quickly up the steps to the door and rang the bell.

Emanuele opened it, and when he saw them on the doorstep he threw up his arms and gave thanks to heaven before ushering them inside.

"What is it, Emanuele? Has something happened to Aunt Rina?"

The old man shook his head. He seemed to be in the grip of some powerful emotion, for his tongue could not form the words he was dying to speak. Finally, after an impatient gesture from the waiting Domenico, he broke out:

"It is the Signor Vito! Word has come that he has been found! He is on his way home! The Signora is prostrate with joy; we had to put her to bed, for the shock was too much for her old heart. But she is so happy, so very happy. As indeed we all are." Emanuele wiped a tear from his faded old eyes and, at the same time, smiled his joy as he gave them the news.

Domenico turned to Caroline and he saw immediately the expression of incredulous joy which radiated from her animated face. He was not to know that she was thinking of Dorinda's delight when she found out about Vito's resurrection and of the baby who would now have a father to provide for him.

She could not read Domenico's expression as he stood looking down at her joyful face. He showed no sign of the emotion which he must have been feeling at the news.

It was with a shock of horror that she realized the import of the event to themselves, for he asked her in a deeply troubled tone, "What of us, Caroline? What will we do now?"

He did not wait for her answer but ran, two or three steps at a time, up the stairs to his aunt's bedroom. She heard her cry "Domenico!" and then she was left, with silence all around her, to her own thoughts.

Slowly she walked up to her room and sat down, in a daze, on the side of her bed. The full realization of what Emanuele had said had hit her, and the one thought which drummed through her throbbing head was that Vito was coming home and that she must get away before he arrived and showed her up for the liar and cheat that she undoubtedly was. The idea of staying to face Domenico's wrath when he found out about the lies which she had told him was terrifying and it spurred her to action. Frantically she began to pack a small suitcase with the bare essentials for her journey back to England and obscurity.

Money! She would need money to pay her fare. The bank account that Domenico had opened for her still remained untouched, but the banks did not open until later and she needed to get away immediately. But how?

Her eyes lit upon the telephone and thankfully she remembered Jeffrey. Impulsively she dialled his number and gave a sigh of relief when his sleepy voice came over the wires.

"Jeffrey? This is Caroline. I need your help. Please, Jeffrey, will you help me to get to England?" Her anxiety communicated itself to him even over the phone, and he quickly assured her that he would do all he could.

"Do you want me to pick you up now?" he queried.

"Yes, oh, yes! I'll be ready when you arrive. Don't make a sound. I'll hear your car and come out to you. And... thank you, Jeffrey," her voice almost broke. "You're a real friend."

She flung off the costume which had been the cause of so much strife and changed quickly into a travelling suit of fine blue and white tweed. With one last agonized look around her beautiful room she crept stealthily, like a thief in the night, down the stairs.

The servants were nowhere to be seen, but she listened anxiously for any sound from Domenico, who was still with his aunt. She prayed that he would not appear before she had left the house, and luck was with her. She waited, her nerves near to screaming point, until she heard Jeffrey's car pull up outside. Nervously she fumbled with the door catch and when she was outside in the cold morning air she let the door close behind her with a dull thud. Not stopping to look back, she ran down the steps to where Jeffrey was waiting and was quickly driven Sway.

"I haven't had time to phone the airport, Caroline^ I think it would be better if I drive you back to my flat for some breakfast and then we can make enquiries about the earliest flight available to you. What do you say?" His worried face was turned to her for confirmation and she gave him a grateful look and agreed to his suggestion.

"I don't know what I would have done without you, Jeffrey! I hardly like to ask, but I have to have some money for my fare. Can you lend me some? I'll pay you back as soon as I get a job. I have a terrible cheek, I know, but," she hurriedly steadied the quiver in her voice, "I have no one else to turn to."

Jeffrey looked angry, angrier than she had ever imagined he could look, for he was a happy-go-lucky type by nature who allowed

nothing to touch him very deeply. He skimmed the surface of life and was well satisfied to avoid the heights and the depths of living, content just to be what he was, an elegant social butterfly.

"What do you mean, until you get a job? You don't mean to tell me your husband would allow you to work when he is one of the richest men in Rome?" he asked her angrily.

"Domenico won't know. I've left him for good! I don't expect I shall ever see him again."

The brave look of indifference with which she tried to mask her feelings did not deceive him for a moment, but he kept silent. First of all he wanted to get her to a warm place where she could have a meal and relax, and then he would get to the bottom of what was troubling her. One thing was certain, she was desperately unhappy and badly in need of someone to look after her.

When she was seated in one of his comfortable chairs he rustled up some breakfast for them both, refusing firmly her offer to help him. She tried manfully to do justice to the meal that he provided, but the food stuck in her throat and she finally gave up the attempt to eat and put down her roll with an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry, Jeffrey, but I don't seem to have any appetite."

He poured them both another cup of coffee and leaned back in his chair.

"All right. Tell Uncle Jeffrey all about it."

"There's so much to tell that I don't quite know where to start. Hadn't we better phone the airport?" she procrastinated. "Perhaps they may have a seat vacant today. I must get away, Jeffrey, for if I'm still in

Rome when Domenico finds out I've left him he'll be sure to find me!"

"And would that be such a terrible thing?" he asked gently.

"Yes," she whispered. "So terrible that I don't think I could bear it."

At that, he picked up the phone and dialled the airport. After a-few exchanges with an official at the other end he put down the phone and nodded an affirmation to the anxious Caroline.

"There is a seat vacant on a plane which is leaving at eight o'clock. I've booked it for you."

She gave a tremendous sigh of relief, and for the first time for hours, relaxed completely.

"Now," he said firmly, "would you mind telling me what this is all about? You have plenty of time before I need take you to the airport, so you can start from the beginning. Shoot!"

She looked undecided, then, knowing that she owed it to him to put him in the picture, she began to tell him all that had happened, beginning from the day of her father's funeral and ending where he had picked her up from outside the house that morning. When she had finished, his coffee was cold in his cup, his interest in her story was so strong, and he gave a "Phew!" of astonishment when her faltering voice came to the end of her tale.

He rubbed his hand across his brow as if bewildered and gave her a rueful look as he said, "Poor old Domenico! I honestly never thought that the day would dawn when I would feel sorry for him. But it has. You've fairly put him through the mill, haven't you, Caroline? And do you mean to say that although you're married to him he thinks you're in love with his cousin? The poor mutt!"

"Oh, don't, Jeffrey!" she cried. "Can't you see that I had to do what I did? I couldn't let him take the baby away from me. I had to let him think I was Dorinda, and then one thing led to another and I was caught in a web of deceit which has finally trapped me! You can see now why I must get away, can't you?" she entreated.

"But are you absolutely sure he will be as angry as you think, when he finds out? He may love you too much to let it stand between you. Why don't you at least speak to him before you leave Rome? Give him a chance to hear your side of the story before Vito comes home. Tell him yourself, first, Caroline!" he urged.

She jumped up in agitation. "No! No, I couldn't. I must get away! I must!"

She had not told him of her belief that Domenico was in love with Candida, for she knew that he was in love with her himself and she did not want him to be hurt. He would find out soon enough that the girl he loved belonged to Domenico.

He persuaded her to sit quiet while he cleared away the breakfast dishes and washed and shaved ready to take her to the airport. When he was ready he took her down to the car and they set off. Greedily she drank in the sight of Rome which she had not got around to seeing in detail, and when she thought of the long lonely years which stretched ahead of her without Domenico, her heart swelled so much that it felt ready to burst within her.

Goodbye, my darling! she called to him silently, as the car left the outskirts of the city, and then, goodbye, my darling baby. I needn't weep for you, for I know you will be well taken care of!

They reached the airport with time to spare and after Jeffrey had purchased her ticket they went into the lounge and he ordered coffee. She sensed his anxiety on her behalf, for he kept giving her quick

looks and a worried frown marred his usually bright features. She put her hand over his and looked at him squarely.

"Don't worry, Jeffrey. I know what I'm doing. Please don't fret about me."

"I can't help it, darling. What will become of you when you reach England? Where will you live? How can I keep in touch with you?"

"I shall write to you as soon as I can, and, thanks to your generosity, I have enough money to get me to my friend's house, where I know I'll be welcome. I'll be all right, I promise yob!"

"Well, if you're sure," he gave in reluctantly, "I suppose I shall have to let you go. But remember, darling, if you ever need me just whistle and I'll come running."

Her expressive face showed how touched she was at his solicitude, and he squeezed her hand for a second and then quickly left her to go over to the kiosk where he bought her a huge box of chocolates and a bundle of magazines. With a swift glance he took in the headline on one of the English papers and he took it over to her with a wry grimace.

"You're getting away just in time, Caroline. It says here that Vito is expected to land at this airport today and that he's bringing his wife along with him. Say, what did you say your sister's name is? Is this her photograph in the paper?"

Startled, she took the paper from him and saw Dorinda's smiling face gazing up at a dark young man with the unmistakable look of the Vicaris. The headlines screamed the news that the Italian's companion had searched unceasingly for news of him and had followed every trail, against all advice, until she had been triumphantly successful in finding him, suffering from slight

amnesia, amongst other things, in a remote Mission hospital in the heart of the African jungle. The paper made great play of the fact that Dorinda had overcome tremendous odds in her search for her lover, never giving up hope that one day she would find him. They gave details of the wedding which had taken place in Africa after Vito's doctors had given him the go-ahead, and the radiant faces which smiled from the newspaper photograph left no doubt as to their future happiness.

Caroline's eyes filled with tears of joy as she read on. No need to wonder, now, why she had not received the money that Dorinda had promised her. It must have cost every penny she could scrape up to follow all the false trails which had finally led her to Vito. Her greatest joy was the fact that her beloved baby would soon have his mother and father to make a fuss of him, and that they would fill the gap which her sudden departure was sure to cause.

She stood up, still clutching the newspaper, when she heard her flight number called over the airport Tannoy, and the face that she turned to Jeffrey was serene and almost happy as she made her farewell.

"Goodbye, Jeffrey darling. This is the best going-away present you could have brought me. I'm quite resigned to going now that I know that everything that has happened hasn't been in vain. At least two of the members of my family are happy, Dorinda and the baby. Promise me you won't tell Domenico where I've gone, Jeffrey?"

She waited, insistently, for his promise before moving towards the barrier, and he gave it grudgingly. She stood on tiptoe and gave him a swift kiss, then moved in the direction of the waiting plane. He watched her go with a heavy heart and, when she was just a speck in the distance, he walked moodily to his car. He waited there until he saw the plane was airborne and then he let in his clutch savagely and drove away in the direction of Rome.

CHAPTER X

THE taxi-driver who was hailed outside Southampton station by a slight slip of a girl was not a sentimental man by nature. He had, of necessity, to be hard-boiled, for he had to contend with many odd characters in the course of his job, but this girl set him thinking, fancifully, of a startled young fawn. Her wide blue eyes seemed to appeal to him to be kind, and she had a lost, almost timid look which brought out in him a most unfamiliar feeling of protectiveness.

"Where to, miss?" he asked gruffly. Caroline took out a slip of paper from her pocket and read out Jane's address.

"Have you there in ten minutes I" was his gratifying reply, and she sank down, with a sigh of relief, into the roomy comfort of the back seat.

It was not until the taxi had drawn up in front of a neat semi-detached house with gay multi-coloured curtains at the windows that she began to wonder whether it wouldn't have been wiser to send a telegram before descending upon Jane in this manner. What if they were out, or away on holiday?

She told the obliging taxi-man to wait and went with some trepidation up the garden path to the front door.

It was opened by a tall nice-looking man with the far-seeing eyes of a sailor, and just for a moment she wondered about her welcome, for he looked at her with polite blankness, then recognition came and both together they spoke.

"Jim, I..."

"Caroline, by all that's wonderful! I didn't know you for a moment. Come in!"

He called out to Jane to come and see what the wind had blown in, and as he pulled her eagerly into the tiny hall the taxi-driver gave a hoot of his horn and drove away with a smile of satisfaction. She has friends, anyway, he thought to himself, and boy, does she look as if she needs them!

Jane ran through from the kitchen and when she saw Caroline her delight knew no bounds. With a cry of joy she ran forward and folded her into her arms and for a moment everything was chaos.

"Darling! Why didn't you tell us you were coming?"

"I... I left in rather a hurry, Jane. I do hope I haven't inconvenienced you by descending upon you so suddenly, but I can always go to a hotel."

"Hotel? You just dare! We've been simply dying to see you. In fact, I was saying to Jim only the other day that if I didn't receive a more explicit letter from you soon I would go to Rome myself and see how you were getting along."

She held Caroline a little away from her and Caroline tried to evade her searching eyes, but Jane's womanly perception noted immediately the too-bright eyes and the near-tremulous mouth which was being set, unsuccessfully, into a firm bright smile. A look of deep concern crossed over her face at these signs of unhappiness and with an imperceptible nod in her husband's direction to tell him to keep out of the way, she led Caroline gently into a tiny sitting-room and sat her down in a comfortable chair. She pulled a chair near to Caroline and, when she was settled, said, "All right, darling. Do you want to talk about it?"

Caroline should have been used to Jane's forthright way of going straight to the heart of a problem and bringing it out into the open, but her friend's sudden attack unnerved her and, with a cry of heartbreak,

she slipped from her chair on to her knees and buried her face in Jane's lap, then sobbed out the whole sorry story into her willing ear.

When-'she had finished and the sobs had ceased to tear through her racked frame Jane picked up her chin between her two fingers and looked down at her in amazement.

"Do you mean to tell me you love that husband of yours and yet you've left that Candida woman with a clear field? I'm ashamed of you, Caroline! I thought you had more spunk!"

Caroline looked aghast. She had expected sympathy and soothing words, but Jane left her in no doubt that she considered her to be weak and a coward for running away.

"How could I stay?" she asked, a vein of indignation running through her voice at the injustice of her friend's attack. "He'll despise me!"

Jane hid a smile of triumph at her show of temper. She had deliberately provoked her into this show of spirit because she had realized that it would take very little to make her break down completely. This was more like the Caroline she knew - the slip of a girl with an indomitable spirit. She could not suppress a broad smile, and Caroline looked at her with suspicion.

"Why, you schemer, you!" The dullness of her eyes lit with the beginning of a sparkle. "You tried deliberately to annoy me, didn't you?"

"Yes, darling. And you must admit you feel all the better for it. Am I right?"

She waited for an answer, and Caroline began to smile, a weak smile, like the sun struggling through layers of cloud, but it was a beginning, and Jane was well satisfied.

In the days which followed she provided the tonic that Caroline needed to lift her from the depths of depression which came over her at the least provocation.

A familiar giggle of laughter from one of the twins could twist a knife in her heart as it brought back memories of baby Vito. The sight of a tall figure striding away in the distance was enough to set her heart fluttering and her nerves tingling until she realized that it was not Domenico but simply a passing stranger. The hurt in her heart did not get any lighter, but gradually she learned to hide it, even from Jane. She put on a show of being gay and carefree as she played with the twins and chatted with their parents, as she had in the days before her marriage.

She had been with them for nearly four weeks and she did not want to outstay her welcome. She suggested to Jane that it was time for her to get a job and a place of her own. Jane pleaded with her to stay, but she was adamant. She knew that Jim had waited a long time to have his family with him and that, although he was as insistent as Jane that she could never be unwelcome, her presence in his home for an indefinite period would be an unfair imposition on his good nature. So she began to plan. The first thing she must do, she decided, was to let Mr. Wilkins know that Dorinda was no longer lost, and then, as she thought of Mr. Wilkins for the first time since her return to England, she remembered that he was still holding for her the money from the sale of her home and furniture. She felt light-headed with relief as she recalled that she had told him she would contact him when she wanted the money sent to her. What a godsend it would be to her now!

The next day she travelled to the small town where Mr. Wilkins had his office. She was tempted to call to see Aline and her husband, but decided against it as the thought of answering the questions they were sure to ask her about Domenico was too much like probing a recent

wound. She went straight to Mr. Wilkins' office and, when she had given her name, was ushered into his austere presence.

He peeped at her over his ridiculous spectacles when she went forward to greet him, and his first words came as a shock.

"Have you seen your husband, young lady?"

"No," she stammered, and then in a panicky voice, "Do you mean to say he's in England?"

"He most certainly is," he answered disapprovingly. "He was in this office more than three weeks ago asking for news of you. As you know, I could not help him, for I had no idea of your whereabouts. He left the address of the hotel at which he is staying and asked me to contact him immediately I had news of you. And, I might add," he continued with a look of grim satisfaction, "that if ever I've seen a determined man it was he. He means to leave no stone unturned until he finds you!"

She gave a gasp of dismay and put out her hand to grasp the back of a chair to stop herself from swaying. Her head was swimming alarmingly with the shock which the news had given her. She had thought she need never see him again, and that their individual solicitors would carry out, between them, all the necessary dealings which would be needed to have their marriage annulled.

"You mustn't tell him I've been here, Mr. Wilkins," she entreated. "Please! I don't want to see him ever again!" She was as white as a sheet when she said this, and Mr. Wilkins hurriedly grabbed a chair and pushed her into it before ringing for his secretary to bring a glass of water.

When she had had a few sips and the room had stopped whirling around her she begged him again not to communicate with Domenico.

"But, my dear," he cleared his throat in embarrassment, "I really think you ought to see him and get whatever is wrong between you sorted out. Even if - and I don't believe for one moment that such is the case - but even if there is no hope of a reconciliation, you must meet to discuss what settlement he is prepared to make for you and you must let him know what your plans are for the future."

"I won't accept a penny from him," she answered vehemently. "And when our marriage is over he won't be responsible for me in any way, so I don't see what possible interest my future plans can be to him."

She stared him out defiantly, and he was so taken aback by her statement that he sat gaping at her with his mouth hanging open with amazement.

"Then how will you live?" he stuttered back at her. "You're not trained for a job. In fact, my girl, you are back to where you were when your poor father died — untrained and practically penniless." He shook his head as if despairing of ever making her see sense. She had a husband who, if actions were anything to go by, was eager to have her back, and yet she was stubbornly refusing to even see him.

He gave a resigned shrug and gave up wondering at the foolhardiness of the present generation, then proceeded to attend to the rest of her business, but only after having given her his reluctant promise to say nothing to Domenico if he should call again.

When she got back to the house she was trembling with reaction. After hurrying from Mr. Wilkins' office she had glanced over her shoulder every few minutes in case Domenico should be striding after her, and she had been violently startled at the sight of every tall

broad-shouldered man who had passed near her. She tried to hide from Jane the shock that she had received, and to her surprise she succeeded, for Jane had a very preoccupied manner and she had to speak to her twice before her voice penetrated her abstraction.

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling." Jane jumped. "What did you say?"

"I said," Caroline repeated patiently, "that I've seen Mr. Wilkins and it seems that I have a decent sum in the bank, so I can start looking around for somewhere to live."

This seemed to jerk Jane right out of her day-dreams, for she entreated her earnestly, "Not yet, Caroline. Wait just a little longer."

"But why, Jane? I can't put it off for ever and, goodness knows, you've been an absolute angel to have me for so long. I simply can't impose upon you any longer."

"Just a little longer, Caroline. Please!"

She was bewildered, but decided to give in to her friend's plea. Another few days would not make much difference anyway, so she shrugged and said, "All right, Jane, if you insist. But I hope Jim won't think he's got a permanent lodger."

Jane's beaming face and happy rejoinder, "He won't!" made Caroline look at her suspiciously, but her expression gave nothing away and she returned her look blandly.

Jim remarked upon Jane's expression as being like that of a cat who had eaten the cream, when he came home later that evening, but even he, though he teased her unmercifully about what he called her "complacent feline" look, got no more satisfaction than Caroline had.

She decided to make no mention of Domenico's presence in the country or that he had been looking for her. She wanted time to think about Mr. Wilkins' insistence that she must meet Domenico some time or other, before anything could be decided between them, but two or three days passed and she had still not nerved herself to accept the fact that she must see and speak to him once more. She had thought that the hateful wrench of parting from him was behind her and she doubted if she had the courage to meet him, just to go through the same agony of parting yet again.

She was no nearer a decision on the day that Jane asked her if she would mind baby-sitting for them that evening as she had just received a delayed invitation to a party which was being held that evening. The friend, whose invitation it was, had no idea that they had a guest staying with them and, strangely, Jane did not immediately suggest that she should phone her and ask if she might bring Caroline along. The omission brought Caroline a small twinge of hurt, for she was beginning to feel a little sensitive about her protracted visit and wondered if, perhaps, they were looking for an excuse to be alone for a little while, but she immediately pushed this idea out of her mind as being unworthy, for she had no doubt that both Jane's and Jim's repeated assurances that she could never wear out her welcome were genuine. So she gladly agreed to stay with the twins that evening and insisted that Jane went out that afternoon to have her hair done and to have a leisurely wander around the shops, something which it was impossible for her to do with the twins in tow.

Jim came home early and in high spirits, and when he had spruced himself up ready for the evening he confessed that he felt like a young man on his first date, it was so long since they had been able to "live it up" as they had since Caroline had arrived to baby-sit for them. She welcomed this assurance that her presence was of some use, and waved them off gaily, telling them not to dare to come back before morning.

She ran up the stairs where the twins lay sleeping peacefully to change out of her suit. She put on a pair of jeans and a short-sleeved pink jumper, her favourite outfit for lounging, and as she was running the comb through her bright hair she heard the doorbell. She grinned to herself, thinking that it would be Jane, who always seemed to forget something when she went out, much to her husband's annoyance, and went downstairs to open the door. She was still smiling broadly, ready to tease Jane about her forgetfulness, when she opened it.

"Jane, you ...!" Then she stopped and clutched at the door-frame as a hand seemed to tighten around her heart.

"Domenico!" she choked out.

He stood there gravely and waited. When she made no move and did not speak, he forced a smile, a rather humourless smile, and asked her quietly, "May I come in?"

"Yes... Yes, of course." She hardly knew what she was saying as she moved like an automaton towards the sitting-room and sank down upon the couch, grateful that her unsteady legs had carried her that far. Domenico followed her and took a seat opposite. She looked at him squarely for the first time, and was shocked by the signs of strain around his mouth and by the shadows, which had always lurked in his fine eyes, but which were now there in full force. He moved his head as he searched in his pocket for his cigarette case and she saw a glint of silver in the dark wings of hair at his temples. The force of her love for him swelled up like a tide, but she willed herself to speak calmly.

"How did you find me?"

"How?" he repeated harshly. "By scouring the country for the better part of a month and by pestering your friends and acquaintances for news of you. I finally had a letter from your sister suggesting that I try

to find Jane as she was fairly certain that you would be with her. And she was right. I called here a few days ago and saw Jane and managed to convince her that it was imperative that I talk to you. Then she promised to arrange for me to see you alone. We have to talk, Caroline. You realize that, don't you?"

"Yes... I suppose so." She could not blame Jane for her deception. She realized that she had done what she thought was best, and now that he was here she was not sorry. The meeting had to come and she could get it over with and say goodbye to him for what would really be the last time.

"First of all," Domenico went on hardly, "I want to apologize for the way in which I treated you. When Dorinda told me what you had been through on her behalf I..." Words failed him. He stood up, his back to her, and ground out his cigarette in an ashtray in front of him. She could not see his face, but she could see a muscle twitching in his cheek and his hands were clenched tightly as he fought for composure before going on.

"You married me because you were afraid I would take the baby away from you when I found out that you were not his mother. Is that so?"

"Yes, Domenico, I did. I'm so sorry I had to deceive you, but I thought that if you supposed Vito was my baby and that I had been in love with his father you wouldn't try to separate us. I hated myself for the trick I played upon you, but I had to do it, Domenico. It was the only way!"

He was tense with anger as he lashed out, "And how do you propose that we spend the- rest of our lives? I impressed upon you the fact that there is no divorce in my country. Am I supposed to live alone in Italy while you reside here, in England? Or are you prepared to come back with me and to try to salvage something from this mess?"

The hurt in his eyes belied the anger in his voice as he said this, and Caroline jumped eagerly at the chance to tell him that he need not put up with her for much longer.

"But don't you see, Domenico?" Her eyes shone earnestly as she leaned forward to state her case. "We can get an annulment. That's the reason I wouldn't let you ...!" She pulled up short and a cloud of colour stained her cheeks as she tried to think of a way to put her thoughts into words.

She tried again. "That's why - in Paris, and at the villa —"

She could not go on. Domenico had no intention, it seemed, of helping her out, although she could tell that he knew exactly what she was trying to say.

"You wish to marry someone else?" he rasped.

"No, of course not! But don't you see, Domenico," she almost stamped her foot with rage at his stupidity, "don't you see that if we get an annulment you'll be free to marry Candida?"

He looked at her in astonishment. "I have not the slightest wish to marry Candida," he answered coldly.

She took a step back. "But you love her, Domenico, I know you do. That evening when I saw you kissing her, I knew then that you loved her."

His black eyebrows drew together in a frown and an embarrassed look crossed his features. "If you had looked a little closer that night, Caroline, you might have noticed that I was more kissed than kissing," he retorted dryly.

"But you were out with her every night - Jeffrey told me. And that evening when you phoned me before I went to the party, she was with you then. I heard her!"

Her pansy-blue eyes looked accusingly into his dark ones, daring him to deny it.

He gave a sigh of exasperation and sat down beside her, taking hold of her shoulders in his firm hands as if to emphasize the point which he was about to make.

"Look, Caroline, I don't know what Candida has to do with our affairs, but it seems that we must dispose of her before we can get down to facts. She is a director of the firm as well as being one of the family, and while I was away she had managed to get her affairs in a terrible mess. She asked me to straighten them out for her, which entailed a lot of work, and the only time I had to spare was in the evening. You must remember that the business had been neglected during my absence and the work had piled up for me at the office, so I had no option but to work with her each evening. I admit," he added, rather shamefaced, "that she began to get rather possessive on the night of the dinner party, but, if you had waited, you would have heard me making it quite plain to her that my interest in her was solely of a business nature. I have never thought of her in that way. To me she has always been the playmate who shared my childhood, and nothing else. Does that satisfy you?"

A wild sweet hope began to struggle for existence in Caroline's heart. She looked up at him with dawning hope and the softness of her eyes disarmed him. With a groan of anguish he tightened his hold upon her and pleaded:

"Please come home with me, Caroline! These past few weeks have been hell. I promise not to make any claim upon you if you will just say you will give me another chance. I know I don't deserve it, in fact

I could not really blame you if you said no, but," his voice dropped to a whisper, "I love you so much, darling. So much that I can't bear the thought of a future without you!"

Humbleness from Domenico, her arrogant Roman, was more than she could bear. She wanted him badly, but not like this! Domenico, who had never pleaded in his life before, was saying that he would be content with any crumb that she might feel inclined to throw him!

With a wildly beating heart she melted towards him. She lifted her soft lips to his and murmured as she did so:

"Oh, Domenico, my dearest love!"

For one stunned moment he looked at her uncomprehendingly, and then, with a swift movement, his arms slipped from her shoulders to encircle her slim waist and he pulled her forward into the haven of his arms. His lips came down upon hers in a searing kiss that lifted them both into an ecstatic world in which there was room for only themselves. Desperately, they clung together as if to expiate all the hurt and pain that had gone before, and their kisses were a dedication to one mother that, come what may, they would never hurt each other again.

Domenico, when the first surge of passion had abated enough to allow them to speak coherently, found his voice first. Still holding her as if afraid to let her go, he charged her dazedly, "Do you mean to tell me that I have suffered all these months, and yet you love me?"

She twined her arms around his neck and snuggled into him with an assurance which delighted him, and answered:

"I've loved you since that night in Paris, my darling, but I dared not let you see it. When did you fall in love with me?"

He smiled down at her, the shadows gone for ever from his eyes, and told her, "The first time was in a garden, my dearest love. You were wearing the same monstrous outfit as you are wearing now, but it made no difference. I fell in love with a harum-scarum in jeans and with the bluest eyes and most heavenly figure that any man could wish to behold."

She began to make excuses for her informal dress, but he stopped her with a kiss which threatened to draw her soul from her body. When he lifted his head he continued, "The second time I fell a little deeper in love, and it was on the day that we were married. But in Paris ...! In Paris, I was completely lost. I carry a picture about in my mind of that night which will never leave me."

She blushed a brilliant scarlet as she recalled her confusion at waking up in a black diaphanous nightdress, and she had no doubt, now, who had put her to bed that night.

His loving smile chased away her shyness and when he demanded that she kiss him she told him before obliging:

"It shall be done, my lord and master! I'm yours to obey!"

Suddenly the laughter went out of his eyes and he pulled her closer with an almost desperate fervour. She withstood his long searching gaze unflinchingly, her love shining unashamedly from her eyes, and was moved almost to tears when he whispered solemnly, "If I had to choose one moment to live within my heart it would be this one, my darling. All my life I have searched for you, and if I had to suffer to find you then I accept it. I do not deserve your sweetness and your love, but all my life will be dedicated to taking care of you."

Her heart was too full of words and she was saved the necessity of a reply when his lips claimed hers tenderly. She had no doubts left. He was hers completely, and she gave silent thanks for his love. All the

torture of the past weeks was forgotten as his love was communicated to her in abundance.

He nuzzled the white column of her neck with searching lips and she felt him begin to tremble. He was demanding her complete surrender and he admitted to her hoarsely, "I am jealous of every man who has ever kissed you, my heart's darling. Tell me again that you love me!"

She sensed again his insecurity and her whole generous nature went out to him.

"Domenico," he looked up into her serious eyes. "Don't be jealous of my father."

"Your father...?"

"He is the only other man who has ever kissed me."

To her ^dismay, he went white and looked away from her. He was humbled by the thought of how his cruel kisses must have offended her gentle innocence. The slow tide of colour crept under his skin as evidence of his mortification. She caught him to her with a sob of compassion and kissed him until the ardour returned to his embrace and he no longer felt the lash of his own condemnation. He held her heart in his hand and was convinced, at last, that she was his alone.

"Do you know where we are going, my love?" he murmured in her ear.

She shook her head bemusedly, not caring so long as she was with him.

"We are going to Paris-on our honeymoon. Only this time it will be different. *Very, very* different!"

She gave a sigh of contentment and said with supreme happiness,
"Oh, yes, Domenico! Please!"