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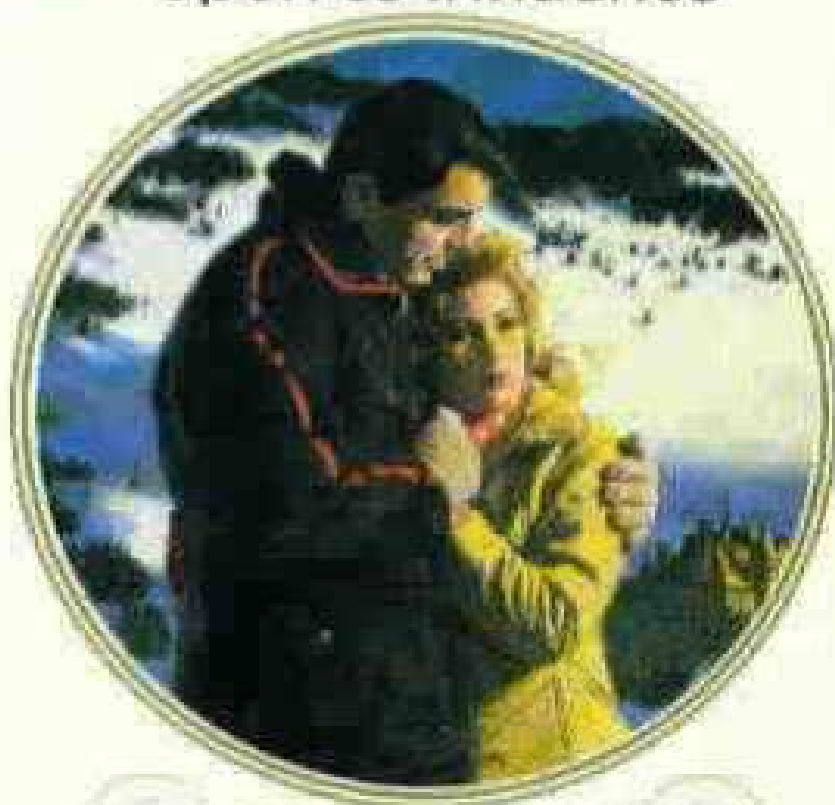
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*Harlequin Presents...*



**FRANCES  
RODING**

open to influence



# **OPEN TO INFLUENCE**

**Frances Roding**

Was she consigned to a life of a spinster?

Rosemary Stewart loved her orphaned nephew, Kit, as if he were her own son. When Kit's uncle, Nicholas Powers, stated his intention to challenge Rosemary's legal guardianship, she was desperately afraid she might lose to the powerful English millionaire.

So she agreed to sign the outrageous contract Nicholas proposed, believing it was the only way she could ensure that Kit would have all the love and caring a young child needed.

But she hadn't considered that she would ever regret signing away her rights to a life--and love--of her own.

## CHAPTER ONE

ROSEMARY glanced nervously at her watch, absently smoothing back the soft curls of honey-gold hair that fell over her shoulder, then looked down at the dark-haired little boy crouching on the floor, deeply absorbed in his game.

In another ten minutes Lesley would be here, and she could leave Kit safely with the nanny that her nephew shared with two other small children. Normally Lesley didn't work on a Saturday. Today, though, she had made an exception.

The doorbell jangled, and even though she had been expecting it, Rosemary tensed, her eyes widening slightly before she went to let the other girl in.

'Hi . . . hope I'm not late, the traffic was appalling,' Lesley commented cheerfully, as she smiled at Kit and took off her coat. There are times when I wonder why I live in London, and busy Saturdays are definitely one of them!'

<sup>4</sup>'I'm sorry to take up one of your free days, Lesley,' Rosemary apologised.

That's OK. From your message I gather it's something of an emergency?' Lesley glanced curiously at the fair-haired girl bending to find an all-important piece of plastic that Kit had mislaid. The other two families she nannied for comprised career-minded mothers and fathers climbing up corporate ladders who could easily be slotted into a definite pigeonhole, but Rosemary and Kit were different.

For a start, there was about them both a terrible vulnerability; an awareness of past unhappiness and a closeness they seemed to share which sometimes reminded her of two defenceless children clinging together. Although, like herself, Rosemary was in her early to

mid-twenties, she had an innocence, an unawareness that sometimes made Lesley want to urge her to be less giving and more guarded.

'An emergency . . . Yes, it is rather.' Now for the first time Lesley did see a rather worried look in Rosemary's eyes. 'I'm going to see Kit's uncle,' she confided quietly.

'Kit's uncle?' Lesley frowned and stared at her. 'But I thought you and Kit were all alone in the world. I'm sure Marcia told me that Kit's parents were your only family . . . '

'Well, yes . . . Look, come into the kitchen and I'll make us both a cup of coffee. I've got a few minutes before my taxi arrives.'

With the kitchen door open both girls could keep an eye on Kit, who, oblivious to their conversation, was still playing happily with his toys.

'He's such a good little soul,' Rosemary sighed.

'Yes, he's lucky to have you, Rosemary. Many children of his age who've lost their parents as he lost his can become very difficult and withdrawn, all the more so because it's so hard to explain to them what's happened. But Kit has adjusted very well, thanks to you.'

'Well, I suppose it helped that I lived with Adam and Belle, so I was already part of his family,' Rosemary said modestly, her eyes darkening slightly.

Even now, eighteen months later, she had not really come to terms with the finality of her brother's and sister-in-law's deaths.

They had been so happy when they set out for the airport. Adam had been taking Belle to Paris for the weekend—a special wedding anniversary present—to the city where they had first met. Only the plane had crashed and everyone on board had been killed.

'You were telling me about Kit's uncle,' Lesley prompted her, seeing the unhappiness clouding her eyes.

'Yes . . . Belle's twin brother . . . '

'You've never mentioned him before.'

'No, he and Belle were estranged; she left home and went to Paris, and it was there that she met Adam. I know she wrote to her brother after Kit was born, but she never received any reply.'

'Mmm. I wonder why he's got in touch with you now.' Lesley looked sharply at Rosemary's pale face. 'You *are* Kit's legal guardian, aren't you, Rosemary?' A sudden suspicion seizing her.

'Oh yes. Because of the problems Adam and I had when our parents died, he and Belle made sure of that.'

'Oh well, perhaps he's had a change of heart and wants a family reconciliation. Where does he live?'

'In France, I believe.' Rosemary saw the expression on Lesley's face and her own relaxed a little. 'I'm to meet him at the New Piccadilly Hotel; apparently he has a suite there.'

Lesley gave a soundless whistle. 'Wow! He sounds like a very wealthy man.'

'I believe he's a millionaire,' Rosemary told her tonelessly.

Unlike Lesley, she was not impressed or awed by the knowledge; she had learned from Belle that love and caring were far more important than money. Belle had told her before she died that she had been happier in her few years with Adam than at any other time in her life, and Rosemary believed her.

'And you've no idea why he wants to see you?' Lesley pressed.

'None at all.'

Rosemary's voice was slightly cool. She liked Lesley very much, but it was not her way to confide freely in others, and yet her innate honesty and openness made it difficult for her to be deliberately evasive. She didn't know why Nicholas Powers wanted to see her, it was true, but surely it could only be because of Kit, and that alone was more than enough to make frissons of alarm and fear run up and down her spine.

'So who is he, then, this mysterious uncle of Kit's? Anyone I might know?' joked Lesley.

'Nicholas Powers,' Rosemary told her tonelessly, watching as the other girl's eyes rounded.

*'The Nicholas Powers—the oil millionaire; the one who owns that fabulous valley in the French Alps? I was reading an article about him only the other day. Is it true that after his father's death Powers Oil went bankrupt? It said in this article that Nicholas Powers built it all up again, virtually from nothing. And to think that he's little Kit's uncle!'* Lesley glanced speculatively at the dark-haired little boy playing happily on the floor and added quietly, 'He isn't married, you know, and a man like that's bound to want an heir to follow him; family will be very important to him.'

Mercifully the taxi arrived before Rosemary had to answer. Bending to kiss Kit, she hurried to the front door, wishing she had not confided in Lesley. All that the other girl had said had only reinforced her own negative fears and doubts. Why had Nicholas Powers got in touch with her now—eighteen months after his sister's death?

She had already been to see Adam's solicitor about the letter, but the kindly old man who had handled their affairs when their parents died

and then later when Adam himself died had shaken his head and said that he could see nothing to worry about. It was true that the crisp, concise wording of the letter made it seem rather cold, but businessmen on the whole tended to be like that, he had assured Rosemary.

Nicholas Powers was probably just suffering from an attack of remorse and simply wanted to assure himself that his sister's child was being cared for properly. After all, he could scarcely want to care for Kit himself; the lifestyle of a bachelor millionaire could hardly be adapted to cope with the routine and needs of a very small child.

Rosemary had allowed herself to be convinced that her fears were groundless, but now, as the taxi sped away from her small Wandsworth house towards the centre of the city, she was not so sure.

'Tosh place, this new hotel,' the cab driver remarked in a friendly fashion. 'Got a very fancy health club there, they have—swimming pool, gym, the lot.'

Rosemary gave him a rather absent-minded smile. She remembered reading somewhere about the fabulous sums of money that had been spent in refurbishing the old hotel, but since she did not frequent such luxurious places, she had scarcely paid it much attention. Looking after Kit kept her slim and supple enough and until quite recently she had had to cope with a full-time job as well, but now she had given that up. She had had to. Her mouth twisted in a rather bitter smile. She was twenty-four years old and until six months ago had never been in love. It seemed ironic that when she had been on the verge of falling in love, it had been with a married man—her boss, no less. She had fought against her feelings, of course, but her own nature was such that she couldn't stay in her job. Rosemary's was not an aggressive personality, but she possessed a certain deep inner strength beneath her gentle exterior, and to her it was almost as wrong to allow herself



to love a man who she knew was committed to someone else as it would have been to have tried to take him away from his wife.

She had been left with only one way out: she had had to resign. And soon she would have to start looking for another job. It was true that she had some money, some savings put on one side, and then there was of course the compensation money Kit had received from the airline, but that was carefully invested for his future, and Rosemary was determined not to touch a penny of it.

'Here we are then, miss.'

A liveried doorman came to open the door for her, and trying to subdue her feeling of trepidation, she went in through the revolving door and across the marble- tiled foyer to the reception desk.

A neatly uniformed girl told her that Mr Powers was expecting her and that someone would show her up to his suite.

The suite was on the fifth floor. Rosemary followed her guide down what seemed like miles of blue and terracotta carpeting until he stopped at last outside one of the doors.

Inserting a special key, he opened it for her, and said: 'Mr Powers will be with you shortly, miss,' then he stepped back, indicating that Rosemary was to precede him into the room beyond.

It had been recently redecorated—as part of the hotel's general refurbishment, Rosemary supposed—and in keeping with the blue and terracotta scheme in the corridor, the walls were covered in a softly speckled pale peach paper, with a darker toning border just below the plaster cornice.

A luxuriously thick blue and terracotta carpet covered the floor; a coal-effect fire burned in the marble fireplace. Silk-upholstered furniture in a deep French blue defied Rosemary to dare to sit on it

and crease its immaculate surface, and even the casual cushions in terracotta and peach heaped on the sofa looked as though they had been carefully arranged in just that way.

The bookcases either side of the fireplace, the desk and the table and chairs were all either antiques or excellent reproductions. Did hotels have antiques? Surely not—and yet there was something about this furniture, about the patina and the style . . . impulsively Rosemary ran a finger along the silky wood of one of the bookcases; it felt warm and rich to her touch, and yet the overall effect of the room was repressive and overawing. Even the paintings on the wall whispered wealth. Rosemary loved beautiful things, but this room, despite its fire, despite its warmly vivid colours, was cold and austere, or was she simply allowing the image of Nicholas Powers which she had gained from Belle to colour her reactions?

Belle had rarely spoken about her brother. Rosemary knew that she loved him; she had that sort of instinct about people that sometimes enabled her to see below the surface; and she had often sensed Belle's love and pain. It had been after Kit's birth that Belle had confided to her about her own childhood and about her brother.

'Nicholas is obsessed with money,' she had said. 'He will never believe that love is far more important than wealth. He will never forgive me for running away from home and marrying Adam, I know that. My mother and her family have destroyed whatever compassion and understanding he might once have had. Nicholas doesn't believe in love; and he'll never know what it's like to be loved, because he won't let himself be loved. For Nicholas the only reality is what he can reach out and touch. Love is an emotion he won't admit exists. He once told me that he'll never marry; that no woman will be allowed to do to him what our mother did to our father. I feel so sorry for him,' she had said.

Just thinking of her sister-in-law and the happy lives the four of them had shared before the accident was enough to bring a lump of emotion to Rosemary's throat, and just as though he knew of her psychological disadvantage, it was at that moment, as she was battling against the pain of her memories, that Nicholas Powers chose to walk into the room.

Physically he was everything she had ever imagined from Belle's descriptions and more: tall—taller even than Adam, who had just topped six foot. Broad, too, with a powerful pair of shoulders; forbidding and yet also in some strange way compelling, with the strongly carved features that Belle had once described to her, telling her rather wryly that Nicholas was considered a throwback to the wild gypsy strain that had entered the family many years before when one of their ancestors had married a gypsy girl.

However, he did not look gypsyish to Rosemary; there was nothing raffish or wild about his expensively tailored clothes and closed, hard face. Instead he reminded her somehow of some of the ancient Egyptian tomb paintings, perhaps because of his complete immobility, perhaps simply because of the arrogant maleness of his cold expression.

Only his eyes reminded her of her sister-in-law. They were the same incredible mixture of green and blue, but whereas in Belle that deep aqua colour had been warm and loving, in her twin brother it was freezingly cold, like ice over the incredible depths of water in which the blue of the sky was mixed with the green of the water and then frozen.

'Miss Stewart.'

Unlike Belle's, his English was not accented, not even with an American accent, she noted. Its crisp authority somehow reduced her very much to the state of lowly supplicant, and that was something

she most definitely did not like. Her body stiffened in proud defiance even though inwardly she was tremulous with dread.

'I have ordered afternoon tea for you; it should be here soon. Please come and sit down.'

Rosemary walked on wobbly legs over to one of the silk-covered armchairs, and subsided into its softness, noticing that he preferred to take one of the harder dining chairs, almost as though he disdained the soft comfort of the armchair.

His dry, 'You like the apartment?' made her realise that she had been staring for rather a long time, and collecting herself, she shrugged.

'I don't think I should like to live in a hotel, it seems very impersonal,' she responded stubbornly, refusing to be overawed by her luxurious surroundings.

'They have an excellent health club here; that's why I use it. I travel a good deal to many of the world's major cities, it would be impractical to own and maintain homes in all of them. I do have a home, though . . . '

'Yes, in the French Alps, the Val des Neiges . . . ' Rosemary interrupted impulsively.

His eyes narrowed slightly.

'How do you know about that?' His voice was sharp as though he resented her knowledge.

'Belle told me, of course. She said it was a beautiful place, but very remote, and cut off from the rest of the world in the winter.'

'Not nowadays . . . with a helicopter it is possible to fly in and out of the valley almost all the year round. What else did Belle tell you?'

'About the valley, or about you?' Rosemary asked shrewdly.

'Both.'

There was an inflexibility about his voice that warned her that he meant to discover *all* that Belle had told her. Taking a deep breath, she said lightly, 'Well, she told me that by some quirk of ancient French Law, the valley, its chateau and its lands have retained the legal written status of a principality, even though in the very early part of this century the then owner ceded all his rights as absolute ruler of the principality and accepted the sovereignty and protection of the French Government.' She paused, and when he made no comment went on, 'I know that your father bought the valley from the Government and that the people who live there are very independent and proud. Belle told me that there's a legend that they're descended from a gypsy tribe who lost their way and were trapped in the valley one winter. She said the legend goes on that when the spring came and the people saw how beautiful the valley was they decided to stay. She told me that up until quite recently many of the old people spoke a strange language that's said to be derived from the Romany and that several renowned anthropologists have made studies of the valley and its people, and have confirmed that there's probably some truth in the legend.'

'Full marks, Miss Stewart,' Nicholas Powers broke in sarcastically. 'Go to the top of the class. Now what did my sister tell you about me?'

What would he say if she told him that Belle had told he was cold and proud, unable to love anyone, solitary and alone, and that in spite of everything she had felt deeply sorry for him? He wouldn't like it, Rosemary guessed intuitively.

'Can't you remember? Shall I start you off? Surely she must have told you about our parents? About our mother—the mother who left us, abandoned us?'

Rosemary bent her head and bit her lip. Of course Belle had told her.

'Yes,' she admitted huskily, 'Belle told me about her . . . about your mother.'

'And about her brothers,' he pressed inexorably, 'about her family. Did she tell you about them too? Did she?'

He was treating her as though she was a criminal! Rosemary thought indignantly.

'Yes, she did. She told me everything. How your mother left your father and went back to her family in Texas. She told me all about the divorce, and how your father was forced to hand over the rights of some of his oil fields to your mother, and how she and her family managed to get the American courts to transfer the title of the American and Middle Eastern oil fields to her.'

'Go on,' he demanded harshly when she suddenly faltered. 'You haven't finished, have you?'

For some reason she felt as though she were guilty of the most intrusive and horridly avid sort of gloating over someone else's misfortune, whereas nothing could have been further from the truth. All her sympathy had been with Nicholas, Belle and their father, when Belle told her the sad little story. She did not know why their mother had left their father, but she could see in her rejection of her children and her husband a bitterness that had shown in the way she had destroyed everything her husband had worked for.

'Go on, let's hear it all.' His face contorted briefly. 'God knows I should be used to hearing it by now; the Press regurgitate it with great relish at every conceivable opportunity.'

'After the court proceedings all your father had left was the Val des Neiges and some North Sea Oil leases--' Rosemary faltered, willed to speak by the fierce concentration of his attention.

'And the only reason my mother left him with those was because the leases were worthless, and because the property came under the French courts and not the American,' he put in sardonically.

'Your father . . . your father had a stroke and died not long afterwards, leaving you and Belle to be brought up by friends of your father.' Rosemary swallowed and said huskily, 'Do you . . . does your mother . . . '

'We've never spoken to one another since the day she walked out of the Chateau,' he told her bitingly, 'and I for one have no desire for that state of affairs to change. She miscalculated when she left my father with the North Sea oil leases; I inherited them from him, and they enabled me to build up Powers Oil again, and you may be sure that no woman will ever be allowed to take it away from me, to destroy me the way she destroyed my father.'

Rosemary felt her heart miss a beat. Belle had said that Nicholas would never marry, and now she knew why. She supposed it was logical that a teenager who had seen his father destroyed by his mother would react like that, but he wasn't a teenager any more, he was a man, an extremely hard and bitter man, but surely also a very physically sensual one, if the gossip columns were to be believed?

A discreet knock on the door heralded the arrival of a waiter with their afternoon tea, but Rosemary was too nervously overwrought to eat. She still didn't know why Nicholas Powers had summoned her here to his London apartment, but every instinct she possessed told her to be on her guard. And he had hardly been forthcoming or friendly—calling her Miss Stewart when they were virtually related!

She poured herself a cup of tea, and then, when his eyebrows lifted, poured one for him. Fortunately the teapot was not one of those with a spout that insisted on dribbling. As she handed him the cup she was careful to avoid coming into any sort of physical contact with him. Despite the warmth of the room she had the idea that he would be cold to touch.

Was he going to tell her why he had summoned her here like this, or was he playing a waiting game, waiting for her to ask him?

'You didn't bring the child with you.'

Rosemary put down her teacup.

'You didn't ask me to,' she told him evenly. She saw the look in his eyes and added defensively, 'He's being properly taken care of, I've left him with . . . '

'Miss Lyons, the nanny whom you share with two other families. Yes, I know.' His eyes narrowed as he saw her expression. 'You see, Miss Stewart? It isn't a pleasant sensation to discover that one's life is an open book to others, is it?'

'How did you know about Lesley?' she asked uncertainly. He had no Belle, after all, to tell him all about her life.

For the first time she saw him smile, if the humourless way his mouth curled could be called a smile. He had nice teeth, though, even and white, and one of the front ones was slightly chipped.

She warmed to that tiny little flaw; somehow it made him seem more human—more vulnerable, if such a word could ever be used in describing such a self-contained and impervious man. She was just comforting herself with this thought when he blasted that comfort away from her, his voice as cold and humourless as his smile, as he informed her brutally, 'I know virtually everything there is *to* know



about you, Miss Stewart; I know all about the mutual dependence you and my nephew seem to have on one another. Quite a charmed little circle, so I've been told—touching, in fact, if one allowed one's emotions to be touched by such juvenile devotion. You cling together like a pair of lost children.'

'Kit *is* a child,' Rosemary reminded him, hating him for the way he was sneering at her.

'But you aren't, are you? Oh yes, I know all about you; about the way you live, the sort of person you are. You see, for the last few months I've been getting regular reports on you.'

Reports? At first she didn't understand, not because she was stupid, but simply because what he was saying was so alien to her way of life. When it did finally dawn on her what he meant, she looked at him in shocked pallor, her eyes hauntingly violet in the small oval of her face.

The look of shock and pain in those eyes might have melted the heart of a less hard man, but Nicholas Powers simply stared at her with remote satisfaction. He had got the upper hand now. Good . . . that was exactly what he wanted.

'You mean you've paid people to spy on me?' Rosemary asked huskily.

'In essence, yes.' He seemed more amused than ashamed. 'Although "spying" is rather an emotive way to describe the relatively simple task of collating information about the way you live.'

Shock gave way to anger as she surveyed the cold remoteness of his face.

'And what have you managed to learn from this information you've had "collated"? Belle told us that you lived like a hermit in the remote

towers of your own private kingdom.' Her soft mouth curled slightly as she attempted to mimic his derisive smile. 'I suppose the only way for people like you to experience life is to live it second-hand, so to speak; but if I may say so, you . . . '

'You may say whatever you wish, Miss Stewart,' he cut in brutally, 'but I must warn you that if you continue in this ridiculous vein for much longer I shall have to inform my legal advisers that I consider you mentally as well as financially incapable of looking after my sister's child.' His mouth curled cruelly as he looked down into her stricken face. 'And for your information,' he added softly, 'your "life", as you are pleased to call it, is so uninteresting that anyone trying to live it at second-hand, including myself, must surely die of boredom.

'You should be glad that I want to take the child off your hands, Miss Stewart. That way you will be able to live a far more normal life than you do at present. There can't be many European women who are still virgins at the age of twenty-four. And you aren't, as I had supposed, so plain that you couldn't attract a man.'

Rosemary could hardly believe what she was hearing. She stood up on shaking legs, feeling herself trembling with rage and panic, totally swept away by events which she no longer seemed in the least capable of controlling.

'Just because I don't have a boyfriend it doesn't mean that I'm still a virgin!' she raged furiously, taking issue on the least important aspect of his speech first.

'No?' One dark eyebrow rose, the ice-green eyes studying her emotionlessly. 'If you mean to imply that you prefer your own sex, it is really foolish of you to tell me so. The courts do not look at all generously at women of your ... er . . . persuasion. Gloria Vanderbilt's mother lost control of her daughter and the Vanderbilt fortune for little more than a suggestion that...'

'I mean no such thing! Why did you want to see me . . . what do you want from me?'

He looked pleased by her panic and fear.

'Why, Miss Stewart, I'm surprised at you,' he mocked sardonically, looking her up and down in such a way that the whole of her petite five-foot-odd frame trembled with outrage. 'I was told you were quite intelligent. I should have thought it was obvious what I want. I want my nephew ... I want Kit.'

Rosemary staggered slightly and then sank back on to the settee, as her legs refused to support her any longer.

'You want *Kit!*' she whispered disbelievingly. '*You want Kit!* Just like that. He isn't a . . . thing ... a possession, he's a child, a living, breathing, feeling human being!' she cried as her rage and pain found expression in her voice.

'And he is also my nephew and heir,' Nicholas Powers told her icily, leaning towards her, his hands braced either side of her on the settee, so that she felt as though she were imprisoned.

When her anger was hot, his was cold, like death, she thought, shivering in shocked reaction to her own unusual outburst of temper. She willed herself to look into the dark face above her own, trying not to flinch back from the freezing look in his eyes.

'Really, you know,' he told her softly, 'the more I listen to your hysterical outbursts, the more convinced I am that you are unfit to have charge of the boy.'

Rosemary jolted upright.

'I'm his legal guardian,' she whispered huskily. 'You can't do that. Adam and Belle . . . ' She swallowed nervously and then continued as

bravely as she could. 'Belle didn't want her child to be brought up the way she was.'

'With every material comfort?'

'Without love,' Rosemary told him, watching his mouth thin, and his eyes harden. 'Anyway, legally . . . '

'Oh, in the eyes of the British courts you may be his guardian, but do you think even they would uphold your claim when they know he is my heir? Do you realise what that entails, what dangers he could be in, what sort of education he will require in order to take my place? What can you give him, Miss Stewart, compared with all that I have?' Nicholas demanded arrogantly.

Rosemary didn't hesitate.

'I can give him love,' she told him fiercely. 'I can give him something you know nothing about. Something Belle wanted for him ... I won't let you take him away from me!'

He levered himself away from her abruptly, his mouth curving into a cynical sneer.

'Do you honestly think you can stop me? I have never allowed anyone or anything to stop me getting what I want, Miss Stewart.'

Rosemary could believe it, but she wasn't going to let him browbeat her—not when Kit's whole future was at stake.

'Do *you* honestly think I would let you take Kit away from me to be brought up in a . . . in a succession of hotel suites. No matter how luxurious they might be, they're not the right environment for a child. They need a settled background, a proper home.'

'I quite agree.'

For a moment she was too stunned to respond, and she thought there was just a fugitive gleam of amusement in his eyes before his expression hardened again and he continued crisply, 'Kit would be brought up in Val des Neiges . . . '

'A remote mountain valley that's cut off from the rest of the world by snow for nearly a third of the year? And who would live there with him? Who would care for him and love him? If you're so desperate for an heir, why don't you marry and have a child of your own?' she cried bitterly. 'Leave Kit and me alone. We're happy as we are!'

'But do you think he will be equally happy when he grows up and realises what you've given up on his behalf?' He looked at her and said abruptly, 'You ask me why I don't marry and have children of my own. I'll tell you why, but not now . . . not today. I should like to see Kit for myself. I want you to bring him to see me. Tomorrow, preferably ... I intend to spend most of the morning in the gym here. We could have lunch in the Club's restaurant.'

Rosemary wanted to protest that over lunch in an exclusive health club was not the ideal place to get to know a lively three-year-old, but she said nothing. It occurred to her that for her own sake it might be as well if Nicholas Powers were to be faced with the reality of what looking after an exuberant toddler could mean.

'Very well,' she agreed, 'I'll bring Kit to see you tomorrow.'

'Very wise of you,' was his only comment as he walked with her to the door.

His manners were immaculate, she noted wryly, but the man himself was as cold and remote as the peaks of the Himalayas.

Of course Lesley was eager to hear about everything, and started cross-questioning her almost the moment she stepped in the door.

'He wants to take Kit?' she frowned, and looked worriedly at Rosemary.

'He can't, of course,' Rosemary was quick to assure her. 'Legally I'm Kit's guardian.'

'In this country, yes, but I wouldn't be too sanguine about your legal position if I were you, Rosemary. Men like Nicholas Powers have ways of getting their own way. He could even abduct him,' Lesley warned her.

'No. No, he wouldn't do that.' Quite how she knew Rosemary wasn't sure; she only knew by some strange sixth sense she had about the man that Nicholas Powers would never allow himself to stoop to anything underhand. No, he had struck her as a man with too much pride for that.

## CHAPTER TWO

'BUT, ROSEMARY, I don't want to go out. I want to stay here and play with you!'

It was hard for Rosemary to steel her heart against the appeal in the winsomely pleading eyes looking into hers, especially when she herself was dreading the coming confrontation with Nicholas Powers.

She had hardly slept at all, but that didn't show in her piquant face, apart perhaps from a slight intensifying of the vulnerability shadowing her eyes.

She wasn't going to let Nicholas Powers browbeat her into giving Kit up to him. She was Kit's legal guardian, and nothing could change that. Or could it? she wondered uneasily, as she dealt with Kit's little-boy crossness with the ease of long practice. Perhaps Nicholas Powers had been right when she said that his power and money would have more influence with a court than Belle and Adam's wishes?

With gentle coaxing and teasing smiles she managed to wean Kit away from his crossness and into his outdoor clothes, in readiness for the arrival of their taxi. Some toys, judiciously chosen by Kit himself, were ready in his favourite brightly coloured carrier bag.

Not normally a vain girl, Rosemary couldn't resist the temptation to take another hurried glance into the mirror. Did she look neat and tidy enough to impress Nicholas Powers with her firmness and her determination not to relinquish Kit? Her blonde hair, normally left free to curl down on to her shoulders, was caught up in a neat French plait. She frowned anxiously as she caught sight of the shadows lingering in her eyes. She looked so pale, so . . . frail, she admitted unwillingly, but she did have a very fair skin, and she had never replaced all the weight she had lost when Belle and Adam died. Unwillingly she remembered their solicitor, Mr Brownstone,

commenting unhappily at the time of their deaths that she looked barely more than a child herself.

But she wasn't a child; hardly, at twenty-four, and yet she knew already that in many ways she was no match for Nicholas Powers; they had lived such different lives. How could he understand her feelings for Kit—a man who was openly derisive and contemptuous of human love in every shape and form?

Shivering slightly, she pulled her navy wool coat over her skirt and blouse. Her clothes were plain but good, geared to the working life she had lived prior to giving up her job. Rosemary liked clothes; she often dawdled outside exclusive shop windows gazing admiringly at the models, wondering wistfully what it would be like to be able to spend so much money on herself without any burden of guilt.

Adam had often teased her that she was too sensitive to the needs of others; too soft-hearted and vulnerable to other people's pain, and she knew that for her it would be impossible to spend so much on herself without thinking guiltily of all those who had so little—people who could not even feed themselves, never mind buy clothes.

The taxi driver arrived, and Kit's crossness gave way to excitement as he clambered inside.

Because it was Sunday, central London was less busy, and they arrived outside the hotel several minutes early.

No degree of familiarity with such an imposing foyer could surely ever mute its effect, Rosemary reflected, as she headed for the reception desk, with Kit clinging shyly to her hand.

This time she wasn't directed to the lifts, but to a flight of stairs that led down to the sports complex.



'Mr Powers is expecting you,' the receptionist told her. if you just tell the girl on duty in the Complex she'll show you to the reading room.'

A set of double doors led into a foyer with a marbled stairway leading down to the left, and another up to the right, to an attractive restaurant area overlooking the swimming pool.

Rosemary stared when she saw it, the receptionist smiling at Kit's cry of excitement.

It was truly one of the most beautiful swimming pools Rosemary had ever seen. No doubt it was quite modest to a man of Nicholas Powers' high standards, but she had never seen anything quite so luxurious in all her life. Tiled, in dark blue, its classical shape and Greek columns made her stand and stare almost open-mouthed.

'Mr Powers is still in the gym at the moment,' the girl told her, consulting a list in front of her. 'However, he won't be long. If you'd like to go through into the reading room, he'll join you there shortly.'

She indicated the flight of stairs leading down to the left, and thanking her, Rosemary took Kit firmly by the hand.

The reading room took her breath away completely. It reminded her of a library of a beautiful Georgian stately home.

Several groups of comfortable terracotta-covered chairs and settees were grouped round low tables, the rich terracotta and blue carpet muting the sound of people's feet. A variety of pictures decorated the terracotta walls and behind the wrought iron railing on the galleried landing she could see bookcase after bookcase full of volumes.

Even Kit was awed by his surroundings, sitting wonderingly at her side on one of the settees, and gazing round with hugely rounded eyes.

Above them, three allegorical paintings decorated the ceiling, and Rosemary stared at them in bemusement, until Kit, recovering himself a little, tugged on her sleeve.

'That little boy over there is drinking fruit juice,' he informed her in a loud whisper.

There were several family groups in the room, and Rosemary noted that the children all seemed uniformly polite and well behaved. One small tot actually seemed to be reading the *Sunday Times*, and she blinked slightly, wondering if she was seeing things, checking a quick grin when she realised that it was being read upside down.

Fortunately Kit wasn't a demanding or greedy child, and she was able to distract him quite easily from his desire for fruit juice. She wasn't sure how long Nicholas Powers' few minutes would be, so she got one of Kit's favourite books out of the carrier bag and settled him down with it.

Looking down into his serious little face, she felt a sudden upsurge of pride and love. Tears stung her eyes. How on earth could she bear to part with him? A quiver of fear ran through her, making her body shake. What on earth was she thinking? She wasn't going to have to part with him. Nicholas Powers had no rights where Kit was concerned, none at all—had he?

His sudden appearance at the top of the marble steps just as she was thinking about him caused her to stare at him like someone transfixed, a tiny frightened mouse caught and held in the sights of a predatory eagle.

As he walked towards her she was reminded of a hunting leopard—all sleek muscles and dangerous prowl. His hair was damp, his skin bronzed.

Kit, sensing her fear, slid one small hand into hers and stared belligerently at him, his bottom lip pouted slightly.

'So this is Belle's child.' He was inspecting Kit as though he were checking something he was thinking of buying, for potential faults, Rosemary thought bitterly. 'He looks like her.'

'He looks like you,' she contradicted flatly, holding her breath as she realised what she had said. But it was true. With that determined scowl Kit did look remarkably like his uncle.

'Say hello to your Uncle Nicholas, Kit,' she instructed woodenly. She could feel the rebellious tension holding Kit stiff at her side, and knew guiltily that he had picked it up from her.

'Won't!'

As Nicholas moved forward, Kit turned and buried his head against Rosemary, refusing to look at him.

'I've booked us a table for lunch. They'll be ready for us now.'

As he stepped back so that Rosemary and Kit could precede him, he murmured sardonically to Rosemary, 'Nice try, but it won't do any good, you know. He might cling to your side now, but children of that age soon forget.'

'How would you know?' Rosemary resented the implication that she had deliberately encouraged Kit to reject him. 'You don't know the first thing about children!'

'Don't I? Aren't you forgetting something? I was once one myself, you know.'

Lunch was even more of an ordeal than she had imagined. Kit, who normally enjoyed his food with healthy relish, refused to eat

anything, alternatively clinging to her side and demanding to go home. Really, if she had deliberately coached him he couldn't have put on a better show of a clinging, dependent child.

She blamed Nicholas for Kit's reaction to him. He didn't have the slightest idea how to talk to a small child, she thought bitterly, watching his mouth tighten as once again Kit refused an ice-cream and instead clung tearfully to Rosemary.

'I don't like it here!' His voice was distinctly wobbly, and disastrously clear. 'I want to go home, Rosemary.'

'You put him up to this, didn't you?' Nicholas demanded of her, thin-lipped with anger. 'You deliberately . . . '

'No, I did not,' she interrupted, angry herself now. 'Kit is three years old, Mr Powers,' she told him bitinglly. 'He's still little more than a baby, and although he isn't old enough to understand it, he can sense the atmosphere between us. Like all children, he doesn't like anything that's unfamiliar. Why are you doing this to us?' she burst out emotionally. 'You say that Kit is your heir, but you have children of your own.'

'No!'

The harsh denial made Kit blink and move away from the protection of Rosemary's body to stare at him.

'We can't discuss this down here,' he continued in a harsh voice. 'We'll go up to my suite.'

She wasn't given any opportunity to refuse. She and Kit were hustled up to the fifth floor so quickly she could barely catch her breath.

'Now,' said Nicholas once they were inside, 'we can sit down and talk.'

It took her several minutes to settle Kit with his books and toys, and she could sense Nicholas Powers' tension as he stood behind her watching her as she sat on the floor, coaxing Kit to play with his building blocks.

'You don't look more than a dozen years older than he is yourself,' he muttered when she eventually stood up. 'You can't really want to be burdened with the responsibility of a young child. How much will it cost me to get sole charge of him, Rosemary?'

It took her several seconds to realise what he was implying, but once she had grasped his meaning, she went white and then dark red, her fingers curling into small fists of rage, as she stared at him in utter contempt.

'Nothing, if I thought you genuinely loved him,' she said at last. Curiously a dull tide of colour seemed to seep up under his skin, and then as though something in her look made him feel uncomfortable, he moved away from her and said sardonically, 'Are you trying to tell me that money means nothing to you at all?'

'Of course it means something, but I don't happen to think that it's the be-all and end-all of life. There are other things I consider far more important.'

'A rather romantic and foolish view of life, I should have thought. Money is necessary if one is to live.'

'Money is necessary if one is to exist,' Rosemary corrected him flatly. 'Living requires other things besides money, and I happen to believe that those other things are far more important. I believe that money causes more misery than pleasure . . . '

'Easy to say when you don't have any,' he mocked. 'But if you were suddenly to inherit ... a million pounds, say . . . I'm sure you'd change your tune fast enough.'

'The only use I'd have for a million pounds would be to give it away to charity.'

He turned and looked at her as though he couldn't believe his ears.

'You really mean it, don't you?' He shook his head. 'You're living in a dream world, little girl—real life just isn't like that.'

'Because people like you won't let it be,.' Rosemary retorted passionately. 'Do you honestly think I'd let you take Kit away from me, to be brought up in a world where the only important thing is money? Beyond anything else in my life my first duty is to Kit. Nothing is more important to me than that. Can you say the same thing? How much time will you be able to spare him? How often will he see you, or will he be relegated to a world of nannies and private boarding schools?'

'You say that now, but one day you'll grow bored with being Kit's surrogate mother—you'll want a husband and children of your own. It's not natural for a young woman of your age to live totally without any contact with the opposite sex.'

'For contact with the opposite sex, I suppose you mean sex itself,' Rosemary retorted, marvelling a little at her own frankness. 'I'm not the sort of woman who wants or needs that kind of physical relationship, Mr Powers.'

'No, you're the sort of woman who wants her sex all dressed up with words like "love" and "forever",' he agreed.

The way he was sneering made Rosemary itch to hit him, but then she remembered what his own childhood had been, and suddenly her anger died away, to be replaced by a feeling of intense pity. Of course, he didn't believe in love, for that would mean that he would have to acknowledge to himself that his mother had not loved him; she could quite easily see how for a man of his pride it would be

preferable to believe that love did not exist at all than to admit that his own mother had felt no love for him at all.

'No, I'm the sort of woman who believes that real fulfilment in sexual terms can be experienced only when there is love,' she responded calmly. 'I'm not naive, Mr Powers. I know that sexual attraction can be a very powerful thing, but you see I'm far too fastidious to settle for anything less than the very best, and as far as I'm concerned sex without love is second-rate.'

'My advice to you is to wait until you've experienced what you're talking about before making such rash statements.'

The cool contempt in his voice stung, and Rosemary found herself retaliating before she had time to register what she was saying.

'I have experienced love, so I know exactly what I'm talking about when I say that for me sex, without it, is simply not worth having.'

'I see . . . You have experienced love, you say, but obviously your partner didn't share your experience, did he? What happened? Did he discover after he had you that it wasn't the emotion of a lifetime after all? You're very gullible if you fell for that old ruse.'

For a moment she was too shocked to speak.

'How dare you suggest such a thing! It wasn't like that at all,' she hissed, conscious of Kit's presence only a few yards away. 'As a matter of fact, the man I loved is married. I worked for him . . . and once I realised how I felt about him I gave up my job. There was never any question of an affair ... of anything like that in our relationship at all. He was happily married and I had the misfortune to love him. There was nothing more to it than that.'

'Perhaps you'd find his marriage less of a stumbling block if you behave sensibly and accept the money I'm prepared to pay you for legally handing over my sister's child to me.'

Rosemary stared at him in a mixture of astonishment and disgust. This was the second time he had made such a suggestion. Hadn't she made herself plain enough already? Did he really honestly think he could buy Kit from her? The sympathy she had felt for him before was wiped out by the powerful surge of anger that swept her. Everything that she had wanted to say seemed to be locked up deep inside her throat. For almost a full minute she found it impossible to articulate, and when at last she could speak, the words came rushing out in a furious whispered burst of incredulous disbelief.

'I've already told you that there's nothing . . . nothing on this earth that could make me give up Kit, especially to a man like you, who thinks of everything in terms of money. What does it take to get it through to you that I love Kit? Do you really think for one moment that I would ever contemplate trying to buy John's love, or that I could love him if he was the sort of man who could be bought? Can't you understand that I love the man he is, and that his love for his wife and children, and his loyalty to her, are part of what makes him so dear? Money might be the most important thing in your life, Mr Powers, but I can tell you now that it's the least important thing in mine!'

All at once the anger drained out of her. Turning away from him, she said huskily, 'No, I don't suppose you can understand that, can you, any more than you can understand how much I love Kit. 'Belle once told me that she didn't want her son destroyed in the way you were destroyed . . . '

Something seemed to flicker in his eyes, some tiny trace of emotion that touched her too-tender heart, and she immediately wished the words unsaid, but it was too late.



'Go on,' he commanded harshly.

She bit her lip and murmured hesitantly, 'Belle dreaded the thought of Kit ever falling into the hands of your mother or her family. She once said something to me about Kit being your only heir. But you could marry and have children of your own.'

'I shall never marry.'

The harsh words shocked through her and she stared at him, her violet eyes dark with pain and lack of understanding.

'You could still have a child,' she pointed out.

'You mean pay a woman to have my child for me? Never. A woman greedy enough to do that would soon realise the benefits to be reaped by being the mother of my son, and no matter how many legal documents I got her to sign, as long as she lived there would always be the chance that she could do to my child what my mother did to me.'

He said it so emotionlessly that Rosemary was angry with herself for her own sudden shift of feeling. It was ridiculous that she should suddenly ache with compassion for this man, and not just ridiculous but also dangerous.

'There is, of course, an alternative,' he said suavely, waiting for his words to sink in as he looked at her. 'An avenue we have not yet explored, a compromise, if you like.'

He paused, and Rosemary looked at him. A compromise? This man? This hard unyielding iceberg of a man was offering her a compromise? She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, glad that Kit was too deeply involved in his game to be aware of what was going on. 'What sort of compromise?' she asked at last.

'You could always come with me to France and bring Kit up yourself. I'm prepared to admit that there's a bond between you and the child which it might prove difficult to sever, and in such circumstances I am prepared to make the best of things by allowing you to retain your self-appointed position as his surrogate mother, but under my roof. Have you thought that just as I could legally take Kit away from you, so could my mother?' he demanded roughly.

She hadn't thought about it until that moment, but now the implications of what he was saying made her pale.

'But why should she want to?' she asked feebly.

His derisive look withered her. 'Why? Because, Miss Stewart, Kit is my heir, and as my heir, my *only* heir, he would be an extremely powerful pawn in my mother's hands.'

'She wouldn't do anything like that. She wouldn't take Kit away from me ... ' But deep down in her heart Rosemary knew that she was wrong. It was impossible to understand how any woman could treat her own child the way Susan Powers had treated her son. There was no way Rosemary could ever allow Kit to go to his grandmother.

'Well?' The curt demand cut through her painful thoughts. 'Do you agree that such a compromise would benefit us both?'

He was watching her, Rosemary realised, and, most oddly, the tension in the room came from him and not from her. It gave her a heady feeling of power to realise that for some reason she had the edge over him. He *wanted* her to agree to his compromise; had probably wanted her to agree to it all along the line, she realised on a flash of insight. After all, it would be much easier for him if she went to France to take care of Kit; there would be no awkward court case, no publicity . . . no danger of her arraigning herself with his mother's family against him.

'I would have to speak to my solicitor about it,' she replied cautiously, feeling her way. There would have to be certain legal provisos.'

'Such as a generous income as recompense for the fact that once you come to live in the valley, you will be virtually committing yourself to a life of spinster- hood. What price do you put on your continual single- minded devotion to my nephew, Miss Stewart? One million dollars, two million?'

There is no price!' Rosemary told him furiously. 'I'm not for sale, Mr Powers, and neither is my love for Kit. The legal provisos I was talking about related to my rights as Kit's legal guardian and aunt. For all I know your views of bringing up children may differ widely from mine. I'm against Kit going to boarding school, for instance; at least not until he's old enough to cope with such a situation.'

'I see your point, and yet I confess to a certain amount of concern, Miss Stewart. You said "children" and not "child". Surely a rather Freudian slip?'

Rosemary felt her face flame with temper and exasperation. 'You seem to be obsessed with my potential sex life, Mr Powers. I assure you that I'm as unlikely to marry as you are yourself, although for very different reasons. And certainly I have no intention of having a child or children.'

'Yes, it is rather amusing in some ways, isn't it?' A thin smile curled his mouth without reaching his eyes. 'You will not marry because you believe in love, and I will not marry because I do not believe in it.'

'No, you won't marry because you're obsessed with the belief that at some stage your wife will betray you, as your mother betrayed you; that she'll steal your wealth from you in the same way that your mother did.'

Shocked by her tactlessness, Rosemary turned away from him. What on earth had got into her? She wondered if her thoughtless comments had hurt him. She reached a brief upward glance.

He was watching her with cynical amusement. 'That has been said to me too often by too many women for it to have any effect on me. I'm a realist, and you are a romantic.'

'You're romantic enough to want an heir to follow you,' Rosemary pointed out defensively.

'I need an heir. I need someone who I can trust to control the empire I've built up when I can no longer do so ... '

Since he couldn't possibly be more than thirty-five, Rosemary was a little surprised by his vehemence. Surely men as ruthless and determined as Nicholas Powers didn't even start thinking about handing over the reins of control until they were much, much older than the man standing in front of her.

'Kit is three,' she protested, instead of voicing her thoughts, it will be nearly twenty years before he ... '

in twenty years' time I shall more than likely be completely deaf.' There was a small silence, during which Rosemary fought to assimilate what he was saying without betraying her shock.

'Yes . . . one of fate's more amusing twists, isn't it? Especially since the damage was apparently caused when I was younger than Kit is now. I had an ear infection as a child. My mother considered me a nuisance; she never wanted me, apparently. So when I cried in pain from an ear infection, she shut me in the nursery and forbade the staff to go anywhere near me. By the time my father discovered what was going on, it was too late to do anything about the damage.'

'For a long time the problem has been in remission, but last year I was involved in a collision in my car, which seems to have re-activated it. At the moment the deterioration is slow, but unstoppable. On present estimates the specialists .advise me that I will slowly grow less and less able to hear properly and that within twenty years I shall be stone deaf. Imagine that, Miss Stewart. I shall be as helpless as an infant, totally at the mercy of those around me, at least as far as the business world is concerned, so you can see why it's so important for me to have an heir I can trust. My father built up Powers Oil from nothing, and I had to stand by and watch it all destroyed, vengefully and deliberately. I swore then I would re-build it, and this time it will not be torn down.'

Rosemary looked away from him, but apparently not quickly enough. 'I do not want or need your pity!' he rasped acerbically.

He was practically snarling the words at her, his very rage betraying more than his clipped sentences ever could. He was a man in torment, Rosemary recognised; a man who had everything and yet conversely a man who had nothing.

'No, but you *do* want and need my co-operation,' she said calmly. 'I'll need to talk to my solicitor, but providing he agrees, I'm willing to bring Kit up as your heir, and to live with him in your chateau.'

'You're very obliging.' Rosemary didn't like the cynical way he spoke. 'Of course I shall make sure that financially you are recompensed for ... '

Once again she could feel her self-control straining. 'I've already told you I don't want your money—any of it!'

The house had been in her and Adam's name and it was in her mind that she could possibly let it, and that the income it would bring in would give her a small measure of independence from Nicholas.

She would have to accept that he provided a roof over her head and paid for the food she ate, of course, but that was all she would accept from him, she thought fiercely. She would make him see that there were some women who did not want his money.

She was certainly not going to allow Kit to be brought up to share his uncle's obsession with money, or his contempt and bitterness for the female sex. Kit would never have to learn as Nicholas Powers had that there was no such thing as freely given love. Kit would have all the love, all the security, all the caring she was capable of giving him.

No wonder Belle had turned away from the life she had shared with her brother, and looked instead for a much simpler existence with a man who loved her for herself alone.

How many times had she heard Belle say that the happiest years of her life had been those she had shared with Adam? Such a short span of time, Rosemary thought, grieving afresh for her brother and sister-in-law, but at least Belle, unlike her brother, had known and shared human love.

Could any amount of money really compensate for the loneliness she sensed was burned soul-deep into Nicholas Powers? Over the years she had seen his name coupled in the press with that of any number of beautiful women, but there was something about him that had struck her almost the moment she saw him, and that had been his essential aloneness.

Physically he was a very attractive and masculine man, but there was a coldness about him, a remoteness that suggested that he preferred to keep people at a distance.

He deliberately chose as the women in his life those who were most easily impressed by his wealth, and then despised them for the very characteristics he had chosen them for, Rosemary guessed shrewdly.

Could it be that secretly he was afraid to love; afraid to commit himself to a relationship which might ultimately cause him the same pain as his mother's defection? She shrugged the thought away.

'So, it is agreed that you and the child will come with me to France.'

'Provided our solicitor agrees,' Rosemary reminded him firmly, standing up and going over to gather up Kit's toys.

As the little boy hugged her affectionately, she couldn't help contrasting his open, sunny face with the shuttered, withdrawn expression of the man watching them, and she made herself a vow then that she would never allow Kit to be corrupted or spoilt by the power of his uncle's wealth.

If Kit had to be brought up in Nicholas Powers' home, Belle would want her to be there to take care of him, and so would Adam. She owed it to them to be there, but stubbornly she resisted giving in to him, feeling a small sense of satisfaction in knowing that her caution was irritating him. He was too used to people being so impressed by his wealth that they fell over themselves to do what he wanted. Well, she wasn't going to be like that.

## CHAPTER THREE

OF COURSE on Monday morning when Lesley called to collect Kit, and take him with her to the home of one of her other two charges, she was all agog to hear what had happened.

Carefully Rosemary explained what Nicholas Powers had suggested.

'Mmm ... if you ask me, he planned to take both of you to France all along,' Lesley pronounced. 'Think about it, Rosemary . . . having your agreement makes life one hell of a lot easier for him. I know these millionaire types, any kind of publicity is a complete anathema to them, and you could have made a hell of a stink in the press for him. I bet he just threatened to take Kit away from you to frighten you.'

That thought had struck Rosemary too, but for some reason a perverse sort of loyalty prevented her from saying so, just as that same ridiculous loyalty stopped her from telling her friend about the real reason Nicholas Powers wanted Kit. She had sensed how much he had loathed and resented telling her about his encroaching deafness, and for some reason had felt compelled to keep it to herself.

Kit already had his coat on and was eager to join the other boy and the little girl who were Lesley's other charges. Jonathan's father worked at home, and despite the fact that she herself was no longer working, Rosemary had felt it worthwhile to continue with the arrangement, feeling that the male influence of Jonathan's father on Kit's life was something that he needed. She was all too aware of how few men Kit came into contact with. How much would the two of Nicholas Powers once they were living in his home? Precious little, Rosemary suspected; Belle had told her that her brother travelled all over the world on business, and spent very little time at home.

'He's using you, Rosemary,' Lesley cut into her thoughts now. 'Where else would he get anyone so devoted and caring to take charge of Kit?



You've given up your whole life for him since his parents died. No nanny or hired help would do that.'

'But I love him,' Rosemary protested, shaken by Lesley's comments.

'Exactly, and you can bet that that's what Nicholas Powers is banking on,' her friend said darkly.

To Rosemary's consternation before she could make the time to get in touch with her solicitor, he telephoned her. It came as a shock to discover that Nicholas had already had a draft contract drawn up and that moreover it was already in the hands of her solicitor.

Stumbling over the words, Rosemary explained to him what had happened.

'I think you'd better come and see me this afternoon,' he told her.

Rosemary arrived a little late for her appointment, which made her feel even more flustered and on edge.

It came as something of a surprise to her when Mr Brownstone advised her that he was pleased that she was being so sensible. Her heart sank when he went on to say that had she decided to fight Nicholas Powers for legal guardianship of Kit, she might well have lost.

'But his parents wanted me . . . ' she began.

'Yes, yes, I know that, but the courts have to take all things into consideration, Rosemary, and there's no getting away from the fact that Nicholas Powers is in a far better position to provide for the boy than you are. Now, let's go through this contract, shall we?'

She had half expected her solicitor to be shocked by the nature of the contract, but although he glanced at her once or twice over the top of

his bifocals as he read slowly through it, he made no comment until he had placed the document down on his desk. Only then did he purse his lips and study her over his steepled fingertips.

'You realise what this contract means, don't you?' he asked her, frowning a little. 'It stipulates that for as long as Kit is a minor you will have sole care of him, just so long as you agree to reside under Nicholas Powers' roof and with the proviso that you do not enter into any emotional or legal commitments with a member of the opposite sex.'

He pursed his lips again, still frowning. 'I want you to think very carefully about this, Rosemary, because once you sign it, should you fall in love and want to marry—or indeed should you decide at any time that you don't want to reside under Nicholas Powers' roof, he'll be within his legal rights in taking Kit away from you. You're only twenty-four and, if I may say so, you are a very attractive young woman. It's not totally outside the bounds of possibility that some young man will want to marry you and that you'll want children of your own . . . '

'No . . . No ... I shall never marry, and I shall never, ever give Kit up,' Rosemary broke in passionately. 'I know what I'm doing ... I *have* thought about it. If there was any other way . . . some way that I could be sure that the courts would uphold my rights as Kit's guardian . . . '

Her voice tailed away as she saw the dubious look in her solicitor's eyes.

'I can't give you that assurance, Rosemary. Nicholas Powers has a good deal more influence than you. I understand that he wants to make Kit his heir, and legally that puts him on much firmer ground than you. Are you sure this is what you want?' he asked her gently. 'This contract is very explicit. Here,' he handed it to her, 'read it for yourself.'

Rosemary did so, her eyes skimming the typed pages, and then going back to the beginning to read them more slowly.

It was just as Mr Brownstone said. There in black and white, if she signed it, was her solemn commitment to Kit; her vow not to enter into any kind of permanent physical or emotional commitment for the duration of Kit's minority, her promise to live at Val des Neiges, or any other of his homes that Nicholas Powers should so specify.

There was only one clause she could object to, and that was the one stipulating that she would be paid a sum of money commensurate with her position and her relationship to Kit, at the beginning of each month.

'I won't take any money from him,' she told her solicitor curtly. 'I intend to let out my house, and the money that I get from that will be sufficient for my needs.'

He looked as though he wanted to argue with her, but perhaps something in the stubborn set of her mouth deterred him, for instead he sighed a little, and said: 'Well, if that's your wish, although I must confess . . . '

'It *is* my wish,' Rosemary told him firmly.

She felt drained and shaky, shocked as much by the speed with which Nicholas had acted as by the crippling harsh content of the contract.

But what alternative did she have? Her solicitor had made it plain that if it came to a court battle she might not win, and how could she take even the slightest chance of losing Kit? He meant so much to her . . . everything.

As he watched the expressions race over her vulnerable face, the man seated opposite her suppressed another sigh. She was so very young . . . too young to be dedicating herself to bringing up someone else's

child in a life that would be almost as narrow and confined as that of the most devout nun, but he could see that nothing he could say would make her change her mind, and not for the first time in his business life, he marvelled at the power of maternal love.

'I have to stay with Kit,' Rosemary told him as she stood up. 'And I don't want him growing up thinking that I had to be paid to do so. I want him to always have the security of knowing that I love him.'

'Mm, well, I can see your point,' he admitted, 'especially in view of the circumstances. I must confess that what I know of Nicholas Powers doesn't incline me to think there'd be much room in his life for a small child. When he isn't flying from one corner of the world to another, checking up on his oil wells, he seems to spend his time squiring around a vast selection of ornamental young ladies.'

Mr Brownstone was rather old-fashioned, but Rosemary knew what he was getting at. Nicholas was notorious for his affairs—or rather for their brevity. Belle had once confided to her that she didn't think he'd ever dated anyone for more than a month, it's almost as though he's determined not to give himself a chance to get to know them as people,' she had said. 'All he wants them for is their expertise and willingness in bed.'

Rosemary had been shocked by her statement, but now, having met the man and listened to him, she could well believe that Belle had been right.

She shrugged the thought aside; his sex life was of no interest to her and in that respect his deafness might almost be a benefit. It would, no doubt, stop him from having to listen to any unwanted avowals of love, she reflected acidly.

His contempt when he had described her as a twenty-four-year-old virgin had hurt her, but it hadn't changed her views. For her, love

would be an intrinsic and essential part of sex. She just wasn't the sort of person who could ever go to bed with someone simply for the sake of experimentation. What one never had one never missed, and she certainly didn't have any desire to emulate Nicholas Powers' bed-hopping habits. Maybe she was rather odd in being uninterested in sex for sex's sake and in being faintly apprehensive of the total commitment that loving a man entailed, but it was that natural inner reticence that made it relatively easy for her to commit herself to Nicholas's contract.

She could even take the detached view and see exactly why Nicholas wanted to tie her to it. As he had coldly pointed out to her, there was no guarantee, if she did marry, that her husband might not try to manipulate Kit, and through him, eventually Powers Oil.

In many ways she pitied Nicholas more for his obsession with Powers Oil than she did for his encroaching deafness. The thought made her smile, all the more so because she knew quite definitely that Nicholas himself would not share her amusement. Did he ever smile properly, she wondered, did he ever laugh? She couldn't imagine it. Belle had been right when she described him as a man completely without real emotion and human instincts.

'But why are we going away, and why aren't Tara and Jonathan coming with us?'

Patiently, and for the umpteenth time, Rosemary went carefully through her edited explanation.

She had waited until everything was legally signed before telling Kit anything about what was going to happen, and now with only a few days to go before they left for Val des Neiges, the little boy was still

pressing her to explain to him why he couldn't take his two friends to France with him.

'We're going to live with your uncle, and Tara and Jonathan have to stay with their mummies and daddies,' Rosemary explained.

'But why? I want to stay here!'

'I know you do, poppet, but your uncle wants us to go and live with him.'

'Doesn't he have a little boy of his own?'

'No.'

Fortunately Kit seemed happy with this explanation. Getting ready to leave had been a frantic upheaval. She hadn't realised at first just how much planning would be involved, and luckily she had remembered in time what Belle had said about the valley being virtually cut off from civilisation for a good three months of the year. They were well into autumn now, and luckily the shops were stocked up with winter clothes, so she had had to go and dig deeply into her small savings to equip Kit and herself for the harshness of an Alpine winter.

Typically, once the legal details were attended to, she had heard absolutely nothing from Nicholas. Quite what she had been expecting she didn't know, perhaps not the kind of chatty phone calls she and Adam once used to share when they were apart, but it rankled that he had made no attempt at least to warn her of what she might expect. It would have served him right if she and Kit had turned up at the valley with nothing more than late summer clothes.

All she did know was that they would be flying to a French airport and that they would be transferred to the valley by helicopter.

As she surveyed the piles of clothes and toys strewn all over her bedroom, she wondered how on earth she was going to be ready in time. As fast as she packed away Kit's toys, he unpacked them. Luckily Lesley was free to take care of him for all of Saturday, which should give her enough breathing space to get ready for their Sunday morning flight.

One purchase she hadn't been able to resist making on her own behalf had been a slim-fitting racing ski- suit. Adam had been a keen skier and he had taught Rosemary to share his love of the sport. Several skiing holidays in Scotland had given her a certain amount of skill, and once in the shop she hadn't been able to withstand a tempting mental picture of herself sweeping elegantly down a snow-clad slope in her new outfit while Nicholas Powers watched in surprised admiration.

Now, as she packed the ski-suit, she derided herself for her folly. Nothing would ever surprise Nicholas, and he would certainly never find anything to admire in her. Just for a moment, she wondered what his reaction to her would have been if she had been as sophisticated and beautiful as the women he dated. Would he have been attracted to her? If he had been, no doubt he would have ruthlessly forced himself to ignore her. There was no way he would allow the slightest intimacy to develop between them. Perhaps, after all, it was just as well she wasn't stunningly lovely, Rosemary decided wryly.

The suitcases were nearly packed. All that now remained was Kit's toys. As she stood up, she pushed her hair back off her face, then frowned as she heard the front door bell.

Kit and Lesley were back early . . . too early, really. Tiredly she hurried downstairs to let them in.

The day had been overcast and wet, and now as she went downstairs she switched on the hall light. Its illumination emphasised the

shadows beneath her eyes and the vulnerable hollows beneath her cheekbones.

She had nothing on her feet and her face was free of make-up, her hair curling wildly round her face. She pushed it back automatically with one hand, opening the door with the other, unaware of the fact that her raised arm was drawing the soft wool of her old checked shirt taut against her breast, revealing its soft fullness.

Before she had opened the door properly, the man outside took it from her, moving quickly.

'You took your time. It's pouring out there!'

She had a brief glimpse of a car parked outside the house before he closed the door. He was wearing soft casual trousers and a toning leather jacket over a checked shirt.

'Nicholas!'

Rosemary was barely aware of speaking his name. She stepped back from him automatically, breathing in the smell of rain and cold air mingled with leather and a scent that her body recognised as belonging to the man rather than the elements. It disturbed her. There was something dangerously intimate about recognising a man by his scent, almost as though he had somehow insinuated himself into her memory in a much more intimate way than she had realised.

'What . . . what are you doing here?' It was all she could think of to say, her heart suddenly plunging downwards as she wondered if he had perhaps come to tell her that he had changed his mind; that she was not to go to France after all.

'What's wrong, were you expecting someone else? Were you in bed waiting for him? Is that what took you so long to open the door?'



Rosemary gaped at him, hardly able to believe her ears. If it had been anyone other than Nicholas speaking in those words she would have thought they were teasing her.

'I was not in bed,' she told him indignantly when she had got her voice back. 'As a matter of fact I was upstairs packing, and as you've pointed out, I'm hardly likely to be entertaining a lover, am I?'

Her temper made her heart thud, and her eyes darken, her normally pale skin was flushed with anger, her breasts rising and falling quickly beneath the thin shirt.

'Then why come downstairs only half dressed?'

He looked down at her bare feet, and she immediately curled her toes into the carpet, and then, shockingly, he slowly scrutinised her from head to foot, his glance lingering trespassingly, and deliberately, she felt sure, on the full curves of her breasts.

Appallingly she felt her nipples swell and harden. Her skin burned with embarrassment, but she had to show him she was not afraid. She made herself look at him. There was an odd, unfamiliar look in his eyes. They seemed darker, greener, and somehow not as cold. His face was slightly flushed as well, just along his cheekbones.

For what seemed to be a lifetime there was silence and then he added tauntingly, 'And you aren't wearing a bra.'

If only she could deny it, but it would be a lie.

'Odd, that,' he drawled. 'Out of character, I would have thought. You're surprisingly voluptuous for such a small creature; nothing like small enough to go braless without it being noticed.' He moved slightly, and Rosemary had a sickening fear that he was actually going to touch her, that his hands were actually going to . . . She stepped back and swallowed hard, and it was only when she realised

he had simply been putting his hands in the pockets of his trousers that she was able to identify the curious aching sensation disrupting her body.

It shocked and completely disillusioned her. She couldn't possibly have wanted him to touch her; she must have been imagining things. This foolishness had to stop. Her mouth compressed. She wasn't going to allow him to think that she made a habit of provocatively dispensing with her underwear—even if it was in the privacy of her own home.

Keeping her voice low and as controlled as she could, she said quietly, 'For your information, I am not wearing a bra because, quite simply, it's in the washing machine. I want to leave the house empty and ready for the people who are renting it while we're away. A friend has offered to store some things for me. The rest of my clothes are packed, and I'm washing the last few dirty things.'

'I see ... '

His attention was on her hips now, and Rosemary felt the heat course through her body. It was anger she was experiencing, she told herself weakly, that was all.

Did he really think she had nothing on under her jeans? She could feel her heart thudding as she fought to control her ire. How would he like it if . . . She swallowed hard at the thought of her ever finding the nerve to subject him to the same sort of physical assessment he had just made her endure, and turned her back on him. It was disturbing to find that she was still acutely aware of him behind her. She could almost feel the heat coming off his body.

She moved automatically into the sitting-room. The fire she had left on to keep the room warm was its only illumination and a

disturbingly intimate one, but as Rosemary reached up to switch on the light Nicholas stopped her, by putting his hand on her arm.

This was the closest she had been to him, and she was amazed to see that close up his eyes were not a band of solid colour, but a deep vivid green, speckled with a softer blue.

'Don't put the light on.' Without asking her permission he sank down on to her settee, still loosely holding her arm. 'I think I've got a migraine coming on. Could you get me a glass of water?'

His eyes had closed, twin fans of thick dark lashes shadowing his skin. It gave her an odd sensation of pain and compassion to look down on him like this. She almost wanted to reach out and smooth the thick dark hair off his forehead in the same comforting way she soothed Kit's baby ailments.

She had never suffered from migraine, but her father had, and so she left Nicholas where he was while she went to the kitchen to fetch his water.

When she came back he was lying back against the settee exactly where she had left him, and for a moment she thought he was actually asleep.

Hot colour still burned against his cheekbones, and she touched one with her fingertips. His skin felt smooth and hot, and it was not a bit like touching Kit. She looked at his mouth and felt her body quiver. His eyes opened and for a moment he was looking straight at . her.

'I've brought you the water.'

She half expected him to make some sarcastic comment about her touching him, but instead he sat up and extracted a small phial of tablets from his jacket pocket.

'It's something to do with my ear,' he explained. 'Flying tends to bring these headaches on.'

'Are you here on business?' Rosemary asked him anxiously. 'Is there someone I should get in touch with?'

'Yes and no.' His eyes closed as he swallowed the tablets and leaned back against the settee. 'My business has already been completed, and as for the someone you should get in touch with,' his mouth twisted wryly, 'I doubt that I'd be much use to her tonight.'

He looked up at her just in time to catch the surge of colour heating her skin.

'Virginal in mind as well as in body,' he mocked. 'I don't suppose you've even seen a man naked, have you?'

'You're talking to me as though I was closer to fourteen than twenty-four!' Rosemary protested. 'And there's no need for it. Your love-life is your affair, Nicholas, and my lack of one is mine. I don't know why you're trying to embarrass me like this.'

'Don't you?' His lashes dropped over eyes suddenly slumbrous and dark, as his medication started to take effect.

'Well then, let's just put it down to frustration, shall we?'

Whoever he was supposed to be with tonight was welcome to him! Rosemary thought savagely as she walked back into the kitchen. She wasn't used to men talking to her the way he had, and it disconcerted her. Even more disturbing was the fact that somehow she had become aware of him in a way that she most definitely did not like.

The first time she had met him she had supposed he would be a cold lover, intent only on his own physical gratification; now, shockingly, she was not so sure she was right. There had been something in his

eyes when he looked at her that told her he knew all there was to know about giving a woman pleasure. She mistrusted him, she reminded herself. What was he trying to do—force her to break their contract before it came into force?

She made herself stay in the kitchen for almost half an hour, and when she came out she saw that he was quite definitely fast asleep. The heat had left his skin, now leaving him unhealthily pale. She touched his hand and found that despite the fire, he felt very cold. Frowning slightly, she went upstairs and took the quilt off her own bed.

She had just finished tucking it round him when Lesley and Kit came back. Motioning to both of them to be quiet, she ushered them into the dining-kitchen.

'Now who's the sleeping prince?' Lesley exclaimed, enthusiastically. 'You're a dark horse, Rosemary. He's really something!'

'He's also Kit's uncle,' Rosemary told her drily, giving her a warning look. 'Apparently flying tends to bring on a migraine attack.'

'Oh dear! You'll have to let him sleep it off, then. My mother gets them and she swears that's the only real cure.'

'Is he really my uncle?' Kit demanded in a loud whisper when Lesley had gone. Rosemary had removed their small portable television from the sitting-room to the kitchen so that he could watch it without disturbing Nicholas, is he the one we're going to live with?'

'Yes, and yes again. Come on, finish your milk, and then I think it will be time for your bath. Early bedtime tonight, young man—we have to be up early in the morning, and I still have to pack all your toys.'

Ten o'clock. Rosemary eased herself up, wincing as her knees protested. She had spent the last two hours packing away all Kit's toys, in the special boxes she had bought. They would be carried on the plane as excess baggage, and she only hoped there would be room for them in the taxi. The fact that Nicholas could afford to buy his nephew an entire toyshop hadn't influenced her decision to take them with her. Kit was a well adjusted and happy little boy, but he would need the familiarity of his own things around him once they were at the chateau.

Ten o'clock, and there had been no sound at all from the man downstairs. She had expected him to wake up long before this. Should she wake him or let him go on sleeping? She had wanted an early night herself.

Tiredly she went downstairs and let herself into the sitting-room. He had moved in his sleep and was now lying down, under the quilt. His breathing suggested that he was still deeply asleep, and Rosemary hadn't the heart to wake him. Amazingly, if she looked hard enough she could detect a resemblance to Kit in those harsh features, softened now by sleep. He really had the most incredibly thick and long lashes for a man. What a waste! She was lucky that in spite of her being so fair-haired, her own lashes were reasonably dark.

A cup of coffee and a sandwich nibbled in the kitchen took the edge off her tiredness, but by the time she had finished and washed up her unexpected guest was still asleep. There was nothing else for it: she would simply have to leave him—and she would also have to leave her quilt, she thought wryly. Luckily she had some spare blankets in the drawer beneath her bed, and after a quick bath she curled up under them.

Whether it was because she didn't have her quilt or not, Rosemary didn't know, but she woke up early, and knew she would not be able to get back to sleep.

There was no sound at all from downstairs, and her throat was parched with thirst. A quick glance out of her window showed that Nicholas's car was still there, which meant that he must still be asleep. It couldn't be very comfortable for him, scrunched up on her small settee . . . Still, it had been his choice.

Following her normal morning routine, she showered and washed her hair. It was naturally curly, and when she wasn't working, she simply left it to dry. Her dressing-gown was packed, and it was too early to change into the clothes she intended to wear for the flight. Instead she pulled on an ancient rugby shirt of Adam's that she often wore round the house. It came halfway down her thighs and probably made her look like an outsize bee, she acknowledged wryly.

On her way downstairs she looked in on Kit. He was lying fast asleep in his bed, his dark hair fluffed out on the pillow. Overwhelmed by a sudden surge of love, she bent to kiss him. He looked so sweet and babyish still when he was asleep.

There was no sound from the sitting-room, so she avoided it, going straight into the kitchen.

She was almost too thirsty to wait for the coffee to filter, but she enjoyed this first early morning drink too much to have instant. The clock on the wall told her that it was still early—not even seven yet. She normally enjoyed a brief lie-in on Sundays. Sunday was her special day, when she read the papers and generally lazed about until lunchtime. Sunday afternoons, she normally took Kit out, usually to the park when the weather was fine.

She was just pouring the coffee into a mug when she heard the papers come through the front door. Bliss—she could take them upstairs with her and have a quiet half- hour before Kit woke up. He was at that stage of being deeply interested in the printed word, and demanded continuously that Rosemary allowed him to 'read it

himself. He had astounded one of their neighbours by speedily 'reading' through his favourite book of fairy tales, when she looked after him one evening when Rosemary had had to go out, until Rosemary had been obliged to disillusion her by telling her that Kit knew the stories off by heart.

Even so, there was no denying that he was a clever child. Deeply engrossed in her own thoughts, she trudged into the hall and picked up the papers. Balancing her cup in one hand and holding the papers in the other, she headed for the stairs.

When the sitting-room door suddenly opened and Nicholas came out wearing nothing but the most minuscule pair of briefs, she could no more contain her stunned shock than she could have flown. Her tongue seemed to have stuck to the roof of her mouth, her ability to breathe suddenly dangerously impeded.

He had been right to mock her for her ignorance concerning the male body. When she had involuntarily imagined him without his clothes, she had fallen ridiculously short of reality.

For a start, there was much more of him. Innocently she had pictured an adult version of Kit, forgetting all the different ways in which a man's body might develop.

Adam had been tall, but fairly slender; he had certainly not possessed the sort of muscles that roped the hardness of Nicholas's body. Muscles were something Rosemary had always associated with wrestlers, when she thought about them at all: a sort of unappealing male bulk that she found slightly distasteful. But these muscles . . . She blinked and wondered absently when he managed to find the time to get that all-over tan—at least, she presumed it was all-over. Feeling like someone who had just been deprived of oxygen for too long, she dragged air into her lungs and tried not to stare.



Fine silky hairs covered his chest and arrowed down past his navel in a thin line that . . .

Abruptly Rosemary tore her gaze away from his body, then turned a brilliant shade of bright pink when she realised that he was watching her every bit as closely as she had been studying him. Inwardly she cringed as she waited for him to make a biting sarcastic comment, but to her surprise instead he suddenly frowned and pushed his hand through his hair, disturbing its dark sleekness still further.

'I heard a noise and came to investigate . . . ' he began.

'It was probably the paper boy.' Rosemary knew she was gabbling, but seeing him like this was having a peculiar effect on her normally calm nervous system.

She was being silly really; after all, she had seen Adam similarly garbed often enough, and men at the beach . . . But this was different, something inside her insisted; this was somehow more intimate . . . more . . . dangerous.

'How are you feeling?' she asked him. 'Has your migraine . . . '

'Gone, thank God.' He glanced over his shoulder into the room behind him. 'Did you try to rouse me? These tablets have a very heavy sedative effect and . . . '

'No, I thought it was best to let you sleep.'

'Thanks.' He grimaced faintly and looked at her mug of coffee. 'Any chance of some of that for me?'

He was different like this; more human . . . more approachable, and oddly that made her feel far more flustered than his coldness did.

'It's in the kitchen. I'll get you some.'

To get to the kitchen, she had to step past him, and she found herself automatically breathing in so that she wouldn't come into contact with his body. He stepped back immediately he realised, filching the papers from her with a look in his eyes that reminded her overwhelmingly of Kit at his most mischievous. Her eyes widened and she caught her breath.

'What's wrong?' asked Nicholas.

'Nothing. It's just that you looked so much like Kit.'

Instantly his face hardened. 'Don't start confusing the two of us, Rosemary,' he warned her. 'I'm not Kit, and I don't need your mothering.'

Illogically, his words hurt her. Why was it that every time she sensed something warm and human in him and reached out to respond to it, he slapped her down? Why was it? Surely you know the answer to that, she mocked herself as she poured him a mug of coffee. He slapped her down because he didn't want her getting close to him. He didn't want anyone getting close to him. She knew that, so why bother to try? Why indeed?

The problem was that behind his cold aloofness she sensed a loneliness that she just couldn't help but respond to. It was an essential part of her personality that she couldn't seem to change.

## CHAPTER FOUR

'How MUCH longer now, Rosemary?'

They had been in the air for less than an hour, and Rosemary glanced across at Nicholas, who was busy studying some papers. So far Kit had been very well behaved, but now he was growing restless. The comfort of the private jet was an unfamiliar luxury and one which had taken Rosemary completely off guard. She had expected that they would travel on a scheduled flight, albeit in the first class cabin, and her face burned a little as she remembered Nicholas's sardonically amused reaction to her surprise when he had casually mentioned that he always travelled in his own jet.

She was hesitant to interrupt him, and she spoke rather hesitantly as she asked him how long the flight was likely to last.

'We should be in Paris soon,' he informed her, looking at his watch.

'Paris?' Rosemary frowned.

'Yes . . . Didn't I say? We shall stop over there for a couple of days. I have some business to attend to, and of course you will need to equip yourself and Kit for the rigours of our valley winters. Pierre, my assistant, had arranged an account for you with my Paris bank. Since your position in my household will be that of a relative rather than an employee, there'll be certain occasions when I entertain business colleagues when you will be expected to join us, and naturally you'll need to be suitably dressed. The wives of my French business colleagues are gowned mainly by the important fashion houses, and you'll have to follow their example.'

Rosemary looked shocked. 'But I can't afford those sort of prices!'

His mouth compressed and he looked hard at her.

'Don't be so impossibly naive, Rosemary,' he said silkily. 'Of course, I shall be paying for them. A car and a chauffeur will be placed at your disposal, and Pierre will have made appointments for you. My apartment on the Avenue Foch is convenient for all the more exclusive shopping areas, so you shouldn't have any problems.'

For a few seconds Rosemary couldn't speak. Did he honestly think she would allow him to buy her clothes; to dress her up like a doll just so that she could be paraded in front of his business associates?

'Thank you, but no, thank you,' she said coldly when she had found her voice. 'I'm sorry if my clothes aren't good enough for you, Nicholas, but they're good enough for me, and what's more I'm proud of the fact that I paid for them with money I earned myself!' Her eyes flashed warning signals at him across the table. 'And as far as the valley is concerned, I've already bought suitable clothes for Kit and myself.'

Just before his eyes narrowed she thought she caught a flash of startled surprise in them, but it was quickly gone, his expression the one of cynical boredom she was growing so used to seeing.

'Stop protesting, Rosemary. It's very admirable of you, I'm sure, but hardly relevant. I'm sure your clothes are perfectly adequate for the life you led in London, but the life you'll live from now on will be vastly different.'

'I'm not coming to France to play hostess at your dinner parties, Nicholas. I'm coming to look after Kit.'

'Yes, but I have no desire to have it gossiped amongst my acquaintances that I keep you chained to the schoolroom like some Victorian Cinderella. The French have very strict ideas about family life and the way it should be lived, and they'll certainly expect to see you at my dinner table.'

Maybe they would, but if she had to comply with Nicholas's wishes she was at least going to be wearing her own clothes, paid for by herself. But she wasn't going to argue with him about it. Instead she concentrated on amusing Kit.

So this was Paris; thoroughly bemused by the speed with which they had been whisked first through Customs and then through the streets in their opulent chauffeur- driven car, Rosemary stared round-eyed at her surroundings as they stopped outside a vaguely baroque building.

'My apartment is on the top floor,' Nicholas told her. it's serviced by a private lift for which Pierre has a key.'

Rosemary had already met Nicholas's personal assistant. He had met them at the airport, and had politely acknowledged Rosemary and Kit before turning to have a hurried murmured conversation with Nicholas. He had sat in the front of the car with the chauffeur, and now he gave Rosemary a charming smile before bending down to speak to Kit.

He was younger than Nicholas, somewhere about her own age, and was obviously much more at home with children. Kit, who had steadfastly refused to have anything to do with Nicholas, responded quite easily to Pierre.

Rosemary wasn't sure, but she thought she caught a rather grim look invading Nicholas's eyes as he glanced down at Kit's black head. Didn't he realise that Kit was hostile towards him because he could sense his own reserve?

Sighing faintly, she followed Nicholas inside the building. A uniformed concierge came out to inspect them, smiling warmly as he recognised Nicholas.

Rosemary's own French was too poor to allow her to follow their conversation, but it struck her that Nicholas was far more at ease and pleasant towards the man than she would have expected, and that, far from freezing him off, he was actually smiling back at him.

In the lift Kit clung tightly to her hand, and Rosemary saw that his earlier excitement had been replaced by a fretful tiredness. Like all children he preferred the familiar, and she couldn't blame him for being bewildered and overawed by their strange surroundings.

It was Nicholas who unlocked the door to his apartment, while Pierre stood to one side to allow Rosemary and Kit to precede him.

A tall dark-haired woman in her mid-forties, very formally dressed in a severe black dress, stood in the elegant hallway. She gave Nicholas a brief smile, and Rosemary and Kit a rather wintry look. Plainly she wasn't used to children, Rosemary guessed.

The building which housed the apartment was obviously eighteenth-century, and had probably once been one of the grand *hotels* owned by the French nobility, Rosemary suspected. The hallway was painted a cool green with the plasterwork picked out in white. Its only furniture was a pair of gilded tables with marble tops either side of the room, surmounted by enormous gilded mirrors.

Impressive though it was, Rosemary found the hall cold and unwelcoming. Even the arrangement of all- white flowers looked icily formal.

'Madame Brun, my housekeeper, will show you to your rooms,' Nicholas informed her. 'I shall be engaged on business matters for the rest of the day, but Pierre will be at your disposal should you wish to go out.' He turned to his assistant and asked him something in French, nodding in approval when the young man responded. 'Pierre has made appointments for you with several couturiers for this afternoon

and tomorrow morning. He will accompany you there, of course, and it's been arranged that Madame Brun's niece will take charge of Kit while you're out.'

Rosemary could feel the anger building up inside her. She wanted to protest that she was not a doll to do his bidding, and that she would prefer to meet Madame Brun's niece for herself before trusting to her charge, but she knew that she was too tired and bemused now to deal effectively with Nicholas's particularly effective brand of icy hauteur, so instead she simply gritted her teeth and submissively followed the housekeeper.

She and Kit had been given adjoining rooms with a bathroom in between.

Steeling herself against the housekeeper's disapproval, Rosemary carefully asked her if it would be possible for Kit to have something to eat.

'Something light, perhaps,' she suggested, 'an omelette . . . and a glass of milk.'

Not sure whether or not she had made herself understood, she waited until the housekeeper had retreated before examining her surroundings.

Her bedroom was decorated in soft tones of old rose, picking out the faded colour in the carpet on the floor. She touched the cover on the large double bed experimentally, not at all surprised when she felt the special softness of silk beneath her fingertips.

The curtains no doubt were equally luxurious, and she crossed over to the window to look down into the street below.

'Rosemary, I don't like it here. I want to go home!'

Kit's plaintive complaint brought her attention back to the room and she smiled encouragingly at the little boy, kneeling down so that they were on the same level.

'We won't be staying here for long, Kit,' she coaxed him.

'And then we'll be going home.'

'To a new home,' she compromised. 'But you'll like it, I promise.' She bent down to ruffle the dark hair and he snuggled up against her. The door opened and she looked over his head to see Nicholas standing on the threshold frowning down at her.

'Madame Brun said that you'd requested something to eat.'

'For Kit,' Rosemary told him patiently. 'He normally has his lunch at this time, and then a nap. I'd prefer to stick to his routine until he's adjusted to his new life.'

'In France children eat with their parents.'

'But you said you'd be tied up for the rest of the day,' Rosemary pointed out to him, 'and besides, Kit is hungry now.'

As Nicholas came into the room, Kit backed nervously away, clinging hard to Rosemary's skirt. She saw the brief flash of temper ignite dark sparks in Nicholas's eyes as he said curtly, 'You've spoiled the boy, made him far too dependent on you.'

'He's still only a baby,' Rosemary protested defensively, 'and he's not used to you.'

She saw Nicholas frown again, and although there was nothing in his face that betrayed any emotion at all she suddenly wondered how he must feel to have his sister's child turn away from him, and was overwhelmed by a feeling of deep compassion.



Bending down, she cuddled Kit reassuringly and whispered to him. 'Why don't you show Uncle Nicholas the new car we bought last week?'

His new car was Kit's pride and joy, and as Rosemary had suspected he was not proof against a chance to show it off. He grabbed it eagerly from her hand, and forgot his earlier fear of Nicholas as he displayed his new toy.

Just as Kit reached him, Nicholas looked at her over the little boy's head, a strange look in his eyes that she couldn't translate.

'I'll arrange for Madame Brun to provide something for the child to eat,' and then he was gone, leaving Kit staring after him in puzzled disappointment.

Why had he done that? Why had he rejected Kit like that? And then she knew; it was because *she* had coaxed Kit into approaching him, and that had hurt his pride.

So he did have some chinks in his armour after all! Ridiculously, her heart ached for him. He was so alone; so cut off from all the normal human joys and pains. Kit tugged impatiently on her skirt. 'Rosemary, he didn't want to play with my car ... '

'No, dear—I expect he was too busy.'

'Like Jonathan's father,' Kit agreed wisely. 'He's busy too.'

'I've arranged appointments for you at four of the main couture houses.'

Rosemary was sitting in the back of the car with Pierre, smiling politely and trying not to let her resentment show. After all, it was not

his fault, but the person who was at fault was conveniently otherwise engaged.

Did Nicholas really expect her to allow him to buy her clothes? Did he really think she had so little pride or independence?

Her quarrel wasn't with Pierre, she reminded herself; he was only doing his job and it would be unfair of her to take out her ire on him. No, the best thing would be for her to simply go along with the arrangements, but to quietly and calmly refuse to buy anything.

'Of course there will not be enough time for clothes to be made for you, but all the houses carry a small amount of stock, so you should be able to take some things with you to Val des Neiges.'

Although Rosemary longed to question him about the valley, she judged it wiser to keep her questions to herself. She would be there soon enough, after all.

She frowned. Madame Brun's niece had proved far less formidable than the housekeeper and she had felt quite happy about leaving Kit with her, but she did not want to leave him for too long.

The limousine glided to a halt, and the chauffeur got out to open the door. Rosemary's eyes widened as she saw the name inscribed outside the discreet entrance. Never in a thousand years had she ever envisaged herself shopping here!

The model-perfect receptionist who took their names thoroughly unnerved her, her clothes immediately making her aware of her own chain-store skirt and top.

'A *vendeuse* will be with you in a moment,' she told them in perfect although slightly accented English. 'If you will please have a seat.'

Rosemary had barely sat down when she was swept to her feet again by the entrance of the chicly dressed woman, with a perfect chignon of dark hair and the most immaculate make-up Rosemary had ever seen in her life. They were escorted through a salon, and seated on flimsily delicate blondewood gilded chairs, while a succession of models paraded in front of them. Each outfit was described by the *vendeuse* in careful detail, and she explained to Rosemary that she had picked out only those items which were readily available, and also suitable for her petite size.

'I was informed that you require both day and evening dresses.'

Although she longed to tell her that she didn't require anything Rosemary kept her thoughts firmly to herself, steeling herself against the temptation of the beautiful clothes being shown to her.

It was positively wicked to even think of spending so much money on mere raiment when so many people were starving, she told herself stalwartly, while yet another part of her mind reminded her that without women rich enough to buy such clothes the people who made and sold them would be without work.

'This in particular would suit you, especially with your colouring.'

Rosemary blinked as she saw the apparition floating towards her on what appeared to be a mist of lavender and grey swirling chiffon.

The dress clung and moved ethereally, so light and delicate that it almost floated, layer after layer of the finest silk chiffon in a shifting range of muted colours, the tiny bodice supported by fragile diamante-studded shoestring straps.

'You must try that one,' Pierre urged with a Frenchman's eye for colour and design, and somehow by the end of the showing, Rosemary found that she had agreed to try four separate outfits including the lavender chiffon.

All of them suited her, but the lavender chiffon was special; it was the sort of dress every woman dreamed of owning, she acknowledged as she studied herself in the mirror, wondering at the way the chiffon hugged and moulded her breasts and how it emphasised the slenderness of her waist.

Reluctantly she took it off, sighing faintly. She couldn't have it, of course. It would be way, way beyond what she would ever pay for her clothes. The other dresses, the grey satin sheath with its brilliantly beaded fitted jacket, and the two daytime outfits had suited her as well, but when the *vendeuse* told her so, she simply smiled gravely and allowed herself to be led back to the salon where Pierre was waiting.

'I should prefer to visit the other houses before coming to a decision,' she told him, forestalling his questions. She had decided that this was the easiest and pleasantest way of dealing with the situation until she could confront Nicholas and tell him that she flatly refused to allow him to furnish her with a new wardrobe.

'We only have time to visit one more today, and we shall see the other two in the morning.'

She couldn't wait that long to confront Nicholas, Rosemary decided. She would tell him this evening that she had no intention of allowing him to manoeuvre her in this way.

The clothes they were shown in the second salon, although impressive, were not, to Rosemary's mind, as much in tune with her own tastes as the others had been, and this time Pierre made no demur when she left the salon without coming to any decision.

It was five o'clock when they got back to the apartment, and she went straight to Kit's room to check up on the little boy.

As she opened the door she could hear the high- pitched sound of Kit's baby voice mingling excitedly with the masculine tones of Nicholas, and she stopped abruptly on the open threshold.

Kit was sitting on the floor, playing with his toys, and Nicholas . . . Nicholas was sitting there with him, his dark head bent towards the little boy's as he explained something technical and, Rosemary would have thought, far too sophisticated for the little boy to understand; nevertheless Kit was listening to him.

As she watched them, both sorrow and pleasure touched her heart. Sorrow for Adam and Belle who could not see their son growing up, and pleasure that Nicholas Powers had been able to cast aside his loneliness and reach out to his nephew.

Suddenly Kit saw her, and getting up ran towards her, flinging his arms round her legs.

'Uncle Nicholas and me have been playing cars,' he announced.

Rosemary smiled at him, ruffling his hair teasingly. 'So I saw!'

Nicholas too stood up, but he was frowning.

'You're back earlier than I expected,' he observed.

'Kit, why don't you put your toys away while I talk to your uncle?' suggested Rosemary.

Obediently the little boy trotted off and started to gather up the cars.

'What is it you want to say to me?' asked Nicholas.

'I can't allow you to buy my clothes for me,' she told him huskily, wishing he wouldn't stand quite so close to her. It unnerved her somehow.

'We've already been through this—your clothes . . . ' he began.

'Are my concern, and not yours. If you're so afraid I might embarrass you in front of your friends, then it's best if I don't meet them. In fact I think I'd prefer it that way.'

He seemed about to argue with her, and then instead he said suavely, 'How many houses did you visit this afternoon?'

'Two,' Rosemary told him shortly. 'And I've already told Pierre that I'm not visiting any more. Some of those clothes cost almost as much as I'd earn in six months! I won't let you spend that amount of money on me ... '

Nicholas heard the distress and sincerity in her voice and frowned. She was something totally outside his experience; this woman who was in so many ways almost a child, and yet who had an integrity and a determination that he was reluctantly forced to acknowledge and admire. Nevertheless he intended to have his own way.

He looked at her, and Rosemary, not understanding the reason for his smile, felt a thrill of nervous emotion run through her.

'Very well, if that's how you feel.'

As he walked past her out into the corridor, she stared after him, hardly able to believe he had given in so easily.

## CHAPTER FIVE

As THE Lear jet broke through the clouds and levelled off, Rosemary settled herself comfortably in her seat. Their short stay in Paris was over and now she and Kit were on their way to their new home.

First they were flying to Nice, and then they would be taken by helicopter on to the valley. She glanced across the table at Nicholas. He was deeply engrossed in studying some papers, and she recalled how surprised Pierre had been to learn that Nicholas was actually accompanying them to the valley.

'He seems to avoid flying whenever he can these days,' he had told Rosemary afterwards, 'and as he has business meetings in Paris later in the month, I shouldn't have thought he would have gone with you. I could have quite easily deputised for him, and I would have enjoyed doing so,' he had added, giving Rosemary a flattering smile, but she was oblivious to his admiration, worrying instead about the effects of the flight on Nicholas.

As though he sensed her regard he looked up at her. His face seemed oddly pale, and she could see that his eyes were shadowed with pain. It seemed inconceivable that he should have put himself through the agony of flying simply to accompany Kit and herself to the chateau; inconceivable, and surely completely out of character. She had not thought him the type of man who would put himself out for anyone. And yet here he was . . .

He moved his head and she saw him touch his ear, and instantly she felt remorse. Ridiculously, she wanted to reach out and comfort him. He wasn't a child like Kit, she reminded herself; she couldn't take away his pain with a cuddle and a kiss.

Kit, who had been sitting quite happily in his own seat, suddenly scrambled on to her lap and complained sleepily, 'I'm tired, Rosemary.'

With the ease of the very young, he was asleep almost instantly, cuddling into her body, burying his face against her breasts. He was a little boy who needed to maintain physical contact. Always affectionate and demonstrative, Rosemary had never tried to discourage him from wanting to be kissed and cuddled, but now, for some reason, she felt acutely conscious of the way he pressed himself against her body, his small hand curling into the V of her blouse.

Unwillingly she glanced across at Nicholas and saw that he was watching them with a brooding expression in his eyes.

Before he could speak, she burst out defensively, 'He's still only a baby!'

'Maybe, but he's going to grow up to be a man.'

His voice was harsh, but whether from pain or from disapproval she didn't know. She felt herself beginning to tremble, though, as she tried to decipher the meaning behind his words. Did he mean that he wasn't going to allow her to baby Kit? She was determined that the little boy wasn't going to be forced to grow up before he was ready. He *was* still only a baby, after all. Instinctively her arms tightened round him, her eyes glowing with protective determination as she stared back at Nicholas.

She was tired herself; the strain of the shock of Nicholas's eruption into her life and all that had followed it was taking its toll, and slowly her own eyelids dropped and she slept, unaware that on the other side of the table Nicholas was watching her, his face taut with a mixture of strain and anger.



This wasn't what he had intended. It was illogical as well as almost inconceivable that he should feel desire for this slender blonde girl, who was still almost entirely a child. It was also inconvenient. His mouth tightened. He knew any amount of women who were both willing and more than able to alleviate his physical desire, so why was he allowing himself to get so wound up over this one?

Irritated with himself, he shifted in his seat. The pain in his ear intensified and he felt an inward flare of panic. He was going deaf. A now familiar sense of helplessness boiled over inside him. He closed his eyes and tried to relax. Whatever else happened, his mother and her family must not be allowed to get their hands on Powers Oil. Whatever had to be sacrificed . . . whatever had to be done to prevent that would be done. He felt the plane start to drop and his body tensed in anticipation of physical agony. It seemed to get worse every time, or was it simply his ability to cope that deteriorated? Sometimes he even thought that deafness would be preferable to the pain, but that feeling never lasted long.

It was ironic that it had been his mother who had caused the damage to his hearing. If she had not hit out at him in temper and then shut him in the nursery ... if she had paid heed to his infant cries, the doctors could have diagnosed the virus before it was too late, but she had not cared enough to find out why her baby cried, she had only wanted to silence him. His eyes opened and he glanced across at where Kit lay in Rosemary's arms, his head pillowed against her breast, his small hands clinging to her.

Suddenly, shockingly, he ached to share his nephew's pillow, to know the exquisite comfort and protection of being held as Kit was being held, but even as the desire formed he crushed it. There wasn't any room for that sort of weakness in his life; there never had been and there never would be. As for wanting Rosemary . . .

He looked at her again and mentally compared her with the women who had shared his bed. What on earth had made him think he desired her? He was suffering from frustration, that was all. Once he had installed them at the chateau he would go to Paris. Monique would be very pleased to see him; she found her diplomat husband excruciatingly boring. Yes . . . Monique . . .

Pain seared through his head and he clamped his teeth together against it, wanting to cry out against the physical agony destroying him, and yet schooled from babyhood not to betray pain or fear to anyone.

Rosemary opened her eyes, waking up abruptly, confused by the feeling that someone had called out to her. Kit slept on, and her puzzled eyes lifted, then widened as she instinctively reached out to touch Nicholas's braced arm.

He recoiled from her almost violently, his face hardening into a bone-crunching mask of rejection, and her desire to reach out and comfort him faded into a sick despair for her own foolishness as she hurriedly withdrew to her own side of the table. Of course he didn't need or want her sympathy. Of course he resented her seeing him in pain, and yet for all his hard coldness, she was left with an overwhelming sense of his aloneness; of his deliberate determination not to allow anyone to reach out and touch him in any human way at all, either physical, emotional or mental. Only with Kit had she seen him relaxed. She sighed and closed her eyes again. Not because she was tired, but because she sensed it was what he wanted. If she could give him nothing else, at least she could give him his privacy.

From the unexpected comfort of the helicopter, Rosemary looked down on the lower slopes of the Alps. They were gaining height all the time, and Kit, who had been rendered speechless with delight at

the sight of the machine, now sat on her lap with his nose pressed to the window.

Nicholas was talking with the pilot, Jacques; they were talking together in French. Beneath them the jagged peak of the Alps soared upwards; Rosemary could see the snowline, and a shiver of excitement quivered through her. Tempted by heaven alone knew what impulse, she had paid a visit to their local library one day while Kit was out. It had taken the librarian a long time to track down what she wanted, but eventually she had come up with something.

'Most of these tiny principalities died out at the beginning of the nineteenth century, especially the German ones,' she had told Rosemary. 'We don't have an awful lot on it, I'm afraid. Apparently the valley was a gift from Catherine de Medici to one of her courtiers.'

Several history books and a detailed travel guide of the French Alps had changed hands, and Rosemary had taken them home to read. The travel guide did little more than acknowledge Val des Neiges' existence, and from what Rosemary had been able to judge from the map it was very high up in the Alps indeed. The guide described it as an anachronism, explaining that the entire valley was privately owned and could only be reached by helicopter or by a single road pass. It had added that the valley had once been owned by the Comtes de Blanchard but that it had passed out of the family's hands shortly after the first world war.

From what Rosemary could judge, the valley covered something just over eighty square miles. It had its own river and a small lake, and on a high plateau looking down on the pass into the valley stood the chateau, with a small village at its feet.

The history books had been a little more forthcoming. As the librarian had explained, the valley had initially been a gift from Catherine de Medici, the Italian Queen of France, to one of her courtiers, Guy de

Blanchard. No one knew exactly what he had done to earn such a gift, but there were hints that he had aided the Queen in her most secret and subtle plots.

Catherine de Medici: now that had been a woman to be reckoned with. The Black Spider, they had once called her; a plain dumpling of an Italian from a family notorious for its skill with poison and its greed for power, married to one of the most charismatic kings France had ever had.

But Henri II had not wanted his dull Italian wife. How could he? He had the most beautiful woman in the world as his mistress; the fabled Diane de Poitiers.

It was rumoured that the Queen in her jealousy had had a secret spyhole made in the King's private apartments so that she could watch while he lay with his mistress. It was also rumoured that she dealt in black magic and sorcery, and whatever the truth, it was known that she often consulted the fabled astronomer, Nostradamus. It was he who predicted the blight that would fall on her children; her eldest son married to Mary, Queen of Scots and then dead so soon afterwards. It had also been during her reign that so many Huguenots had been massacred. They had been violent times, and who knew what Guy de Blanchard had done to win the Queen's favour.

Had he been grateful to her, or had he perhaps resented being sent so far away from court? Perhaps the valley had not been a gift after all, but rather a means of imprisoning an unruly power-seeker without iron bars. It was the sort of subtlety for which Catherine had been justly famous.

For all their beauty, there was something brooding about the Alps, something ancient and unfathomable. They were so high now that Rosemary could look down on the snow-covered peaks. In the distance they rose even higher, and she caught her breath as the

helicopter suddenly soared over a high ridge, then found she couldn't release it as she stared in awed delight at the panorama below her.

A long, deep valley curved through the mountains, entirely surrounded by them, and on its most westerly boundary, perched high on a snow-covered plateau, soared the gilded towers of the most fairytale building Rosemary had ever seen. The setting sun flushed the walls a soft pink, and tinged the snowy towers to match. To Rosemary's bemused eyes it seemed as though the entire chateau floated ethereally between snow and sky, on a blanket of pink-tinged cloud. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen, so painfully lovely that her eyes stung with tears. It was like nothing she had ever known in her life, or dreamed of knowing; a child's dream of a fairytale castle, all tall slender towers and graceful curves. Where she had anticipated grim granite, crouching grey against the starkness of towering mountains, there was a creation as delicate and fragile as a spider's web.

How on earth had anyone managed to create something so beautiful in this out-of-the-way place? The stone alone, the same pale, creamy stone she recognised from the great chateaux of the Loire, must surely have taken years to bring here.

The helicopter was dropping, and she could see now that the steeply shaped roofs of the towers were not gilded, but merely reflected the brilliance of the late afternoon sun. She could also see a miniature lake to one side of the chateau, its walls disappearing beneath the blue water.

They hovered over what she saw was an outer wall. Below them was an empty courtyard, surely far too small a space for them to land in? She could see the lead-paned windows glinting in the sun. A dog barked, the sound briefly audible above the noise of their descent.

Kit woke up, his eyes rounding in excitement. How nice to be that age and know no fear! Rosemary sighed, her stomach muscles tensing, and then to her relief they were down.

The pilot helped them out, and assured Rosemary that their luggage would be attended to. Nicholas was already standing on the ground. He had his head turned away from them, but when he moved, Rosemary felt her chest contract in sympathy as she saw the blind glitter of pain in his eyes.

His ears ... Of course, if the plane affected them, the helicopter must have been sheer torture.

Without being aware of it she must have made some small move towards him, because all of a sudden he tensed and whipped round, glaring at her. His stance, the look on his face, the hardness of his mouth, all screamed fierce resentment, and automatically she stepped back, sensing that she had somehow violated some unwritten law.

'If you will come this way, Madame Hubert, the housekeeper, will attend to you.' The pilot was waiting for them to join him. 'Monsieur Powers offers his apologies, but he has work to do.'

Work? How could he work when he was in that sort of pain? But Rosemary didn't argue. Instead, she picked Kit up and trudged across the courtyard in the opposite direction from the one Nicholas had taken.

Madame Hubert was a small, rather severe-looking woman, in her late fifties, but apart from that she bore no resemblance at all to Rosemary's mental imaginings of a housekeeper. Her immaculately styled grey hair immediately made Rosemary acutely conscious of her own untidy long tresses. They had left in such a rush that morning, there simply had not been time to pin her hair back in its normal neat chignon. The dress Madame was wearing was black, but

it was so beautifully and elegantly tailored that Rosemary could only assume that Nicholas must pay his staff extremely well; it bore the same exclusive air as those she had been shown at the couture houses.

If she had been asked to assess Madame Hubert's role in life simply by judging her appearance, she would have instantly guessed that she was the wife of an extremely well-to-do business man. There was certainly nothing about her that suggested she needed to earn her own living. Her manner towards Rosemary was cool and rather remote, but not enough to be considered offensive. It was that slight touch of *hauteur* in Madame's manner that made her feel subconsciously inferior and ill at ease, Rosemary reflected, as the Frenchwoman greeted her in precise careful English. One thing did perturb her, however. Madame Hubert did not look to her like a woman who would welcome a three-year-old running about. Suppressing a faint sigh, she followed her into what could only be described as a baronial hall.

It was huge, almost overwhelmingly so, and looking around her Rosemary tried to quell a sense of awe. The ceiling was painted in the style made fashionable by the Italians and later adopted by France. Well-endowed nymphs and veil-draped females seemed to be engaged in garlanding a robed and bearded enthroned male. Rosemary knew that many of these paintings were allegorical and that the painters had delighted in hiding clues to their patrons' titles and honours, often by pictorial references to various Greek myths.

The motto and the arms carved into the stonework above the fireplace must surely belong to the de Blanchard family, and the faded, embroidered banners, some quartered with the lilies of France, must too surely have originated from the same source.

At some time a parquet floor had been put down, and Rosemary surveyed its glossy finish with dismay, already anticipating the havoc small rubber-soled boots might wreak on it. Surely the beautiful silk

rugs scattered on the polished wood must have been so prized by their original owners that no foot had ever been allowed to touch them. They must have been bought to adorn cold stone walls, from hotter Persian or Indian climates.

'If you will please come this way.'

Madame Hubert, it seemed, was not in the least awed by the magnificence of her surroundings and firmly guided Rosemary towards a massive double staircase.

Kit had fallen fast asleep in her arms, so Rosemary was able to give her full attention to the soaring spectacle of the staircase. It was incredible that something so delicate and fragile-looking could have been carved out of what was in reality a massively solid edifice.

The satin warm gleam of the wood was impossible to resist, and Rosemary found herself reaching out to caress it. She wanted to linger and study the delicacy of the carvings. There was a bunch of grapes almost real enough to eat, there a peach. How had this work of art been created here in this valley almost above the tree-line? Where had it come from? Was it cedar from the Lebanon, or some rare hardwood from the Americas?

The stair treads were covered in a deep-pile dark red carpet—so deep that it completely muffled their footsteps. At the first floor landing Madame Hubert paused.

'On this floor is the ballroom and its ante-rooms. The Napoleonic Comte de Blanchard, who was responsible for its design, was attached to the court of the Tsar Nicholas before the outbreak of hostilities, and it is fashioned after the style of the Imperial Ballroom. Tomorrow perhaps when you are rested I will show you over the chateau. On this floor also are two ante-rooms in the same style.'



At the second floor landing Madame stopped, then took the right-hand corridor.

'This is the family wing of the chateau,' she informed Rosemary. The other corridor leads to the guest wing, and the staff quarters are on the top floor.'

'Does Nicholas ... Mr Powers employ a large staff?'

'Not on a permanent basis. There is Louis Brun, his chauffeur, who is in Paris at the moment; Louis' wife takes care of the Paris apartment. Then there is Pierre, his personal assistant, and Jacques, the pilot whom you have already met. Until recently Monsieur Powers flew the helicopter himself, but since some months past he has chosen not to.'

Because of the pain he experienced when flying Rosemary guessed. How galling it must be to a man of Nicholas's temperament—a man who she judged loathed and abhorred relying on anyone for anything—to have to admit that there already were some things he could no longer do for himself.

How would she feel, she wondered, faced with the knowledge that she was suffering from a disease which would slowly and painfully deprive her of one of her five senses? Despite the pleasant warmth all around her she suddenly shivered. It was bad enough for her to contemplate such a disability, but for Nicholas, who trusted no one, who she guessed had struggled since his teens to make himself an island, totally self-sufficient, it must be the most appalling mental ordeal. And yet when he had spoken to her about it, he had sounded controlled, and almost indifferent; as though he were talking about someone other than himself. Perhaps that was the only way he could cope with it, Rosemary thought intuitively.

Madame Hubert paused outside a heavy, polished wooden door and opened it, moving aside so that Rosemary could precede her into the room. At first sight it was overwhelmingly large; surely it had more floor space than all the rooms in her London house put together? Then she realised that it was hexagon-shaped.

This must be one of the towers?'

Madame Hubert inclined her immaculately coiffured head in agreement.

'Originally this was three rooms, but Monsieur Powers commissioned the English interior designer David Hicks to remodel all the rooms in the family wing three years ago.

This door,' she touched a door, so cleverly panelled in the same rich wallpapers as the walls that until then Rosemary hadn't noticed it, 'opens on to a short corridor, into your bathroom and dressing-room. This door,' she moved across the room, 'leads into your personal sitting-room and connects with the child's room. There are nurseries on the top floor, but Monsieur Powers said that for the present you would want the child close at hand. The matter of his rooms and the staff that will need to be hired are things that can be discussed at a later date. When Monsieur Powers is not in residence I have three girls in from the village to assist me, and we take on part-time staff for those times when Monsieur Powers wishes to entertain here. I will leave you to settle in,' she added. 'Jacques will bring up the bags. I shall send someone up with a tray of tea—and perhaps a light omelette? Monsieur Powers does not dine until eight-thirty. And the child, he will want something to eat?'

'Oh, just a glass of milk and perhaps a lightly boiled egg for now,' Rosemary told her, feeling thoroughly bemused as the housekeeper gave her a polite smile and left her to take in the magnificence of her surroundings.

Kit had grown heavy in her arms and she looked for somewhere to put him, blenching a little at the thought of anyone actually sitting in the elegantly upholstered chairs scattered round the room. The only place she had ever seen chairs like these had been in coffee-table books or stately homes, and she touched the rich blue brocade covering of one of them admiringly, before going over to put Kit down on her bed.

That bed! She had purposely not looked at it once after her initial shock of delight, because she hadn't wanted to betray to the housekeeper her awed disbelief.

It was a massive four-poster, taking up one entire section of the hexagonal walls. This was no modern creation made up of frills of material and flimsy posts. For a start it was almost eight feet high and the head of the bed comprised a massive thickness of dark oak, liberally carved with a variety of arms, embellished by all manner of fantastic animals. The same expensive brocade had been used for the bedhangings, which were lined with what looked like thick white satin. The cover on the bed matched but had been appliqued in a rich, faintly medieval design in a subtle blending of pinks and lilacs.

The carpet defied description. It was obviously antique Aubusson, Rosemary thought, or perhaps Savonnerie. Carefully tugging down the appliqued cover, she put Kit down on the bed. The sheets and pillowcases were the finest linen and smelled faintly of lavender. Totally bemused by her surroundings, she wandered round the room, looking, touching, feeling hopelessly overwhelmed by such a careless display, not just of wealth, but also of the subtle indications of the sort of wealth that went hand in hand with owning all that was the very best.

A quick glance at Kit showed her that he was fast asleep and likely to remain that way until she woke him, so she opened the panelled door into the corridor.

She found the dressing-room first. It was lined with enough mirrored wardrobes to hold a department store's worth of clothes, and there were cupboards and drawers for everything—shoes, hats, gloves, everything.

Feeling as though she had strayed by mistake on to a Hollywood film set, Rosemary opened the bathroom door, then stared in open-mouthed amazement at the incredible and totally unexpected richness of the gold-veined black marble, and the effect created by discreetly placed mirrors and lights.

It should have looked almost vulgar, but somehow it didn't. Instead, it hinted at a voluptuous luxury that made Rosemary feel totally out of place. This was a setting for a woman of sensuality; who knew her own worth and revelled in her sexuality. It was most definitely not the right setting for the Rosemarys of this world.

The bath was enormous, carved out of the same marble adorning the walls. The fittings were gold, the floor matching the walls; there was even, ridiculously, and yet somehow appropriately, a black velvet chaise-longue with gold-coloured clawed feet and scrolled headrest. Stifling a giggle that was pure hysteria, Rosemary tried to imagine Kit sailing his plastic boats in this sybaritic splendour. The mental effect was reassuringly ridiculous. She simply could not imagine herself using this room. Quietly closing the door, as she stepped back into the corridor, she leaned against it and closed her eyes. She didn't put it past Nicholas to have given her this suite deliberately as a mocking reinforcement of his contempt of her sexual ignorance. She wasn't that ignorant—that huge bath, the whole ambience of the room were dedicated to the worship of the sensual; a delicate inducement towards the erotic, that somehow made it only necessary for her to close her eyes to imagine it peopled with lovers.

Mind you, she thought prosaically, as she walked back to her bedroom, that marble floor would be pretty cold and hard on bare

flesh. The thought made her grin, and helped her to throw off her sense of being diminished by the magnificence of her surroundings.

Kit was still asleep, so she went to stand by the window. The padded window seat would be a good place to curl up on a cold day. She had an excellent view of the small artificial lake and the cluster of fir trees beyond. No doubt somewhere there would be formal gardens of the type beloved by the French—parterre gardens, they were called, weren't they? It occurred to her as she went to investigate her sitting-room and Kit's bedroom that if she was to learn anything about the chateau and its furnishings, she was likely to spend most of her spare time reading up on antiques.

The sitting-room had obviously been decorated to match her bedroom. The small lady's writing desk and the deeply cushioned sofa were two things she fell for immediately. There was also a run of mahogany bookcases flanking the fireplace, and a piece of furniture which looked like a free-standing cupboard, but which she discovered held a television and video set.

She had enjoyed the luxury of a video at home, and it struck her that if she could find a postal service she could occupy some of her spare time, viewing the latest films, and that she could also use the video to start to teach Kit. He was very advanced for his age, and she was anxious that he didn't fall behind, now that he wasn't going to be attending his play-school classes. She would have to find out if there were other children of his age in the village. It was one thing for her to do without adult company, but she didn't want Kit to grow up segregated from his peers.

The bedroom he had been given was very much a replica of hers, probably because it shared the same sitting-room, but it didn't have a four-poster bed, and Rosemary quickly stripped off the expensive satin cover from the bed and made a mental note to talk to Nicholas about making the room more suitable for a child of Kit's age.

If the nurseries were on the upper floor, it might be as well if both she and Kit had rooms up there, she reflected as she went back to her own room. Certainly these were beautiful, but they were not the sort of rooms a child could easily relax in.

She reached her room just as Jacques arrived with some of their cases, closely followed by a girl in a maid's uniform wheeling a large trolley. Obviously somewhere there must be a lift, Rosemary reflected, indicating to the girl that she could wheel the trolley into the sitting-room.

Kit, at first inclined to be grumpy at being woken up, soon cheered up when he saw his favourite supper of boiled egg. Her own omelette was delicious, but Rosemary was in a ferment of dread lest Kit should spill food on to the priceless carpet.

After she had bathed him, she read to him for half an hour, until he fell asleep.

It was only half past six, but she was tired herself; far too-tired to contemplate fencing with Nicholas over the full formality of dinner, and she still had to unpack.

Tiredly she walked back to her own room and surveyed the cases and boxes. The boxes of Kit's toys could wait until tomorrow. He would enjoy 'helping' her to unpack them, but their clothes . . . She came to an abrupt halt as her eyes registered the presence of four unfamiliar boxes, their black shiny exteriors lavishly printed with gold lettering.

Slowly she linked the upside-down letters together, a flush of angry heat staining her skin as she realised what they were. No wonder Nicholas had accepted her refusal to allow him to buy her some new clothes so readily!

She picked up the first box with shaking fingers and unfastened it. The grey silk chiffon dress lay there underneath layers of tissue

paper. She opened the next box, already half anticipating what she would find, and wasn't surprised to see one of the day dresses she had tentatively admired.

The last two boxes revealed other outfits she had liked, and her mouth compressed bitterly, as tears gathered in her eyes. How could he do this to her? Didn't he realise how much it hurt her pride? Of course he realised, she thought angrily. He must do. Dashing the tears away, she almost ran out into the corridor. Nicholas's room was off the same corridor as the suite shared by Kit and herself, so presumably it shouldn't be too difficult to find. Caution warned her to wait and talk to him when she was in a more rational frame of mind, but she didn't feel like being cautious. She wanted to tell him exactly what he could do with his patronising disregard for her feelings, and she wanted to tell him right now.

She found his room on her third attempt. Rather hesitantly she walked inside. Nicholas wasn't there . . . which meant possibly that he must still be downstairs working in his study.

Compressing her mouth, she went downstairs and knocked briskly on the study door, turning the handle and opening it before he could deny her admittance.

He was sitting behind a huge partners' desk, his head « bent over some papers, and he frowned as she walked in. He had discarded his jacket and his thin silk shirt clung to his chest.

Forcing herself not to quail beneath the inimical look in his eyes, Rosemary stood in front of him.

'I've just started unpacking Kit's and my things.'

His mouth compressed still further, and he gave her a look which suggested that he was impatient of her intrusion.

'Yes? Do you need someone to help you? If so, Madame Hubert . . . '

'I don't need any help. I just want to know what those clothes from Dior are doing with my things.'

'Can't you guess?' His voice was exceedingly dry. 'I should have thought it was self-evident.'

'But I told you I didn't want . . . '

'I'm not interested in what you may or may not want, Rosemary,' he cut across her words incisively. 'You were behaving like a child, and like a child you're going to have to learn that you can't always have your own way. I've already explained to you why you need those clothes.' He looked at her chain store clothes derisively and said, 'Surely it can't have escaped your notice that even my housekeeper is better dressed than you.' His eyes blazed suddenly as he leaned across the desk and demanded furiously, 'Do you really think I'd allow you to make me a source of gossip among my business acquaintances by appearing dressed like that?'

'And I've already told you that I won't accept charity!' Rosemary was very close to tears.

'I'm not prepared to argue with you over it. When you appear in front of my friends . . . '

'I'm not going to appear in front of them. I'm here to look after Kit.'

'You're here as my nephew's aunt.' His face tightened as he stood up and moved away from the desk. 'I don't know what perverse pleasure you get from defying me like this, Rosemary. Any other woman in your shoes would be down on her knees thanking me ... '



'Maybe the kind of women you know would, but I've never allowed anyone to buy my clothes for me and I'm not going to start now. I'd rather burn those things upstairs than wear them!'

'Why, you . . . ' He moved towards her, then suddenly stopped, one hand going to his face. A baffled, vulnerable look darkened his eyes, and then right in front of her he made a small sound of pain and collapsed.

Mercifully, he hadn't seemed to catch his head on the desk as he fell, Rosemary thought as she bent over him, their quarrel forgotten in the flood of anxiety that swept over her.

There was something almost shocking about the way he lay sprawled on the carpet. She reached out to touch him, feeling the rapid pulse of the blood moving in his veins as she touched his temple.

He moaned and moved his head, opening his eyes. Immediately they fixed on hers, the pupils dilated with pain, the iris dark with bitter rage, and even though she knew it was the wrong thing to do, she reached out to touch him, comfortingly. His arm felt hard and warm beneath the thin covering of his shirt, his forehead beaded with perspiration. Immediately he jerked back from her, totally ignoring her hesitant plea not to move as he struggled to get up.

Even he couldn't ignore the fact that moving had drained every last reserve of his strength. He had to lean against the desk, his face white with strain and physical pain.

By some alchemy she couldn't begin to understand, Rosemary knew with an awareness that went soul-deep that beneath the controlled hardness of his self-imposed control, he was as agonisingly vulnerable and terrified as Kit was when he woke up from a nightmare. Only Nicholas's nightmare was something he could never wake up from, and as intuitively as she knew what he was enduring,

Rosemary also knew that he knew it too, and he was resenting and rejecting her knowledge with every atom of mental energy he possessed.

She could almost feel the strain of his mental concentration on shutting her out. The hard planes and angles of his face stood out, and his eyes, all ice-green now, denied her with an implacability that tore at her tender heart.

'Get out!' She could almost feel the words lacerate his throat and she knew that he would never, never forgive her for seeing him like this, afraid and alone. How many times had he collapsed like this before, driven beyond the limits of physical endurance by the pain that tormented him?

'You ought to sit down . . . ' She moved to touch him, to direct him back to the chair as she might have done Kit, her breath compressing deep in her chest as she saw the way he recoiled from her touch.

She doubted that any other human being had ever been allowed to see him like this, and she wondered how on earth she was going to be able to build up a secure background for Kit, in the face of the almost violent hostility she could feel emanating from his uncle.

'I said get out!'

He moved away from the desk and came towards her. His shirt was unfastened at the throat and her attention was momentarily caught by the raw maleness of his exposed flesh. Her tongue circled her lips, wetting their taut dryness. A peculiar sensation rolled through her lower body, so devastating that for a moment she thought she was going to faint.

The moment she felt the hard bite of his hands into her flesh she panicked, hardly knowing why she was struggling to break free, only knowing that she must. She could hear the harsh, laboured drag of

Nicholas's breathing and almost feel the violent antipathy he felt towards her.

'Let me go!' Panic lent her strength and she didn't realise until she pulled free of him and bumped into a chair that he had been pushing her towards the open door. As she felt herself falling she clutched desperately at Nicholas, causing both of them to overbalance. She heard the air explode out of his lungs as he hit the floor, his body cushioning the impact of her own fall.

For a second she could do nothing but lie sprawled on top of him, trying to catch her breath and steady her quivering limbs.

'Just what the hell do you think you're playing at?'

'Your hearing's come back,' she said without thinking, without even knowing how she knew, and winced beneath the merciless vitriol in his eyes.

'What are you,' he snarled, 'a bloody witch?'

Pain unravelled inside her. Didn't he realise that she wanted this . . . this *knowing* as little as he did?

She struggled to get up and gasped when he stopped her, shivering as she saw the rage in his eyes.

This wasn't the cool controlled man she had thought she was beginning to know, and she sensed that she was seeing a side of him that was normally kept strictly under control. She tried to move, but his arms tightened round her, his mouth curling in a cruel smile as he witnessed her helpless struggles.

The shocking intimacy of his body pressed against hers as he rolled her beneath him froze her into immobility; one hand gripped her hip, the other tangled in her hair, tugging it painfully.

Tears of shock and reaction weren't very far away. She wasn't used to this sort of masculine anger. She tried to calm herself by breathing deeply, sensing that he wanted her to panic, that he wanted to break her and make her as vulnerable to him as he had been to her, but the pressure of his body made it impossible for her to expand her lungs. Again she started to panic, but her frantic attempts to throw off his weight stilled abruptly when she felt the unmistakable hardening of his body.

Disgust and despair coursed through her, making her feel almost physically sick. Her struggles had aroused him and he was not bothering to hide it. He was punishing her in the most basic and humiliating way it was possible for a man to humiliate a woman.

'Shocked, are you, little virgin? Perhaps you should be. It's too long since I last had a woman. Not that you qualify for that title, but then as they say, beggars can't be choosers, and if my deafness stops me from hearing a woman's cries of pleasure it also stops me from hearing her cries of pain.'

This couldn't be happening. He didn't mean what he was saying; he was just trying to frighten her. Instinctively she knew it, but that didn't stop panic tearing her apart inside as Nicholas lowered his mouth to hers.

She tried to evade him, but his fingers tightened painfully on her hair, forcing her to remain still.

A whisper away from her lips he stopped, and she felt almost faint with relief, her heart jolting painfully into her throat when he didn't let her go, but demanded instead, 'Open your mouth.'

Violet eyes glared into green defiantly, widening only when they saw the shockingly savage glitter of satisfaction burn away the ice.

'You aren't going to help? Well, that's fine by me!'

The sharp impact of his teeth in her lip made her cry out, the sound instantly smothered by the triumphant heat of his mouth. As she felt her whole world fall apart she wondered frantically why it was that the rough movement of his tongue against her flesh should provoke such an upsurge of violent emotion. It seemed to reach right down into her toes and had an effect on other parts of her body that made her wonder if she had ever really known herself at all.

The kiss was a punishment, a savage reinforcement of Nicholas's verbal and mental rejection of her, but it made her ache in a way that loving, kind John had never done. She could almost feel her body softening to accommodate itself to the hardness of Nicholas, and her teeth ached from the self-control it took not to respond to his kiss. Was that what he wanted? To humiliate her by forcing a response from her? She didn't think he would normally go to such lengths to punish one insignificant woman, and her instinctive knowledge of his private fears and agonies had made him savage with the need to hurt her. She knew that.

His mouth still punished hers, but it was more a subtle punishment now, and as he moved against her she suddenly had an unnerving ache to know what it would feel like to have his hard, silky-haired skin rubbing against her unfettered breasts.

Perhaps he too could read minds, she thought frantically seconds later as he rolled on to his side, taking her with him, tugging her blouse off one shoulder and freeing it from one arm before he deftly released the catch on her bra.

Instinct and upbringing screamed at her to protest. This was not love; it was not even desire. It was rage, frustration and contempt; it was also the most overwhelming experience she had ever had, and the sensation that shot through her body as Nicholas cupped her breast, and for timeless, soundless seconds stared down at it, cast a spell over her she didn't think she would ever be able to break.

When he eventually brought his gaze to her face and she saw beyond the tight mask of rage; when she realised that in her ignorance she had totally underestimated the depth of his sexual frustration, fear replaced bemusement. Nicholas had gone beyond punishing her. He wanted her now as a woman—any woman. His hand stroked her breast, smoothing the delicate puckered flesh of her nipple. Her body, always acutely sensitive, reacted predictably and she felt the tension of his harshly indrawn breath as his heart suddenly hammered into her ribs. 'Oh yes, I like that ... I like it very much.'

He sounded almost drunk, his voice hoarse and faintly slurred, and it was impossible not to shiver in physical response. Without the hardness brought on by his mother's treachery and all that had followed it he would have been an intensely passionate man, a man perhaps who liked and enjoyed the company of women, instead of merely allowing himself to enjoy their bodies.

His head dipped, his back arching fiercely, as he pressed her back against the floor. Rosemary closed her eyes to blot out the reality of what was happening and shuddered as she felt the warmth of his breath against her tender flesh.

His tongue touched, teased, circled, tormented, while his hand cupped the softness of her breast, making escape impossible. It seemed unbelievable that she could have reached the age of twenty-four without realising such sensations existed. She was being driven mad by a need to arch up against his mouth, to hold his head against her breast and give way to the storm of sensation threatening to explode inside her.

But she *had* to resist; she couldn't let Nicholas make love to her. She couldn't let *anyone* make love to her. It was written into her contract.

The contract! She tensed, ignoring the muffled sound of frustration and desire that Nicholas made against her skin, her whole body

shivering with shock and fear as she struggled to fight against the fear seeping through her that Nicholas might be deliberately trying to get her to break the terms of their contract. He was a very subtle man, she already knew that. Could he have changed his mind about wanting her to take charge of Kit? Was he only making love to her so that he would have a legal means of sending her away?

She froze tensely in his arms, pushing him away.

'What is it?'

Rosemary swallowed nervously as she looked at him.

'I . . . we . . . we can't make love, Nicholas. It's in my contract—remember?'

He had been frowning at her, but now he looked away so that it was impossible for her to see what he was thinking.

He stood up slowly, turning his back to her as she hurriedly straightened her clothes. Without looking at her he said coolly, 'You were rather late in remembering about it, weren't you?'

Physically she had still not recovered from her shattering awareness of him. She felt weak and defenceless. Dragging the tattered remnants of her pride around her, she said shakily, 'You won't get rid of me as easily as that, Nicholas. I came here to take care of Kit and that's exactly what I intend to do.'

There was a look in his eyes she found hard to define. There was bitterness there, and anger too, but somehow she had the feeling that there was something else there as well; something so ephemeral and elusive that when she looked for it again it had gone.

She wasn't totally naive. She knew that the desire she had sensed within him had not been for her personally, but had simply been a

male need for a female. She would have to be on her guard against him from now on, though. When he had insisted on having that clause inserted in the contract specifying that she must have no emotional or sexual commitments, it hadn't occurred to her that there was the slightest likelihood of her being in default of that condition.

Now it seemed that she had all unknowingly handed to Nicholas a very powerful weapon that he might be able to use against her if he ever decided that he no longer wanted her to be part of Kit's life. She wasn't as indifferent to him as a man as she ought to be—as she needed to be!

She hated harbouring so much distrust of someone who was going to play such a large role in Kit's life, but what alternative did she really have? She faced him as calmly as she could and said quietly, 'I came to tell you that I won't be having dinner with you tonight. I thought I might have an early night; the journey tired me.'

And then she went out, closing the door behind her.

Once she had gone Nicholas dropped in the chair which had inadvertently been the cause of the whole thing, his head buried in his hands.

God, he had almost ... He shook his head, trying to dispel the tormenting mental images that were still half immobilising his brain; to say nothing of what they were doing to his body. What had started out as anger had been transformed to something else so fast that he was still aching with the effect of it. Physical desire simply did not affect him like that.

There had never been a time when he had not been perfectly capable of controlling his needs . . . never. He never, ever gave way to the physical side of his nature the way he had done with Rosemary tonight. It had been her impassivity that had done it; her refusal to be



aroused by him. It had almost driven him mad. She had tasted like no other woman he had ever known. She was . . .

'No!'

The tortured sound seemed to echo round the room. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his forehead. She had *known* that he was in pain. *How!* How had she known? She had looked at him, and it was ... as though she had looked into his soul and witnessed all his insecurities, all his fears. He could have sworn she even knew about the night he had cried himself to sleep when his mother left. He had almost wanted to kill her for that.

He toyed with the idea of sending her away, now before it was too late, but he couldn't take the risk of losing Kit, or was that simply an excuse? His mouth compressed, and he reached for the telephone. All women were the same, and all of them were both expendable and interchangeable.

He remembered then, abruptly, what she had said to him. She had thought he might be making love to her to test her adherence to their contract. She had given him the perfect excuse for getting rid of her but he knew that he wouldn't do it, couldn't do it...

## CHAPTER SIX

'NICHOLAS has left?'

Somehow Rosemary wasn't surprised, even though she knew that he had originally intended to stay several days at the chateau before returning to Paris.

Madame Hubert nodded in confirmation of her earlier statement. 'He left early this morning,' she told Rosemary. 'Jacques flew him out. He left instructions that you were to make whatever arrangements you wished for the little boy. For this morning I have ordered some fruit juice and cereal for his breakfast.'

'Yes . . . yes, thank you. That will be fine.'

Rosemary was still feeling numbed by the incredible, extraordinary mental link that seemed to exist between Nicholas and herself. She had known without Madame telling her that he had left; had known the moment she opened her eyes this morning that he wasn't in the chateau. She shivered slightly, her eyes suddenly haunted and dark. She didn't want this intense rapport any more than he did, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do about it. Her fragile nervous system wasn't strong enough to endure the pain and bitterness of Nicholas's anguish. He was the last man on earth she wanted to share this sort of rapport with. Intuitively she had always known that she had within herself this gift or curse for sharing the thoughts and feelings of her loved ones, but she had never felt it so strongly before; and she certainly didn't love Nicholas Powers.

She shivered again. He was a man she ought logically to dislike and even despise; his attitude towards other people was completely opposite to her own, and yet every time his coldness shocked her into resentment, she was reminded of all that he had suffered as a child, of the mental anguish he had endured, and something yearned to reach

out and comfort him. He was so very alone . . . and it made not the slightest bit of difference that he had chosen to be alone.

By the time Kit had finished his breakfast, it had started to snow. Totally entranced, the little boy begged to be allowed to go outside and play, but Rosemary shook her head. She wanted to give Kit a little more time to adjust to the new climate. At first he seemed inclined to take her refusal badly, but as always his sunny nature allowed her to coax him into accepting her decision. An approving smile crossed Madame Hubert's face as she watched.

'I see you know how and when to be firm,' she commented to Rosemary as she poured her a cup of coffee.

'I believe a certain amount of discipline is necessary, but I don't believe in confrontations or head-on clashes,' Rosemary told her. 'Kit is a very intelligent child, and just reaching the stage where it's possible to reason with him. You did say that you would show me over the chateau today, and that will, I'm sure, distract him from wanting to go out.'

She had come to a decision the previous day, and that was that if Kit was going to live in the chateau then somehow she would have to find a way of both making the place his home and at the same time teaching him to treat its contents with reverence and care.

'I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of him having a playroom somewhere—a room he can paint in, and ride his small bike without causing any damage,' she told the Frenchwoman.

'Yes. Nicholas had mentioned something of the sort to me. There is a room in the basement near to the swimming pool, which Nicholas had set aside to be turned into a squash court, but he has suggested instead that it would make a good playroom for the child. I shall show it to you later.'

The knowledge that Nicholas had actually thought about and cared enough to make such arrangements made Rosemary's throat go suspiciously tight, and she bent her fair head over Kit's dark one so that Madame Hubert would not see her betraying tears.

'Come on, Kit, we're going to have a grand tour of our new home.'

Smiling obligingly, Kit let her take his hand in hers, as they followed the housekeeper.

As she and Kit walked from room to room, Rosemary couldn't help reflecting what a shame it was that the chateau was so empty of human beings; the beautiful rooms with their antique furniture and rich decor called out for people to breathe life and warmth into them. As Kit stood transfixed beneath a huge oil painting, she said as much to Madame Hubert, flushing uncomfortably the moment the words left her lips.

'You are right,' Madame agreed, sighing faintly. 'In Nicholas's father's time there was always a good deal of entertaining. He was a charming man; always a little *triste* perhaps, but charming none the less. I myself am getting too old to care for such a large place. I am not as young as I was.' She acknowledged Rosemary's quick glance of disbelief with a thin smile. 'During the winter, • I suffer from rheumatism. The chateau needs a younger woman's care.' The look she gave Rosemary was very meaningful. Was Madame suggesting that she expected *her* to take charge? Rosemary swallowed nervously. What did *she* know about looking after a place such as this, filled with priceless antiques and art treasures . . .

'It is not so daunting a task as it seems,' Madame told her, as though she had read her mind. 'I have kept records of everything ... I have names and addresses of places where things can be repaired and cleaned. You will see . . . '

Before Rosemary could make any comment, she added briskly, 'Come, I shall show you the State Apartments.'

Rosemary had already seen the magnificent drawing-room, furnished in blues and golds, which she had found slightly intimidating but which the housekeeper had assured her was a room that Kit was free to play in, but, elegant though that room had been, it simply could not compare with the dining-room and connecting salon that she was now being shown, and Madame Hubert, obviously with forethought, paused before a small table holding an ornate chinoiserie box, which she opened with a small key to reveal inside a theatre complete with masked figures.

'This is a music box,' she told Rosemary, winding up the mechanism.

The box was exactly the right height for Kit to peer into, completely enthralled by the dancing figures and the lilting music, it was one of Nicholas's favourite things when he was a child—they are very much alike in looks. It will play for fifteen minutes—long enough for me to show you these rooms.'

Cautioning Kit that he must not touch, Rosemary turned to follow the housekeeper.

'This is the Tapestry Room,' Madame told her, standing to one side to allow her to precede her into the room, it was designed in the first half of the eighteenth century to accommodate a set of Gobelin tapestries, *Les Amours des Dieux*.'

The loves of the gods. Looking at the faded but still beautiful tapestries hanging on each of the four walls, Rosemary could understand why they were so described.

'The chairs are Louis Quinze. You will see that they have been embroidered to match the tapestries. They were worked by the bride of the then Comte during the first year of her marriage.'

The chairs were breathtakingly beautiful, but Rosemary couldn't help wondering where the Comte had been, and who with, while his bride was diligently stitching these chair covers. Perhaps she hadn't cared whether her husband took a mistress or not. Marriage in those days was usually a business arrangement.

'The carpet?' she asked tentatively, bending to stroke the silky fibres.

'Aubusson—a special design to match the plaster-work on the ceiling.' Automatically, Rosemary looked up at the ornate rococo ceiling.

The music box ran down and Kit came over to put his small hand in hers and gaze solemnly up at the ceiling. Rosemary picked him up so that he could look at the tapestries, watching his eyes widen as he stared at them.

After several minutes of silence, he asked curiously, 'Rosemary, why aren't those people wearing any clothes?'

How on earth did one explain the intricacies of art and its interpretations to a three-year-old? She thought she saw the corner of Madame Hubert's mouth twitch slightly.

'Er . . . I don't really know, Kit.'

He heaved a heavy sigh and commented with an almost world-weary air of resignation, 'I suppose I'll have to ask Uncle Nicholas.'

Rosemary's eyebrows lifted slightly, a faint touch of pique drawing a slight frowning line across her forehead. Since when had Uncle Nicholas become the fount of all knowledge? Up until now, Kit had relied totally on her. Up until now . . . She chided herself gently for her thoughts. Of course it was only right and proper that Kit should look to Nicholas as a source of wisdom and information. How often had she herself worried about the lack of an adult male in Kit's life?

But how far would Nicholas influence the little boy? She was determined that Kit would grow up free of the contaminating resentment and bitterness that had spoiled Nicholas's life. She shook herself free of her thoughts, remembering that Madame Hubert was waiting to continue her tour.

'Through here is the dining-room.'

Rosemary felt proud that there was no need for her to warn Kit not to touch things. If only Adam and Belle could see him now, how proud they would be! A large lump lodged in her throat as she looked down at the dark head and the small face, gazing wonderingly round the room.

He was such a good little boy, so loving and intelligent. She would lay down her life rather than let anyone hurt him. Tears suddenly clouded her vision as she thought of another little boy, one who had perhaps once looked like Kit; who might even have faced life with the same curiosity and faith until it had been so cruelly destroyed, turning faith to mistrust, love to hate, and hope to disillusionment. Something about the sad little mental image she had just conjured up made her ache to be able to turn to that unhappy little boy and take him in her arms. She was washed with a fiercely protective wave of feeling and consumed by a passionate wish that things might have been different . . . that she might have been there to protect Nicholas and help him.

'Look, Rosemary! Everything's all shiny, like at Christmas!'

Kit, his eyes blazing with excitement, turned to tug on her arm as he gazed in awe round the chandelier-lit room, where the reflected light glinted off crystal and silver.

Crimson silk covered the walls, creating an impression of intimacy and warmth, not an easy task in a room that easily held a dining table at which Rosemary judged a hundred people would be seated with

ease. Not so much as a fingermark disturbed the polish of the mahogany table; every single chair was placed at exactly the same angle to the table, like a row of soldiers on parade, she thought absently. A pair of ornate silver- gilt candlesticks, a huge salt and an enormous chafing dish of some description adorned the sideboard.

Like the walls, the carpet was crimson with a motif that Rosemary thought she recognised, but couldn't put a name to until Madame Hubert told her it was the device of Powers Oil.

This carpet was especially woven for Monsieur Paul. He loved beautiful things.'

Beautiful things? But had he loved his son? Had Nicholas ever known any kind of human love? The ache deep down inside her grew, and she hugged Kit closely to her side, as though somehow she could reach out and hug away the coldness of that other little boy's misery. What on earth was the matter with her? She must stop thinking, like this. Nicholas was the very last person who would want her compassion. She tried to concentrate on her surroundings.

'Looking after the chateau is more in the nature of being a curator of a museum filled with precious articles than . . . well, being a housekeeper,' she commented to Madame Hubert.

The older woman smiled. 'You have a very intuitive mind, Mademoiselle. Before I came to work here, I did indeed hold just such a post, albeit in my old family home. It was . . . what do you say . . . taken over by the state when my father died, and because I had some knowledge of its history I was allowed to stay on. It was not a happy position for me to be in, and when Monsieur Paul offered me this job . . . '

'Were you . . . were you in love with him?' Rosemary couldn't understand what had made her blurt out such an impertinent question.



Her face burned scarlet with mortification, but strangely Madame Hubert seemed not to take offence.

'A little, perhaps, yes. I certainly admired him . . . This room is only used for special occasions. Nicholas has never entertained in here at all. The Sevres china, the crystal and the silver-gilt cutlery are locked away downstairs. They are far too valuable to be put on open display.'

Sensing that Madame was not going to allow any further personal discussion between them, Rosemary agreed that it would perhaps be as well if the Sevres and the treasure vaults below stairs were left for another day.

It only struck her, as the housekeeper led the way to the main staircase, pausing to wait for her to catch up, that the Frenchwoman was behaving almost as though she, Rosemary, were her mistress, as though the chateau and its treasures were going to be of some personal importance to her, the hauteur Rosemary had sensed earlier gone.

This time, Madame Hubert paused at the top of the first flight of stairs. 'First I shall show you the Long Gallery which houses many portraits of members of the de Blanchard family, as well as those collected by Nicholas and his father. In times gone by, it was the custom of the ladies of the house to use the gallery for exercise during the winter months when they were unable to go outside.'

The gallery had windows that overlooked the village and the mountains. The portraits of the de Blanchard family showed a recurring darkness of hair and eyes "that almost made it possible for Nicholas to be one of their number, but it was in front of the portrait of Paul Powers that Rosemary paused the longest.

Nicholas was not like his father, which meant that possibly he took after his mother. Her eyes went automatically to the blank space on

the wall next to the portrait of Paul. It was hardly surprising that portrait had been removed, but by whom, Nicholas or his father?

As they retraced their steps back to the stairs, Madame Hubert directed Rosemary to an impressive set of double doors.

'The ballroom,' she told her, pushing them open.

Rosemary had thought she was beyond being further impressed, but she had been wrong. The de Blanchard who had gone to St Petersburg and returned with a vision of the famous Imperial Ballroom must have had extraordinary determination as well as unlimited sources of wealth.

How on earth he had expected to fill such an enormous space in such a remote corner of the world, Rosemary had no idea, but that didn't stop her catching her breath in awe as she stared up at the soaring columns of porphyry and jade inlaid with gold leaf. The floor, white marble tiles interspersed with small ones in black to form a diamond pattern, seemed to stretch for ever, the walls were painted white and were embellished with gold-painted rococo plasterwork. On each wall hung a pair of giltwood rococo mirrors that stretched almost from the cornice down to matching gilded tables with marble tops. The fireplace in white marble was surmounted by another giltwood mirror, and there was a raised minstrels' gallery at the opposite end of the room, presumably for the musicians, which was reached by a double flight of stairs.

Jade velvet curtains flanked the windows, and the room's only furniture was a collection of silk-covered giltwood chairs and half a dozen matching sofas, pushed back against the walls.

It didn't take more than the slightest degree of imagination to see this ballroom peopled with men in the startlingly rich uniforms of

Napoleon's armies, and women in those daringly flimsy muslins that Josephine had made so famous.

Rosemary couldn't even begin to think of the work it must have taken to get just the marble here. She said as much, and Madame Hubert grimaced. 'Gilles de Blanchard managed to get the men under his command over the Alps in one piece, so I suppose after that, transporting marble wasn't too difficult. He perished in the retreat from Moscow, killed by the Russian winter.'

Rosemary gave a faint sigh of sadness for the long- dead Comte, watching Kit, who was twisting his back as he stared up at the columns. He was beginning to look tired, as they passed through a set of double doors into the same smaller ante-room. She picked him up and he cuddled up against her, burrowing against her, and as always she was filled with love for him.

'It would be in these rooms that the men would play cards and the servants lay out supper.'

Rosemary sighed again, her imagination peopling the rooms with misty figures from the past.

'I think it's time Kit had a nap. Is it still snowing?'

Madame Hubert walked over to one of the windows and nodded.

'I was wondering about going into the village. Are there any children there of Kit's age?'

Madame pursed her lips. 'Yes, two or three. You will want playmates for him. It is not good for a child to go without them. I shall speak with Helene; she has a married sister with young children. Something can be arranged.'

'And the room you mentioned downstairs?' It had occurred to Rosemary that she might be able to set up a small playgroup, and that, if so, this room in the basement might make an excellent place for it.

'Near to the swimming pool? You will need furniture for it—I could arrange for some catalogues to be sent from Paris. Would you like to go down and see it now? There is, in addition to the pool, a fully equipped gymnasium and a sauna. The flight of stairs at the far end of the corridor leads to them.'

'I think we've done enough exploring for today,' Rosemary smiled, looking down into Kit's sleeping face. 'Perhaps tomorrow.'

Walking round the chateau had left her more exhausted than she had felt after a full day at work. A faint tug of nostalgia touched her as she realised how far she had come from the girl who had been happy and content to live her life within the ordered confines of her job and looking after Kit.

It was true that she missed the rapport she had enjoyed with John, but it was a very gentle sadness; not the sharp agony she might have expected to feel if, for instance, she had been parted from Kit.

Had she really loved John as much as she had thought, or had he really been someone she felt she could lean on, someone to help her share the bewildering and often frightening burdens of finding herself alone in the world with the added responsibility of a very young child to care for?

A faint frisson of unease touched her as she looked down into Kit's face. When she had signed the contract with Nicholas, it had been with the image of her feelings for John at the forefront of her mind. What if in time she should come to care for someone in a different, more intense way? What if someone should come into her life whom she could literally not bear to be apart from?

Where had those challenging thoughts come from? she wondered uncomfortably. When she had signed the contract she had been perfectly happy, supremely confident in fact that she would have no trouble at all in adhering to all its conditions, and yet just now, holding Kit in her arms, it had come to her that they would never know the joy of holding the man she loved; or a child of that love, and although she loved Kit as much as though he were her child, there was still a small cold lump of pain that ached deep inside her.

She was allowing herself to be made unhappy by circumstances that she could not change, she warned herself, and, after all, there were several plus points to her new life.

She was with Kit, and both of them were financially secure. Both of them liked their new home. She had expected to find herself overawed and even faintly repelled by the richness of the chateau, but instead she felt touched by its emptiness, in much the same way that Nicholas touched her with his aloneness. She knew instinctively that she could come to love her new home ... and her new relative? Something inside her shied abruptly away from such a thought, almost as though someone had touched an intensely vulnerable spot she had not previously known existed.

The days passed curiously quickly, Kit adapted himself to his surroundings with remarkable ease, and already seemed to know most of the staff by name. He was even picking up a smattering of French words, Rosemary recognised with a small pang as she heard him chattering away to the girl who had brought his breakfast.

Today she was taking him down to the village. It had been arranged that she would visit Helene's sister so that Kit could meet her two children plus several others.

It had snowed again during the night, and once again snow lay thickly on the inner courtyard. The temperature had dropped as well, but

now, thanks to the carefully monitored periods of time Rosemary had allowed Kit outside each day, she now felt that he was properly acclimatised to their new environment.

They set off for the village after breakfast, dressed in the ski-suits Rosemary had bought in London. The clothes Nicholas had bought for her, which she had sworn never to wear, and had had every intention of rejecting, had somehow found their way into her wardrobe. She didn't want to wear them, but her tour of the chateau had shown her how impossible it would be for her to wear her chain-store clothes, if Nicholas was to entertain. She could always, of course, refuse to join his guests . . . but they were a part of the world in which Kit would grow up, and she owed it to him to make herself as at home in that world as she possibly could.

The black and white jungle print of her blouson jacket over the tight-fitting black salopettes turned her into a striking silhouette against the brilliance of the snow, while Kit looked adorably cuddly in his vivid blue and red outfit with its matching hat and gloves.

Nero, the dog they had heard barking when they first arrived, elected to go with them. The St Bernard apparently belonged to the chateau rather than to any particular person, and he and Kit had already become fast friends.

It wasn't a long walk to the village, and with Helene's instructions Rosemary soon found her sister's house.

Luckily Marie spoke good English. She had been a secretary in Paris for a while before coming home to marry her childhood sweetheart, she told Rosemary, when the latter commented on her linguistic ability.

'Alain could have gone to the Sorbonne and taken his engineering degree had he wanted to, but he decided he would prefer to live here.

Monsieur Nicholas, like his father, helps any of us who wish to gain further education—he found me my Paris job, but he does not push us to leave the valley.'

'Do many of the younger people stay?' asked Rosemary.

She was curious about what would keep them in so enclosed a place. Personally she loved it, but she could quite easily see that teenagers especially might yearn for wider horizons.

'Some. There are those who think that the valley should be developed as a tourist area, as so much of the Alps has been, and often they do leave. But Nicholas is adamant that the valley will stay as it is . . . and most of us agree with him. After all, we do not have to stay here if we do not wish. When they are older the children go away to school, so they are not totally cut off from the outside world.' Marie paused. 'Kit is very like his mother,' she said thoughtfully.

'You knew Belle?'

Marie nodded. 'Yes. Nicholas was very angry when she married your brother.'

'He had no reason to be, they were very happy together.' Rosemary turned away, unable to forget how Nicholas had rejected all the overtures that had been made to him. He wanted Kit now, but only as his heir, only as a pawn in the dangerous game he was playing with his mother.

'Yes, but Nicholas could not know that, could he?'

Rosemary wanted to say that he could have made an effort to find out, but she didn't want to say anything that might lead to speculation among the villagers. She gathered from what Marie had said that it was their general understanding that the breach between Belle and

Nicholas had somehow been healed, and she had no desire to betray exactly what had brought her and Kit to Val des Neiges.

It amazed her that she should feel so protective towards a man common sense told her she ought to dislike. But she didn't dislike him. Pain quivered through her, as she fought not to think about how she did feel about it. Not yet . . . she didn't want to think about that yet. She didn't want to remember how she had felt in his arms, and most of all she didn't want to examine the reasons for her instinctive need to respond to him. Thank God she had stopped herself from betraying that at least! It had been a close-run thing . . . another moment, another handful of seconds even . . . She shivered, and Marie frowned anxiously.

'Are you cold? You will not be used to our low temperatures. Another week or so and we shall be completely cut off for the winter. Once the storms come not even Nick's helicopter can get in and out of the valley.' She chuckled suddenly. 'You will see, for the next few days the village will be practically deserted as everyone makes last-minute trips through the pass, stocking up for winter and Christmas. My two children want new bicycles . . . '

'But they won't be able to ride them until spring,' Rosemary protested.

Marie raised her eyebrows. 'Oh you'd be surprised. Nick lets the children use the Long Gallery to ride in. He learned there himself, apparently.' She saw Rosemary's expression and said softly, 'Yes, he can be kind, although he hates anyone to know it. We have to pretend we don't notice, but then none of us forget what was done to him as a child. When someone has had to endure something like that, it is easy to . . . what do you say . . . make allowances for them.'

Kit was sleepy when Rosemary took him back, nevertheless over his supper he was full of the afternoon. Rosemary had taken to eating her meal with Madame Hubert, and in the evenings Kit ate with them too.



He caused more than one brief smile to lighten the housekeeper's severe features as he prattled on about his day.

Rosemary had already discussed with her the possibility of buying videos to both educate and entertain Kit, and Madame surprised her by announcing that she had rung Power Oil's Paris office to discuss the matter with Nicholas. 'Of course I did not speak to Nicholas himself, but I did speak to Pierre, who has assured me that he will put the matter in hand. It seems that Nicholas is to stay in Paris for a month.' She frowned, and quite unaccountably Rosemary felt her heart sink as she realised that the valley could well be snowed in by then, and that in all probability she would not see Nicholas again until the spring. She should have been glad, instead she felt . . . disappointed . . . more than that; so much more that she didn't want to think about it.

'He does not normally stay away so long at this time of year,' Madame Hubert explained.

'Surely he doesn't usually spend all winter in the valley?' Rosemary protested. 'What about the business?'

'Oh, he can keep himself up to date with that quite easily from here. His office has all the latest computer equipment and communications systems.'

Equipment that would be invaluable to a man who could not hear. Would he end up a Howard Hughes type figure, shutting himself away from the world, allowing no one to see him? Rosemary shivered suddenly without knowing why.

'I wonder if Uncle Nick will bring Nero a Christmas present,' Kit piped up speculatively.

Rosemary told him she did not know. She was scrupulous about talking to Kit about Nicholas, wanting a good relationship to build up between them.

She had been surprised to learn that Nicholas personally presented every child in the valley with a Christmas present, but she supposed she should not have been; it was, after all, in keeping with his role, and anyway he probably didn't choose them himself, she thought disagreeably.

Kit too had obviously heard about these presents, and Rosemary wasn't deceived for one moment. If instead of 'Nero' one read 'Kit' one would be closer to understanding the question.

'He might, if he comes back in time,' was all she allowed herself to say, but the knowledge that the valley was soon to be cut off from the outside world reminded her that she had some Christmas shopping to do.

She broached the subject to Madame Hubert after Kit was in bed. 'I will have a catalogue sent from Paris,' the housekeeper told her. 'You must choose what you want and Pierre will have everything flown down.'

She was living in a very rarefied atmosphere indeed, Rosemary reflected, as she prepared for bed, and she wasn't sure if it was one she entirely liked. She would miss the fun of scouring the shops and balancing her budget as she planned Kit's Christmas surprises. This year he would probably have a plethora of expensive toys, but she knew she would possibly have far less fun in choosing them than she had in the days when she had to think about every penny.

Some time during the night she woke up abruptly, convinced that some unfamiliar sound had woken her, but totally unable to discern what it might have been in the still silence.

Yawning, she buried her head back in her pillow. She must have been imagining things.

She woke up early and lazily contemplated the pleasure of a pre-breakfast swim. She could be back before Kit woke up. Her swimsuit and towelling robe were both ancient, but no one was going to see her.

She swam half a dozen lengths briskly and then floated lazily on her back before getting out and heading for the shower and the changing room. It wasn't until she had stripped off her wet suit that she remembered that she had left her robe by the pool. She went out to get it without giving her damp nudity a second thought. After all, she had the place to herself. Only she hadn't; and she came to an abrupt shocked standstill as she saw Nicholas heaving himself out of the pool. Like her he was completely nude, and her glance skittered wildly over his lean brown body.

He looked ... He looked as no mere man surely had a right to look, and she swallowed hard, her body quivering sharply. He looked pagan, and dangerous, and just looking at him, absorbing the way the individual beads of moisture gathered and coalesced against his skin, made her ache to reach out and touch him. The shock of seeing him so intimately obliterated all reason and she moved without even knowing that she did so, her eyes mesmerised by the fine trickle of water that ran down the centre of his chest, following the dark line of hair. Her lungs refused to help her breathe, her chest felt constricted, her body ached. Confused, she tore her attention away from him and looked down at her own naked flesh as though it was totally unfamiliar.

Reaction caught up with her and she trembled in shock, not unlike that experienced when one has narrowly missed some immense danger.

'Rosemary!'

The harsh, condemnatory way he spoke her name made her cringe with the onset of crippling embarrassment. Instinctively she stepped back from him, her breasts aching in an odd unfamiliar way.

'What the hell do you think you're doing?'

'I . . . I was swimming ... my . . . my robe . . . ' She was stuttering like a small child and she saw him frown as he suddenly caught sight of her robe. He bent down and picked it up, throwing it across to her.

'For God's sake put it on!'

She trembled in sick self-disgust as she heard the acid whiplash of ice in his voice. What on earth was happening to her?

'Nicky darling, so here you are!'

Rosemary froze in the act of putting on her robe at the sound of the husky female voice. It was like thick cream; she was almost purring with pleasure. She stepped into view, and Rosemary felt her heart plunge as she looked at her.

Soignée and elegant, she was everything that Rosemary herself was not, and she shivered as she saw the way Nicholas looked at her.

'When I woke up and you weren't there, I guessed you'd be down here. Honestly, darling, I promise you I know a much better way for you to get your early morning exercise!'

Rosemary felt the heat surge over her skin, her embarrassment excruciating and consuming. She felt Nicholas flick a derisive glance at her, then he was moving away and the other woman saw her for the first time.

She frowned, her voice suddenly far less pleasant as she demanded, 'Who is this?'

'My nephew's aunt,' Nicholas said smoothly. 'I told you about her.'

'Oh yes, of course . . . ' Hard eyes flicked contemptuously over Rosemary's robe-clad body. 'But what is she doing down here? Shouldn't she be with the child?' The way she was looking at her made Rosemary feel she thought she knew very well why she was here, and her skin burned afresh. She wanted to protest that she was wrong, that she had had no idea that Nicholas would be here, but her pride wouldn't let her. 'Darling, you're all wet!'

Rosemary froze as one long scarlet-tipped finger traced teasingly down over Nicholas's chest, longing to avert her eyes and yet totally unable to stop herself watching as the elegant finger caught an errant drop of moisture and conveyed it to a passionately full mouth.

'I think your little English nursemaid is embarrassed, Nicholas,' the rich purr taunted. 'Perhaps you'd better send her back to the nursery where she belongs.'

Rosemary didn't wait to be dismissed. Instead, she fell back to the changing-room on trembling legs, trying to quell the feeling of sick misery clawing at her stomach.

'Uncle Nicholas has come home and he's brought some other people with him!' Kit told her excitedly an hour later over breakfast.

Rosemary guessed that he had had the information from the girl who brought up their breakfast trays, but she made no comment, merely giving him a rather tight smile. She still ached inside from the humiliation inflicted on her beside the swimming pool.

They were half-way through breakfast when the door opened and Nicholas came in. Rosemary found herself avoiding his eyes, as she tried to control the dizzy seesawing of her stomach muscles.

Almost as though he sensed her tension, Kit pressed close to her side, clinging on to her skirt, for all his excited chatter about Nicholas, suddenly babyishly shy.

Rosemary wanted to urge him to go to his uncle, but before she could speak, Nicholas said harshly, 'I thought I warned you not to mollycoddle the boy; he clings to you too much.'

'He doesn't know you very well yet,' Rosemary protested protectively.

'No, and he never will, while you persist in encircling both him and yourself in romantic isolation from the rest of the world.'

His accusation hurt her, the more so because it was completely unjustified, and yet beneath the anger she sensed the bitter resentment of the small child who had been excluded from his mother's heart and she was caught between anger and compassion.

'I want you and Kit to join us for lunch today. It's high time he started mingling with other people.' He was gone before she could object.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

LATER in the morning when Rosemary saw Madame Hubert, the housekeeper told her that Nicholas had arrived in the early hours of the morning.

'It is not like him to arrive without any warning.' The Frenchwoman frowned slightly. 'He has brought some guests with him, as well as his personal assistant, Madame la Comtesse du Gord, and Monsieur Andre Flaubert. The Comtesse is married to a diplomat. Her husband is at present abroad.'

Nothing else was said, but from the repressive tone the housekeeper used when speaking about the Comtesse, Rosemary gained the impression that she did not care for her.

She herself felt slightly sick at the thought of facing Nicholas and his mistress over the dinner table—because she was sure that that was what the Comtesse was. There had been no mistaking that possessive ring in her voice, nor those chiding words that betrayed the fact that they had spent the night together.

She shivered violently. What was the matter with her? She had known that Nicholas did not live the life of a celibate. It was one thing to know of his affairs; but it was quite another to be forced to witness the reality of them. She had hated the way the Comtesse had looked at Nicholas; hated and deeply resented it. Pain flashed through her body burning her with acid fire. With a soft moan of terror she tried to control her stampeding thoughts. She had no right to feel like this. No right . . . and surely no reason?

By lunchtime she had managed to calm herself down a little, although it took all her self-control to withstand the look of blistering contempt Nicholas gave her when she walked into the dining-room dressed in one of her neat chain-store blouse and skirt outfits. She held her head

proudly, her eyes meeting his. Perhaps she was not as beautiful or as well dressed as his mistress, whose clinging jersey dress shrieked haute couture, but for all her outward beauty, inwardly the Comtesse was ugly and greedy. Surely she must be, to be married to one man while indulging openly in an affair with another.

Rosemary knew that many people would consider her views both naive and unrealistic, but she could see nothing of a woman suffering a haunting love for one man while legally tied to another in the Comtesse's hard blue eyes. On the contrary, she seemed to delight in flaunting her relationship with Nicholas, and Rosemary couldn't help drawing fastidiously away as the two of them came towards her.

She saw from the way Nicholas's mouth tightened that he had seen her reaction, but she refused to be quelled by the hard look in his eyes.

At her side Kit clung warmly to her hand, as though sensing her tension.

'So this is your nephew, Nicky . . . Why, he looks very like you.' The Comtesse's glance flicked derisively over Rosemary's fair prettiness. 'I can see nothing of you in him, *mademoiselle*. Come, you shall sit at the table with me,' the Comtesse instructed Kit, reaching out to take his free hand.

Rosemary felt him shrink away from the Frenchwoman and saw the cold rage snap in her eyes.

'He's far too clinging for such a big boy,' she told Nicholas, loudly enough for Kit to hear.

Rosemary ached to point out that all small children were naturally reticent with strangers, and that far from being clinging, Kit was really quite adventurous, but she could sense the little boy's distress, and did not want to add to it.



'I want to sit wiv you, Rosemary,' Kit muttered stubbornly, holding on to her hand and glowering across at the Comtesse.

Rosemary bit her lip. Kit was normally so sunny-tempered and well-behaved. She had never known him take such an instant dislike to anyone before.

'Kit will sit next to me, so that he can tell me what he's been doing while I've been away.'

Across the space that divided them, Nicholas's ice-green eyes warned her not to defy him. Kit had started to pout slightly, but Rosemary managed to check him, bending down to remind him in a soft whisper that he had wanted to tell his uncle about the games he had been playing with the St Bernard.

Over lunch, Rosemary was introduced to the fourth member of the quartet. To her astonishment, Andre Flaubert instantly made it obvious that he found her attractive, flirting with her with a light-hearted insouciance she found it impossible not to respond to.

By contrast Nicholas seemed harshly withdrawn, replying only in monosyllables to the Comtesse's conversation.

Andre, fair-haired and even-tempered, reminded her in some ways of Adam, and she found him easy to talk to. Long before they had finished their main course, she was laughing at his jokes and responding to his teasing comments.

Just once she looked at Nicholas, and instantly her pleasure died, to be replaced by a deep aching pain. He was listening to Kit's chatter and there was such a look of aloneness in his eyes that she ached to reach out and touch him, to take the bleakness from his eyes and replace it with warmth . . . with love.

In that instant, blindingly, totally she knew, and her whole world seemed to turn over slowly, leaving her heart incapable of beating and her body raw with pain.

She loved him.

She drew breath into her lungs, surprised by how much it hurt. When had it happened? The first time she saw him? No, surely not . . . Love wasn't like that; it was ... It was looking at Nicholas and aching to give him all the love in her heart, and knowing if she did that it would be rejected. He didn't want love, she acknowledged tormentedly; he preferred the shallow physical satisfaction he shared with women like the Comtesse.

She had thought that she loved John, but she hadn't; not really. She had just convinced herself that she did because loving him was safe; he was out of reach. Perhaps some part of her had always known that for her it would be like this. It was something she didn't want; something she couldn't control, or even equate with everything she knew about herself, but none the less, it was there. She couldn't look at Nicholas; she couldn't look at anyone. She pushed away her plate, the food barely touched, unaware of the quick frown touching Andre's face as he watched her.

The same quiet dignity that had enabled her to cope with the death of her brother and sister-in-law helped her now. It was one thing for her to realise that she had fallen ridiculously and hopelessly in love with Nicholas; it was quite another for anyone else to realise it. She intended to make sure that no one ever did. Especially Nicholas himself. If he knew, he would destroy her; he would take her love and use it against her as cruelly as his mother had used his love for her against him. She shivered suddenly, unaware how pale her face had gone, how huge her eyes in her small face.

Andre touched her arm and she jumped, turning blindly to look at him. 'You are not feeling well?'

Without turning her head she knew that Nicholas was watching them; she felt her heart pound and ache with pain as she shivered under the burden of this almost telepathic knowledge she had about him. 'I . . . it's nothing . . . I'm fine . . . '

'I'm going to learn to ski, aren't I, Rosemary?' Kit piped up, helping to diffuse her tension. She smiled shakily at him, and temporised, if Uncle Nicholas agrees, Kit.'

'Can you ski?' Andre asked Rosemary.

'A little, although I haven't had any practice in a long time.'

'Well, that can easily be rectified,' he assured her with a laughing glance. 'For a time during my university days I was employed as an instructor. I should be delighted.'

'The mountains round here are not nursery school slopes,' Nicholas suddenly cut in harshly. 'Rosemary skis with no one until I have ascertained for myself that she is capable.'

Rosemary felt herself colour under the whiplash of his criticism, and even Andre frowned.

'Rosemary does not strike me as a girl who would over-estimate her abilities, Nicholas, and I assure you that I am very well qualified to assess them.'

'Oh yes, very well qualified,' the Comtesse purred mockingly. 'Perhaps someone ought to warn your little relative that Andre is as skilled in the art of seduction as he is in skiing. It does not seem to me as though she has had a great deal of experience—in anything.'

Rosemary quailed beneath the deliberate cruelty in the Comtesse's voice and face. She felt as though her pride was being stripped bare.

She was only too glad to escape from the lunch table on the pretext of putting Kit down for his nap. In point of fact since coming to the chateau, Kit had slept less and less during the day. Normally in the afternoon they went out into the courtyard and played with the dog, but today Rosemary preferred to keep to their rooms so that she could avoid any contact with Nicholas and his guests.

What she didn't expect was for him to walk in while she and Kit were busily engaged in constructing a castle from Kit's bricks.

The moment the little boy saw him, he lost interest in their game, instead hurtling himself towards Nicholas and gripping him tightly round his knees.

Rosemary knew that it was through her own gentle endeavours that Kit was so readily accepting his uncle. She had painstakingly talked to Kit about him, and encouraged him to accept Nicholas as a close member of his family. 'Hey, I thought you were sleeping!' The rather awkward way in which Nicholas swung Kit up into his arms made her ache with tenderness. Nicholas was so new to all this ... so very wary and unsure, and yet when he looked at Kit she could see something more than mere acceptance in his eyes. Her heart bumped crazily. If Nicholas could feel something for Kit, then . . .

He didn't stay with them for very long, and addressed no remark to her directly, but ever sensitive to him, Rosemary sensed a tension within him that she couldn't totally understand. She had hoped to avoid joining Nicholas and his guests for dinner, but during the afternoon Andre had insisted that she join them as his dinner partner, and she had not known how to refuse.

Now, as she walked into the dining-room and saw the malevolent glitter in Monique du Gord's eyes, she wished that she had.

The other woman was wearing an off-the-shoulder cocktail dress; diamonds glittered at her throat and ears. She looked every inch the soignee chic Frenchwoman, and Rosemary knew that in her simple woollen dress and the pearl ear-rings that Adam and Belle had given her one Christmas, she couldn't hope to compete. Not that she wanted to; her instincts told her that beneath the surface glamor Monique possessed nothing that she would envy.

But she possessed Nicholas. Rosemary knew that they, must be lovers, but she refused to let herself dwell on that thought. She could not bear to contemplate the two of them together.

Despite Andre's light-hearted conversation, as far as Rosemary was concerned, dinner was an ordeal. Every time she looked up, Monique seemed to be touching Nicholas, and her own body burned with a feverish heat that was reflected in the haunting agony of her eyes.

They had barely retired to the drawing-room to drink their coffee when Monique turned to Nicholas and said throatily, 'I'm going to bed, darling. You won't be long, will you?'

A curiously heavy silence followed her remark. Rosemary willed herself not to look at Nicholas, but she couldn't help it. The ice-green eyes burned into hers, and she literally shook with reaction. Did he know . . . had he guessed . . . ? No, no, surely not. With a superhuman effort she managed to drag her glance away.

'Well, Nick, you've had your orders. I shouldn't keep the lady waiting too long, if I were you,' teased Andre. 'She isn't exactly renowned for the evenness of her temper.'

Nicholas got up and walked across to the sideboard to pour himself a drink. While he had his back to them, Andre whispered *sot to voce* to

Rosemary, 'Monique isn't exactly the most subtle creature in the world, is she, but I can see why she feels the need to stake her claim. You possess an alarming blend of innocence and seduction, *cherie*. Every time I look at your mouth it seems to tremble, and a man would have to be a saint not to want to know if it feels as soft as it looks.' He laughed softly at her flushed confusion. 'No wonder Nicholas is so possessive towards you!'

Nicholas possessive? Rosemary opened her mouth to correct him, but he forestalled her.

'Come skiing with me in the morning.'

Nervously Rosemary glanced across at Nicholas's rigid back. He was pouring himself another drink; she frowned worriedly.

'But . . . ' she began.

'But what? Surely you don't really let Nicholas lay the law down and tell you what you can and can't do? You're not a child, Rosemary, you're a woman . . . and a delightfully desirable one too.'

He was right. Why should Nicholas forbid her to go skiing? She was experienced enough to know the limit of her own skills. A sense of recklessness came over her; a need to show Nicholas that he could not continually dictate to her.

'All right, I . . . I'll come with you. When . . . '

'Early in the morning. I'm always at my best first thing in the morning.'

The sexual undertones to his words made Rosemary flush.

'You and the rest of the male sex, Andre.'

The harsh unexpectedness of Nicholas's voice behind her made her jump, but before she could speak, Andre said lazily, 'Rosemary has agreed to come skiing with me in the morning, Nicholas. She is not a child, you know,' he told him. 'And I promise you that she will be in safe hands.'

It seemed as though Nicholas was about to forbid her to go, and once again Rosemary gritted her teeth together, determined not to let him bully her, but instead he said suavely, 'You *may* take her skiing, Andre, but don't be deceived by that soft exterior. Rosemary is a woman who does not need a man, and besides, her contract with me precludes her from entering into any sort of man/woman relationship.'

Rosemary stared at him in shocked disbelief, hot colour storming up under his skin. She felt Andre touch her arm and flinched. How could Nicholas have humiliated her like that? A fierce surge of temper burned through her and she stood up and faced Andre, fighting down her embarrassment. 'Nicholas is wrong, Andre,' she said huskily. 'I'm perfectly at liberty to see whomever I wish. My contract with him states only that I can't enter into a *permanent* relationship. He wants to safeguard Kit's security,' she explained quickly, sensing the Frenchman's astonishment. 'And as for my not needing\*a man,' she gave Nicholas a brief bitter look, 'perhaps it's just that I haven't yet met the man who can teach me to need him.' Her chin tilted firmly as she looked at Nicholas again.

if there are people who want to despise and humiliate me because of my lack of sexual experience, then I can't stop them; just as they can't stop me for despising them for preferring the shallowness of physical satisfaction to the richness of emotional commitment.'

Rosemary was shaking when she finished speaking and Nicholas had a tight white line around his mouth. She knew that she angered him, but she no longer cared.

'Spoken with all the true sincerity of an emotional adolescent,' he jeered unkindly. 'I was wrong about you, Rosemary. I thought there'd been no men in your life by your choice, now I know better. No man of any sense would involve himself with a woman like you.'

He turned on his heel and left the room abruptly, leaving Rosemary to face Andre alone.

'I . . . I'm sorry about that . . . ' she began.

'I'm not—it was extremely illuminating.' When she looked confused, he said softly, 'I've known Nicholas for nearly five years, and I have never ever seen him react like that before—especially not to a mere female. You must have really got under his skin!'

'He resents the fact that he needs me . . . for . . . for Kit,' Rosemary explained. 'He ... he ... ' Reaction was starting to set in and she was shivering violently, her teeth chattering.

'Hey, come on! Sit down and relax. He was wrong, you know, Rosemary. You're extraordinarily desirable. There's a hauntingly innocent air about you that makes a man like me question the wisdom of my own way of life.' Andre smiled at her and then seeing her embarrassment changed the subject. 'You will come skiing with me tomorrow, won't you?'

She nodded.

'Have you got some skis?'

'Yes, I bought two pairs in London, traditional ones, and some of the modern short ones.'

'Excellent. Despite what Nicholas said, I seem to remember there are some fairly gentle slopes here that we can test you out on. Don't worry about what Nicholas said to you. He lost his temper . . .



Monique sometimes pushes him too hard; if she's not careful she'll lose him, and she won't like that. Her husband is nothing like as wealthy as Nicholas, and with Nick as her lover she has the best of both worlds; her husband's title and her lover's money. Now go and get some sleep.'

He leaned forward and touched his mouth gently to hers, withdrawing almost instantly with a whimsical smile curling his mouth. 'Incredible,' he murmured softly. 'Your mouth feels like the petals of a newly unfurled rose.'

From anyone other than a Frenchman, the compliment would have been ridiculous, Rosemary thought sleepily half an hour later as she slid into bed. Andre would be a tender and giving lover, but it wasn't Andre she wanted, it was Nicholas.

It was destroying her, this awesome mingling of emotional love and physical desire, but she had no idea of how she could rid herself of it. She looked down the years, seeing herself condemned to an endless lifetime of loving Nicholas, and there were tears on her face when she slid into sleep.

It was gone twelve o'clock when Nicholas finally went upstairs. After leaving Rosemary and Andre he had gone to his study, but he hadn't been able to work. He hesitated on the landing, then with a faint grimace headed for Monique's room.

She was sitting up in bed reading.

'There you are.' She closed the book with a snap mirrored by the glitter in her eyes. 'I was beginning to wonder what had happened to you.' Needle-sharp pale blue eyes studied him. Their affair had been waning for a while, but Monique didn't want to let go; he had no illusions as to why. She liked spending his money. Monique, like all the women who shared his bed, had been chosen partly because of her

known determination to remain married to her aristocratic husband. There was no trace of emotion in Nicholas's eyes as he studied her. Emotion had never played any part in their relationship.

She patted the bed. 'Come and sit down, Nicky. You haven't been yourself recently, darling. I think you need a good holiday—Barbados perhaps.' He hadn't accepted her invitation to sit down, and now she narrowed her eyes, her voice hardening to acidity as she added, 'Or one of the Virgin Islands . . . but then no, perhaps that would not be so appropriate.'

Nicholas knew what Monique wanted him to say; how she wanted him to react. His own recent total lack of physical desire for her was something he had studied with detached exhaustion.

'No, I think perhaps a monastery and the celibate life would be more suited to you at the moment, darling, don't you? Not that I'm blaming you, of course . . . we all have our problems. It is not so unusual for a man of your age.' She pursed her lips and viewed him with a thin smile. 'A good rest . . . Unless of course perhaps\* . . . '

She looked speculatively at him and got out of bed. Her nightgown was silk and lace, a creation at once provocative and demure.

'Unless what, Monique?' he asked flatly. 'I'm tired . . . it's been a long day. I think I'll say goodnight.'

Venom flashed in the blue eyes.

'You're not even going to kiss me, are you? It's not my fault, you know.'

'You're right,' he agreed flatly, 'it isn't.'

And it wasn't . . . that was the trouble. As he closed Monique's door behind him and headed for his own room, Nicholas told himself he

was a fool. He should have stayed in Paris ... it had been easier there. That was what he had intended to do, but somehow ... It was hardly Monique's fault that she no longer aroused him.

His mind flashed backwards and he felt again the shock jolting through his body as he saw Rosemary walking towards him in the pool room. He had stood where he was, trying to control his breathing; trying to control the need crying outside inside him. He'd wanted to take her there and then, savagely, possessively; stamping himself into her consciousness with a primitive need that shattered his self-control. And tonight . . . today, watching Andre flirt with her. His body shuddered. If Andre touched her . . .

Outside Rosemary's door he paused and then tensed. Andre would have to go. Tonight he had come closer to losing control than at any other time in his life, he had physically wanted to destroy Andre, he had been so searingly, furiously jealous. He didn't want Andre teaching Rosemary anything ... not skiing, not . . . He swallowed hard, fighting back the sensation scalding him. Andre would have to go, and so would he. He had been a fool to come back; there was no point in it. Even if everything else had been different; even if he had been able to allow himself to make a place in his life for her, how could he when in maybe five, definitely ten years' time he would be reduced to the status of being helplessly dependent on her? She would treat him the way she did Kit, with care and compassion, and that wasn't what he wanted from her.

No, he would have to go back to Paris. If he didn't he could quite easily lose his sanity, and he would certainly lose the protection of his mental and emotional solitude.

Whom was he kidding? he derided himself sardonically; they were already long gone, replaced by an aching need that obliterated every other feeling he had ever known.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SKI-SUIT looked every bit as good on her now as it had done in the shop. Giving her reflection a last frowning inspection, Rosemary opened her bedroom door.

She had arranged to meet Andre in the breakfast- room. Would he be there, or would Nicholas's behaviour make him have second thoughts?

Her mouth compressed a little as she walked downstairs. It wasn't like her to react so challengingly to anything, but she wasn't going to allow Nicholas to rule her life.

'So you have not forgotten our date, and very enchanting you look too!'

She gave Andre a perfunctory smile, noting how much his ski outfit became him. His fair head was bare, gleaming white-gold beneath the crystal chandelier.

'Shall we go in to breakfast? I don't think anyone else is up yet. How much skiing have you actually done?'

Answering his question, Rosemary preceded him into the breakfast-room coming to an abrupt halt as Nicholas rose from his chair to pull one out for her.

Like them he was dressed for skiing, but unlike Andre's, his suit was purely functional, a plain black, closely following the lines of his body. It was the sort of suit normally worn for speed skiing and made Rosemary miserably aware of her own small skill.

Unable to resist the seat he was offering her, she sat down reluctantly, concentrating on pouring herself a cup of coffee.

'I hope you don't mind if I join the party. An early morning ski is the perfect way to wake up the system.'

A look was exchanged between the two men that set Rosemary's teeth on edge. If the atmosphere hadn't been so tense it would almost have been ridiculous. She felt like a bone thrown dangerously between two aggressive dogs.

'Will Monique be joining us?'

The look Nicholas gave Andre was sardonic in the extreme. 'I shouldn't think so.'

Over breakfast, Andre questioned Nicholas about the valley and the skiing facilities it offered, and at length he said to Rosemary, 'I think for today we will stick to the lower slopes, whilst you get your ski-legs back.' He smiled at Nicholas, 'I believe you will find our slow progress rather dull, *mon ami*, so we shall leave you to seek other pastures. Unlike Rosemary, you are not a beginner, and I am sure not in need of any teaching from me.'

As Rosemary averted her face from Andre's, she saw something hot and angry glitter in Nicholas's eyes, and her stomach lurched uncomfortably. She hated quarrels of any kind, and she was beginning to regret that she had ever agreed to meet Andre. It would have been far more sensible of her to have simply accepted Nicholas's ruling, no matter how much she secretly resented it. She found it hard to believe that Nicholas genuinely feared that she would desert Kit for Andre, and even harder to believe that he thought Andre would want her to. No, there must be some other quarrel between the two men. Instantly her mind flashed to Monique. Monique and Andre obviously knew one another well. Could Nicholas have supplanted the Frenchman in the Comtesse's life? Was that the source of the antipathy she sensed between them?

'As you say, the nursery slopes are not for me.' Nicholas sounded almost bored, but if his voice cloaked his real feelings, his eyes betrayed them. As she forced herself to drink her coffee, Rosemary longed to escape from his company.

At last Rosemary and Andre were free to go. Nicholas stayed behind, stating that he had a telephone call to make.

It had snowed again during the night and the powdery dry texture of the snowfall was just right for skiing. Andre took her to a gentle, deserted slope just outside the village, and carefully put her through her paces, watching her with the narrow-eyed concentration of a professional.

'You have a very neat style,' he complimented her, when he was satisfied that her first two neat downward descents had not been mere flukes. 'Also your coordination is very good, but I sense that you have a certain timidity, which makes you less fluid. You must learn to trust in your own abilities.'

He demonstrated what he meant with half a dozen fluid movements, encouraging Rosemary to copy them.

'I think you would do better with something a little more adventurous than this baby slope,' he said after a while, glancing over his shoulder to study the ground. Lifting one pole, he pointed over to a sharper, longer incline shadowed by a plantation of young firs. 'Over there, I think.'

Rosemary looked at him doubtfully and he laughed. 'Come, *cherie*, you have a saying, do you not, "Nothing venture, nothing win!" I promise you there is no need for you to be afraid, I shall not let any harm come to you. Trust me.'

And the way he looked at her told Rosemary that he was asking her to entrust more to him than the mere development of her skiing skills.

He was a very attractive, personable man, but he was not ... He was not Nicholas. The thought struck her, making her close her eyes against a sudden wash of pain. What masochistic tendencies had bred this need in her? A solid lump of misery seemed to form round her heart, encasing it in a ball of ice. She didn't want to be here with Andre; nice kind Andre, who would flirt with her and tease her, and make love to her with charm and skill if she let him. No, she wanted to . . . Abruptly she stifled the desire rising hot and painful inside her, refusing to allow it life . . .

Turning to Andre, she gave him a smile. 'I certainly trust you to teach me to ski,' she told him teasingly.

He took her mittened hand and raised it to his lips, finding a bare half-inch of flesh at her wrist. His mouth felt both cold and warm, his eyes gleaming with an awareness as old as man as he murmured softly, 'For the present I shall have to be content with that, but I will teach you to trust me in more ways than that, *ma cherie*, I promise it.'

He was a skilled flirt, Rosemary acknowledged, as he dropped her hand and carefully led her across the valley floor and up past the small stand of firs to the top of the ridge.

Patiently he demonstrated to her the way in which he wanted her to negotiate the slope, not just once but three times, explaining carefully to her on each occasion just what he wanted her to do.

It sounded easy, and the slope, although steeper than those she was used to, was not menacing. In fact, she was quite looking forward to its challenge; Andre had the skill of imparting confidence.

She had almost reached the bottom, and was just congratulating herself on having skirted the firs successfully, when a splodge of black against the pristine whiteness of the snow caught her eye. It was Nicholas and she watched him in open-mouthed admiration,

observing his skill. Her concentration broke, her balance deserting her, so that she slithered hopelessly over the snow^—falling in an inelegant tumble of arms and legs into the soft protection of a thick white drift.

Almost instantly Nicholas changed direction, swinging across the valley, and heading towards them. Andre, who must have launched himself down the slope the moment he realised what was happening, reached her within seconds, dropping down on his haunches beside her, quickly and expertly running his hands over her body. They didn't linger, his touch was entirely clinical, his forehead pleated in a concerned frown as he asked her if she was all right.

She soon reassured him. She had come down with a bump, but the thick snow had cushioned her. She felt slightly shocked, but that was all. She struggled to sit up, but Andre restrained her.

'No, lie still for a moment.' He lifted his hand and removed his glove, laughing down at her as he brushed the snow off\* her face. There was a sound somewhere behind her like an angry hissing, but the bulk of Andre's body blotted out everything else. She saw herself reflected in his eyes; saw their blueness and his head bend towards her, and she knew he was going to kiss her. She lifted her arm to hold him off, then tensed with shock as she heard Nicholas say savagely, 'What the hell's going on?'

Andre scrambled to his feet, his colour high, whether through anger or embarrassment Rosemary didn't know. Hard hands pulled her out of the snow, and she knew even without having to see his face, just from the heat invading her skin that they belonged to Nicholas.

'The chopper's leaving in half an hour—Monique wants to go back to Paris. I've had your bags packed.'



He was speaking to Andre and not to her, but Rosemary could see the other man's surprise.

'But we have only just arrived!'

Nicholas shrugged. 'You know Monique.'

Andre's mouth compressed. 'Yes.' He turned to Rosemary, his expression rueful, it seems that we no sooner meet than we must part, *ma belle*. You must persuade Nicholas to bring you to Paris. I am sure that you and the child would be much more comfortable there than here . . . '

'They might be more comfortable, but they would be considerably less safe,' Nicholas rapped. 'My nephew will one day be an extremely wealthy young man and bait for any kidnapper.'

His words were colder than the touch of the snow against Rosemary's skin. Why hadn't she realised how vulnerable Kit now was? Because she wasn't used to thinking of wealth in the terms that Nicholas thought of it. Suddenly she couldn't wait to get back to the chateau. Unknowingly her eyes were haunted with fear and apprehension. She felt someone touch her and was surprised to realise that it was Nicholas.

'He is quite safe. Nothing can hurt him here.'

His reassurance was the last thing she had expected, and she turned away from it, hating herself for her own weakness. Just for a moment it had been as though they were completely alone; as though he really had shared and understood her anguish.

'I must get back.'

She wasn't aware of Andre looking at her, already she had retreated completely from him, the one thought in her mind her desire to get back to Kit and assure herself of his safety.

She was with Kit when she heard the helicopter take off. She had gone straight to him when they got back to the chateau, and she tensed for a moment, picturing Nicholas's dark face. How long would he be gone this time? All winter? She shivered, knowing that for her sanity's sake it would be better if she never had to see him again.

She was still wearing her ski-suit, and she bundled Kit into his ready for their daily walk to the village.

Just before lunch they started to walk back in companionable silence.

Kit enjoyed the company of other children, and Rosemary was beginning to suspect that he might have an ear for languages. He certainly seemed to be picking up the odd word in French with what to her seemed to be a remarkable facility.

They were just trudging across the courtyard, when the main door opened, and Nicholas emerged looking furiously angry.

The shock of seeing him there when she had believed him well on his way to Paris held Rosemary rigid with shock.

'Where the hell have you been?'

It took several seconds to answer him, and when she did, he seemed less than impressed, his forehead creased in a deep frown, his eyes that deep slate grey that she was beginning to learn was indicative of tense anger.

She was beginning to be aware of him in ways that she didn't like; to be so acutely tuned to his moods that she automatically flinched.

Kit, not sharing the shock which had kept her rooted to the spot, slipped his hand from hers and ran towards the open door, pausing briefly to regale Nicholas with a mixed-up tale of his morning before going inside in search of Madame Hubert and his lunch.

'Don't you have the slightest atom of sense? Didn't you listen to a word I said this morning?' Nicholas demanded furiously.

'You said that here Kit was safe--' Rosemary began.

'From being kidnapped, but there are other dangers. Look at that sky!'

Dutifully, Rosemary looked upwards, and paled as she saw the heavy clouds piled up against the peaks. Although she hadn't noticed it until now, the temperature had dropped, and there was an odd, almost menacing quality to the stillness of the day. Even as she stared skywards, the first frozen flakes of snow began to fall, soft, pretty flurries.

She watched them, her expression rapt with pleasure, her lips parting. She had never outgrown the magic of snow, not even now that she was old enough to know its dangers.

Absently she was aware of Nicholas crossing the courtyard, although she didn't realise why until his fingers gripped her wrist, his mouth a hard, bitter line as he looked down at her.

'What is it you are thinking?' he asked.

'I thought you'd go back to Paris—with the others.'

'No doubt you would have preferred that Andre had been the one to remain behind, then you could have taken him to your bed, instead of making love to him in the snow.'

There was something almost fiendish about him as he looked down into her pale face, and Rosemary felt the first faint frisson of fear as she looked into his eyes and saw how they glittered with anger and desire.

'You have a contract with me that precludes you from leaving this valley,' Nicholas added.

'My contract precludes me from leaving *Kit*, Rosemary contradicted him flatly. 'Why don't you go back to Paris, Nicholas, and leave Kit and me alone?'

'What are you hoping for? That Andre will come back? He won't,' he told her with quiet savagery. 'Andre only chooses women who can support him financially in the style to which he's become accustomed. He thought you were a rich woman, now he knows better. I told him you had nothing to offer him or any other man—either financially or physically.'

Afterwards, Rosemary never knew quite why she had hit him, but as the sound of the blow died on the crisp air, she saw the almost murderous look of fury in Nicholas's eyes and she panicked.

Oh God, she had to get away; not just from Nicholas, but from herself as well. Since she had come to the chateau she had discovered a Rosemary she had never known existed before; somehow Nicholas had made her question things about herself she had previously not even guessed existed. She reacted instinctively, desperate to get away, not just from him but from her own contradictory feelings as well, hearing Nicholas call out her name in a harsh voice as she fled from the courtyard and into the snow.

At first she ran with no thought of where she was going, impelled only by the frantic urgency of her need to escape. So much had happened to her; she was experiencing so many unfamiliar feelings.

She hardly recognised herself in this new, emotional Rosemary. She loved Kit desperately, but already she was beginning to question whether she could go on, whether she could remain in such close contact with Nicholas. He unsettled and disturbed her. His touch, his kiss had made her realise how little she had actually known of sexual desire and its strengths and weaknesses. She had thought she loved John, but it had been a gentle, diffident sort of love. Contract or no contract, she had to get away from Nicholas, and she was going to take Kit with her.

Her thoughts whirled as fast as the falling snow, taking her past the slopes she had skied with Andre and upwards, while she grappled with the taxing problem of how she and Kit could leave the valley. And once they had left where could they go? Nicholas would follow them; he would try to take Kit away from her! The alternative was to leave Kit behind—Nicholas would let her go then. But could she do that? Kit loved her and trusted her. If she deserted him would he become another Nicholas, suspicious of her sex, showing a cold, remote face to the world, while he hid his childhood hurts away from it? She stopped abruptly as the cold clutched sharply at her chest, and then realised how high she had climbed. Too high, she saw as she stopped to look behind her, and realised that she couldn't see any familiar landmarks in the ever-thickening, falling snow.

Andre, and Nicholas's belief that she had wanted the Frenchman as her lover, suddenly seemed totally unimportant.

The fierce need to escape from Nicholas which had driven her here had gone, and now she was chillingly aware of the danger she was in. She stumbled abruptly, the breath knocked out of her lungs by the impact of her fall. Now, unlike this morning, the snow was not soft and welcoming. Instead it was edged with ice, and far, far colder than she had anticipated. She stopped thinking about her need to escape from Nicholas and the emotions he aroused within her, and started instead to worry about her isolation and danger.

She was completely lost now. She swayed sickly as she looked round desperately for some familiar landmark. Snow whirled round her, devilishly, blotting out the landscape, bewildering and bedevilling her. She was lost . . . lost in what was becoming perilously close to a blizzard.

She strained her eyes, hoping to see the path she had come up in the first heat of her anger, knowing now in a new surge of fear that she must find the way back. The ever-falling snow seemed to clear momentarily. She thought she saw the path, and moved eagerly, crying out as the ground slid away beneath her and she felt herself falling.

Something hit her back sharply, causing her to cry out with pain, and then she felt the softness of snow all around her, its cold embrace that of an icy lover. A long time seemed to go by. Numbly she registered the fact that the inertia that gripped her was a prelude to death, but nothing could stir her from exhausted lethargy. She let her eyes close.

She was warm, deliciously so; she could hear the comforting crackle of logs and smell the scent of pine, both of the things remembered almost poignantly from childhood. She felt someone move and called out a familiar name, bewildered by the thinness of her voice and the pain of her chapped lips.

A shadow blocked out the light and warmth of the fire, sure hands touching her skin. The fear that had woken her subsided. What was there to be afraid of? She was safe, and for now that was enough.

She woke again later, bewildered by snatches of memory, of Adam touching her and comforting her—but Adam was dead. She moved within the soft comfort of the warmth that surrounded her, her eyes abruptly focusing on the familiar shape and colour of her ski- suit.

Her ski-suit. Memory returned, shocking and corrosive. She\*had fallen ... She shivered. She had thought she was going to die, out there on the cold mountainside, buried by the ferocity of the falling snow, her body aching with cold and shock.

She could remember that with appalling clarity; she could remember waking up to the comforting crackle of logs, the pleasure of warmth and security; she could also remember firm hands stripping the discomfort of her wet clothes from her skin. She could remember the sure comfort of knowing her brother's protective care. But her brother was dead.

She tried to focus on the outline of her ski suit while she gathered her scattered thoughts. She could still smell the scent of the pine logs, and now that she looked she could see that the walls around her were constructed of them, and also that she was lying in front of the fire wrapped in . . . she tested the fabric of her wrappings with curious fingers. Yes, a quilted sleeping bag with a thick fleecy lining. She moved her head, and every pulse in her body stopped as she absorbed the shock of meeting flat green eyes.

'Nicholas.'

She blinked, trying to dispel the spectre she had witlessly conjured up, but it refused to go away. On the contrary, it was moving, unfurling from the depths of a wooden chair to come towards her. Cool fingers touched her forehead, hard lips forming words she struggled to understand with a nightmare sense of reality.

'You're all right, Rosemary. You fell and stunned yourself. I found you and brought you here.' He paused, following the frantic search of her eyes as she stared round the small room. 'It's a high plateau hut used by the goat-herders during the summer months. Luckily for us it wasn't far from where you fell.'

Now it was all coming back, and Rosemary shivered convulsively, cringing back from the long cool fingers touching her skin.

'How did you find me?' she asked faintly.

The hard mouth compressed.

'Instinct.' Dark lashes suddenly shielded the icy eyes, the taut profile moving out of her vision as Nicholas turned his head. She had an odd feeling that he didn't want her to look at him for some reason, 'I guessed you might head for the place where Andre had been teaching you to ski. I found your trail from there.'

'But what are we doing here? The chateau . . .

He looked back at her and smiled mirthlessly. 'We can't get back there—not until the blizzard dies. You were lucky that you fell so close to this place. As it was . . . ' His skin suddenly turned grey, and Rosemary wondered if the cold affected his damaged ear, he looked so intensely in pain.

'We'll have to stay here until the blizzard stops. I told Marie that I'd try to head for here. We must hope the blizzard will be over by the time Jacques gets back from Paris. With any luck he'll be able to pick us up in the chopper late tomorrow or possibly early the following day.

That was a stupid and irrational thing you did, running away,' he went on severely, 'What did you hope to achieve? You must know I will not allow you to go to Andre.'

Was that what he thought? Rosemary shivered again and snuggled deeper into the sleeping bag, hot colour suddenly storming her face as she realised that within it she was completely naked.



Nicholas had obviously misread the reason for her sudden surge of colour, because his face hardened angrily.

'Does he really mean so much to you on so short an acquaintance, or is it simply that you are so desperate for a man that . . . ' He broke off, smiling cruelly at her. 'Forget him, Rosemary, for I assure you, he will soon forget you. Andre is not the faithful type.'

She wanted to tell him that he was wrong, but her head ached and she didn't feel up to any sort of explanations.

'I'm hungry,' she said flatly.

Nicholas got up. He was still wearing his ski-suit and it stretched tautly against his body as he moved. Her mouth went dry as she tried to drag her gaze away from him.

'I'll heat up a tin of soup. Luckily we always leave these high plateau huts stocked with food. Which do you prefer—tea or coffee? There's only dried milk, of course.'

'Oh, coffee, please.' The very thought made her mouth water.

She watched as Nicholas filled a kettle and put it on a small gas stove; his movements deft and sure, and totally at odds with the man she had thought him to be. She hadn't expected that he would be able to fend for himself like this. She had visualised him always surrounded by people, paid to make his life easier, but of course it couldn't always have been like that. Those years after his father's death must have been hard ones.

He made the coffee and brought her a mug of it. She sat up automatically, her skin burning a brilliant scarlet as she forgot about her nudity and the sleeping bag fell away to reveal the rounded softness of her breasts.

Her gaze flew to Nicholas, the breath locking in her throat as she saw that he was making no attempt to look away. Instead he was staring at her breasts with a fixed concentration that ignored all the rules that governed conventional behaviour. By rights he should have looked away, should have pretended he hadn't noticed, but instead he was looking at her body with a peculiar fixed tension.

Outside the cocoon of warmth of her sleeping bag the air was cold enough to draw her nipples into rigid points. She shuddered suddenly and like someone coming out of a deep trance, Nicholas dragged his gaze away from her body.

'For God's sake, cover yourself up!'

The harshness in his voice scraped Rosemary's sensitive nerves raw, her fingers suddenly numb as she dragged the sleeping bag up over her naked breasts, her skin drained of its shocked colour as she absorbed the rigid rejection in his face and eyes. It hurt that the sight of her had disgusted him to such an extent that he looked almost ill, but there was no mistaking his reactions.

'My clothes . . . ' she began.

'They're still wet. The snow had soaked right through them.'

His own ski-suit must be damp as well, although he hadn't been lying in the stuff like she had. Even so, she wasn't going to suggest that he took it off. Her face flamed suddenly as she was tormented by a mental image of his naked body. How could he think she wanted Andre when . . . She took a deep breath and wrapped one hand round her mug of coffee.

It was going to be a long, long night and she could only pray that the blizzard did not last beyond another day.

She watched in silence as Nicholas returned to the stove to heat up their soup. This time when he handed her a mug she took care to make sure that she remained within the protection of the sleeping bag.

With another man, she might have been afraid he would try to take advantage of their situation, but with Nicholas . . . She laughed mirthlessly to herself.

She might as well admit it, there was nothing she wanted more than for Nicholas to make love to her; unless it was for him to love her. So much for her desire to escape from him! She shivered tensely, knowing how little chance there was of him caring for her in the way she wanted him to. And to think she had been on the verge of trying to make plans for leaving the chateau, for building up some sort of life for herself away from him! Her mind acknowledged the wisdom of her need to leave before it was too late, but how could she?

'Rosemary, you're not going to pass out on me again, are you?'

How rough his voice sounded, almost as though his throat was sore or something.

'What-Mime is it?' she asked him drowsily, fighting not to betray her feelings to him.

'Barely seven o'clock. It took me a couple of hours to find you, and then another hour to get you back here, once I'd checked that nothing was broken. You were unconscious for quite some time—suffering from hypothermia, I suspect.'

Seven o' clock. Kit? What on earth must he be thinking? He would be so upset that she hadn't been there to put him to bed.

She struggled to sit up, and whispered Kit's name.

'Don't worry, he knows I'm looking for you. Madame Hubert will make sure that he's all right.'

'I shouldn't have run off like that . . . ' she began.

She saw his face compress.

'We have to talk.' He frowned and moved as though he was feeling uncomfortable in some way. In another man, Rosemary might have interpreted his movements as betraying uncertainty, but Nicholas was never uncertain of anything.

'Why did you run away, Rosemary? Was it because of Andre? Are you having second thoughts about the terms of our contract? You told me before you signed it that you had only ever loved one man and that since he could not return your feelings you were quite content to devote your life to Kit.'

Instantly panic seized Rosemary. He wanted her to leave the valley; he wanted an excuse to send her away! In that moment she knew that she simply couldn't go.

Curling her fingers into small fists, she cried out huskily: 'Nothing has changed. Kit still means more to me than anyone else in the world, and there's no way you can make me leave him!'

She thought she saw a faint shadow cross Nicholas's face, but it was gone before she could be sure.

'And you're sure you're quite content to live here in the valley with Kit as your only male companion?'

'Yes . . . yes, I'm sure.'

What was she saying? Only hours ago she had been desperately questioning whether she could even remain another day, and yet the

moment she thought Nicholas was threatening to send her away she was almost pleading with him to allow her to stay.

And not only because of her love for Kit, much as it shamed her to admit it. No. It was not her love for her nephew that was making her ache so desperately inside, that was making her want to cling and beg to be allowed to stay.

'And this man . . . this man you loved in London?'

Rosemary stared at Nicholas, puzzled by his insistence on returning to a subject she had thought of as closed.

if he was suddenly free to marry you, would you then want to change your mind—to be free?'

Free? Free to marry John? She realised that marriage to John was the last thing she wanted.

Averting her face from him, she said quietly, it's too late. I've changed too much. I couldn't marry John now. I'm not the girl he knew any longer.'

She said these words more to herself than to Nicholas, shocked by the bitter harshness of his voice as he demanded bitterly, 'Do you really feel that my touch has defiled you so much that he would no longer want you?'

Tears stung her eyes at the cruelty in his voice. She turned her head slightly away from him so that he wouldn't see them.

'You are content to live here in the valley, then, are you?' he reiterated, in a calmer tone, when she made no response.

'I like the valley.' Rosemary strove to match his indifference, knowing that in saying that at least she was not lying; she did like the valley.

'And the chateau . . . ' he pressed.

'It's much more of a home than I'd imagined.'

Was that really a faint smile that had tugged at his mouth?

'So much so that you ran from it almost into the arms of death?' He wasn't smiling now, and she shivered, hearing the reality in the words.

'You made me angry,' she explained. 'Andre is just a friend.'

'No, Andre is a man who wanted to become your lover,' he corrected her acidly.

'And if he had been my lover, I would have broken the terms of my contract—at least, according to the way you interpret it.'

'Is that the only reason he wasn't?'

They were coming close to quarrelling again. Rosemary could see the brooding bitterness in his eyes and she forced herself not to react to his acid barbs.

If it wasn't for the disturbing effect that Nicholas had on her she would be content in the valley. She liked its people, and she loved the chateau. She hadn't really missed London or the life she had led there; there were times now when she found it difficult to even conjure up John's features.

Now that the panic engendered by her urgent desire to escape from Nicholas had subsided, she knew that the last thing she really wanted

was to leave. And even if she did want to, how could she? She had a responsibility to Kit that must always outweigh her own personal feelings.

She looked at Nicholas and said quietly, 'I can't leave Kit—you know that. All right, so you can give him every material advantage, but he needs more than that. He needs love.'

'And you don't?'

He was looking at her in a rather odd way. Why was he questioning her so intently? Did he want her to leave? Was he looking for a way to get rid of her? The thought made her go cold with fear, but she hid it from him, shaking her head and meeting his eyes with grave resoluteness.

'Not as much as Kit.' She shivered suddenly, aware of her near-nudity, and asked huskily, 'Are my things dry yet?' She was tired of having to lie almost flat beneath the protective cover of the sleeping bag, and besides ... she glanced wistfully towards the clumsy wooden door that Nicholas had told her led to the hut's primitive bathroom.

'Your ski-suit isn't,' Nicholas told her, inspecting the padded fabric, 'but your underwear seems to be OK.'

In spite of herself Rosemary went rosy pink as he handed her her silky briefs and bra. They had been a birthday present from Belle and Adam just before they died and until now had remained unworn. The delicate satin with its appliqued lace had always seemed frivolous somehow, but . this morning as she hurried to get ready she had dressed in the first things that came to hand.

Now, all too uncomfortably aware of the delicacy of the satin, so pale against the tanned darkness of Nicholas's hand, she wished she had donned something more practical, and looked longingly at the pink

thermal undies she had been wearing over her bra and briefs as an extra layer of warmth.

'They're not dry yet,' Nicholas told her, following her glance.

'But I can't walk around in just these!' She caught her bottom lip between her teeth as she saw the look that flared briefly to life in his eyes.

'Perhaps not.'

He got up and walked over to the door, picking up a waterproof backpack that Rosemary hadn't noticed before. 'Here you are, you can wear this.' The shirt he threw her was obviously one of his own, it was faintly scented by his soap and skin. He must have been wearing it, and had obviously pushed it into the pack as an afterthought.

'That's why it took me so long to find you,' he explained, 'I couldn't set out until I had made some preparations. We might have had to spend the night outside, totally exposed to the elements.'

Rosemary looked at him blankly. She understood what he was saying, but to bring a shirt? He must have read her\* mind, because he grimaced suddenly. 'There was a small space left after I had packed in the survival igloo and the sleeping bag, so I threw the shirt in. In such cold conditions, every extra layer of clothing means a better chance of staying alive.'

His voice was unexpectedly harsh, as though somehow he was in intense pain.

'What else is in there?' Rosemary asked.

She was talking simply for the sake of it, mouthing pointless words while her mind tried to evade the picture he had just painted. She didn't need much imagination to know what it would have been like



to spend the night on the exposed mountainside—if she had lived that long.

'Flares, which we don't need, food, drink . . . ' He shrugged. 'The most basic necessities, nothing more. You were lucky that you fell so close to this place.'

'And your pilot will know where to find us?'

'Jacques knows the area well, and I told Marie that I would try to head for here if the blizzard persisted. Besides, there is nowhere else on this mountainside that is flat enough for Jacques to bring the helicopter down. Don't worry,' he told her sardonically, 'you will not have to endure more of my company than is necessary.'

Rosemary was trying to struggle into her underwear, beneath the protection of the sleeping bag, and as he looked at her Nicholas smiled mockingly, 'Such modesty is surely unnecessary now?'

He was referring to the fact that he had already seen all there was to see of her body when he stripped her wet clothes off her, but that had been different.

She had managed to struggle into her underwear, and she scrambled out of the sleeping bag, and stood up on distinctly shaky legs as she pulled on his shirt. The soft wool felt good against her skin, the sleeves so long that she had to fold them back several times. The tails covered her to mid-thigh, but even though she had buttoned it up almost to her throat, when Nicholas looked at her, it was as though she was wearing something deliberately and almost unbearably provocative.

'I . . . I want to use the bathroom.' Even her voice seemed unnaturally husky and soft.

'Go ahead. I'll make us both a hot drink.'

He stepped back from her as she walked unsteadily towards the clumsy door. It was only when she closed it behind her that she realised she had been holding her breath.

Nicholas hadn't lied; the bathroom, such as it was, was exceedingly primitive; however, it was better than nothing, even if it was freezing cold.

There was no running water, of course, but Nicholas had obviously filled a bucket with snow, which had now melted, and she was able to use this to wash her sticky face and hands.

She didn't linger, being all too eager to get back to the warmth of the fire. What a blessing the hut was well supplied with logs! A precaution that the villagers took each winter, Nicholas told her, when she commented on it.

'We don't get many people using the hut during the snows, but when you live in a climate such as this you learn never to take chances.'

Rosemary was kneeling down in front of the fire, relishing the warmth and the cosiness of the goatskin rug. She looked up at him as he came towards her with two mugs of coffee. He put one down within reach of her, and retained the other himself, lowering himself to the floor, a couple of feet away from her.

He looked tired, and she suddenly realised that she hadn't even thanked him.

'Nicholas----' she began. He looked at her, his eyes and mouth hard. 'I can't tell you how grateful I am . . . ,'

'Then don't,' he told her brusquely. 'I don't want your gratitude.' He winced suddenly, the sound of his agonised indrawn breath plainly audible above the crackle of the logs. The mug dropped from his

fingers, spilling its contents over the floor, his body folding up on itself in an agony of pain as he clamped one hand to his head.

Her resentment and fear completely forgotten, Rosemary leapt to her feet, crouching next to him as she went instinctively to take him in her arms.

Even in extremis, he managed to retain enough control to stiffen against her enfolding arms, but his resistance didn't last long, a sob of pain tore at the closed muscles of his throat, and Rosemary felt her own body clench in sympathy. As though he were Kit's age and not a fully grown man, she rocked him in her arms, soothing and murmuring soft words of comfort against his dark head.

He didn't have the energy left from fighting his pain to fight her and his head dropped heavily against her breast, his breathing shallow and expelled from his lungs with a force that betrayed his physical torment.

How long they sat like that, her body wrapped protectively round his, her hands soothing and caressing away his pain, Rosemary didn't know. With every heartbeat, her mind and body registered and shared his pain; his resentment of the inner enemy who had destroyed his self-control, and his fear, and then she felt him draw a deep breath into his lungs, and he drew away from her.

Numbly she looked at him, seeing the faint sheen of sweat on his skin and the bitter bleakness of his eyes. His skin was drawn tightly against the bones of his face, and when he suddenly smashed his fist down against the floor, she didn't even flinch.

'Nicholas . . . ' Her voice, low and troubled, seemed to unleash a fierce-anger. She saw it flash coldly in his eyes as he moved away from her.

'I'm not a child like Kit,' he told her. 'I don't need your mothering!'

He stood up and she looked up at him, pain stalking along her nerve endings. Out of her love, she had given him in full measure all her caring and compassion, and now he was rejecting it—and her. He didn't want her mothering, he had said; and then as though compelled by some guiding hand to look at him, she looked up and saw that behind the anger darkening his eyes was a deeper torment. Her breath caught and rattled in her throat, and as though the words had come from someone else, she heard herself saying softly, 'Then what is it you do want, Nicholas?'

Time hung suspended, like vapourised breath in the air. He looked at her and she looked back, suddenly feeling stronger and surer than she had ever done in her whole life. She waited, willing him to reach out to her, to ... '

She heard him drag air into his lungs.

'Nothing. I want nothing from you,' he told her harshly. He had turned away from her, leaving her to face his rejection alone. A numbing sense of failure engulfed her. She couldn't understand what had made her act so rashly, what had prompted her to push him like that. What *could* he want from her? What he wanted from her sex, he took from women like Monique.

A bitterness she hadn't known herself capable of feeling washed through her.

He turned suddenly and looked at her and she felt herself flinch. An unfamiliar expression touched his face; a combination of pain or regret, or so it seemed.

She saw his chest expand as he breathed in slowly, as though trying to control some urge, and then less harshly than he had spoken before he said quietly, 'I don't want your pity, Rosemary ... the pity of a woman for a flawed man.'

She wanted to deny what he was saying, to tell him that it wasn't pity but love that had moved her to comfort him, but somehow she managed to control the impulse.

The long hours before they could be rescued stretched out in front of her, and as though he too was sharing her thoughts, Nicholas said suddenly, 'Tell me about your brother . . . about Belle.'

It was the first time he had ever raised the subject, ever expressed any interest in his sister and her husband and their life together, and for a moment she could only stare at him wide-eyed.

'What would you like to know?' she asked.

Nicholas sat down before the fire and said: 'Come and sit down where it's warm.'

Obediently she did so, but taking care to make sure she wasn't too close to him. Even with a distance between them she was still acutely aware of him, of the scent of his skin, and the warmth of his body. She shuddered finely, averting her face so that he couldn't see into her eyes.

'Tell me how they met.'

She sensed that he was simply encouraging her to talk to pass the time, but surely it meant something that he was actually letting her talk about Belle? Hitherto she had sensed that the subject was strictly out of bounds.

in Paris,' she told him, hunching her arms around her knees. 'Adam went there on business, and Belle was working in a cafe there.' She saw from the brief twist of his mouth what he thought of his sister earning her living in such a way. They fell in love almost immediately and were married straight away. It was only after they were married that Belle told Adam about herself,' she told him softly. 'Before then

all she told him was that her parents were dead and that she was estranged from her brother. They were very happy together, Nicholas. When I think of how unfair it was that their lives should be snatched away from them like that, I remind myself of that. Adam and I had shared the house since our parents' death—I offered to move out, but neither of them would hear of it, and then when Kit was born ... It was then that Belle wanted to heal the rift between the two of you, having a child of her own.'

'I got her letter, but I thought her husband had put her up to it.' He smiled mirthlessly when he saw Rosemary's expression. 'Oh, come on, you aren't that innocent! It does happen.'

'But Adam wasn't like that! He loved her. I saw them together, Nicholas,' said Rosemary when he remained silent. 'I knew Adam, he was my brother, he virtually brought me up after our parents died. He was a very caring, loving person, and Belle and Kit were his life. Neither he or I could understand how you could reject Belle's attempt to heal the rift between the two of you.'

'No, I don't suppose you could.' Nicholas's voice was harsh again, and she looked at him, wondering if the pain had started again, but it was pain of a different kind that she saw in his eyes. 'I found it very difficult to understand how Belle could reject me. I took care of her, though we were the same age, as a brother should.'

'By leaving her in boarding school, and restricting her life so much that she felt she had to break free!'

'I worried about her,' he came back bitterly. 'God knows I turned France upside down looking for her when she ran away from the valley.'

'She went to America,' Rosemary told him, and bit her lip as she saw the look in his eyes. 'Not to see her . . . your mother. She went to

Boston to work as a nanny, and then she moved back to France. She loved you very much, Nicholas.' She had hesitated about it, but it was the truth. When he made no response she continued hesitantly, 'After Kit was born, you were never far from her thoughts. She once told me that having a child of her own made it all the more impossible for her to understand your mother's cruelty.'

Suddenly the events of the day caught up with her and she smothered a yawn.

'Feeling tired?' he asked. 'Get into your sleeping bag. I'll build up the fire.'

Drowsily, she listened to his movements round the small room; just the knowledge that he was there with her gave her strength and comfort. She closed her eyes, knowing that the day had marked a milestone in their relationship. For the first time they had really talked to one another. They had taken their first steps on the road to friendship. But friendship wasn't what she wanted from him, she thought miserably. She wanted his love.

She was dreaming that she was lost and alone in an empty world of cruel whiteness, pain bit at her legs and she shivered in the grip of intense cold. She knew that somehow she had to keep moving, but the weight of her body dragged her down. She cried out in her sleep, and then came abruptly awake to discover that Nicholas was kneeling beside her, looking down at her. The faint glow from the banked down fire wasn't enough to illuminate his features, but her senses instinctively recognised him.

'Are you all right?' he asked urgently.

She knew without seeing him that he was frowning.

'I was having a nightmare about being trapped in the snow.' She shivered. 'I feel so cold, and my legs hurt.'

'Cramp.'

He moved and she shivered again, realising that she was cold. He paused, then moved back to her, sliding down the zip of her sleeping bag and briefly touching her arm.

'You're frozen!'

He made it sound like an accusation, and she sighed faintly, stifling the impulse to tell him that she had always felt the cold intensely. Whenever she stopped moving her body seemed unable to maintain its own heat, and in the winter she always had to have a hot water bottle to cuddle up to.

'Get up for a minute.'

She wriggled out of the sleeping bag, gasping with pain as the cramp attacked her calf muscles.

'It's all right. Lie still.'

She didn't have much option, Rosemary thought hazily, as pain closed round her muscles like a vice; a vice that could only be prised free by the warmth and skill of Nicholas's fingers, as he firmly massaged her skin.

As the last twinges of pain died slowly away, she lifted her head to thank him. His palm felt warm against her calf, his fingers lightly stroking her ankle. A different kind of heat shot through her, another sort of tension invading her body. Her mouth had gone dry and she swallowed convulsively.

Nicholas turned his head and she stared back at him, her tongue-tip touching her dry lips. He made a sound in his throat, both frightening and exciting, and then she was being dragged into his arms, his mouth plundering hers with skill and savagery.



She ought to have been frightened out of her wits, but she wasn't, and when his hands slid into her hair, imprisoning her beneath his kiss, she was filled with a wild, glittering excitement that ran through her veins like fire.

Without thought of any past or future, she abandoned herself to the delirious pleasure of his kiss with an instinctive voluptuousness. His arms tightened around her, crushing her breasts against his chest. She moaned softly in her throat and felt his muscles constrict in answering acknowledgment. His mouth parted hers, his tongue invading the inner sweetness of her mouth.

The pleasure was so intense she thought that she might faint from it, and then, just as abruptly as he had caught hold of her, Nicholas released her. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling unevenly.

'I'm sorry about that.' His voice was harsh, and weak tears pricked her eyes.

'I suppose you forgot that I wasn't Monique!' she threw at him childishly.

He turned into the firelight and she saw his mouth tighten.

'Go back to sleep, Rosemary.'

Long after she had curled into a small ball inside her sleeping bag, he continued to sit motionless before the fire. Just once, he allowed himself to look into her sleeping, vulnerable face.

He shouldn't have touched her. He should have controlled himself better, but from the moment he had found her, lying there semi-conscious in the snow, he had been ripped apart by the knowledge of how easily he might have lost her. It had been his fault that she had run headlong into danger.

He had been responsible for her flight; he had goaded her unmercifully because he hadn't been able to endure the thought of her with Andre.

Monique hadn't wanted to go back to Paris at all . . . far from it. She had been furious when he announced that she and Andre were going back, and even more furious when she realised why. Their relationship had ended in a scene of such bitter acrimony that it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Their liaison had never been anything other than physical, and he wondered now that he had ever wanted even to touch her, never mind had desired her.

The strain of the day was getting to him, and he ground his teeth impotently, unable to stop himself from remembering. From the moment he had stripped the clothes from Rosemary's chilled body, he had fought against touching her, against wanting her. He had thought that by simply talking to her, he could avert the danger, but somehow it had only enhanced it. She had a way of getting him to talk about himself that no one else possessed.

He shuddered suddenly, remembering how she had held and comforted him when the pain struck; and how much he had wanted her to go on holding him, but for a vastly different reason. He had told himself that he would never give in to his need for her, but he had, and now he knew that for as long as he lived he would be tormented by the memory of what it felt like to have her in his arms; of the honey sweetness of her mouth; of the innocent joy of her passion. He could have taken her there and then tonight; he had sensed it, but how she would have hated both him and herself later. She didn't love him, and his pride wouldn't allow him to let her give herself to him out of pity.

His pride. His pride was the only thing that was stopping him from breaking apart in front of her. It had hurt when his mother deserted

him and he had sworn then that no other human being would ever get close enough to him to do so again.

Desolation gripped him. He wanted her, ached for her—loved her. He retained just enough of his armour-plating to be cynically amused by the irony of it.

## CHAPTER NINE

BREAKFAST had been a silent meal. There was an air of constraint between them now that had obliterated all her foolish hopes that they might have forged a new understanding, Rosemary thought as she watched Nicholas.

He was standing by the window staring out of it. 'Nicholas . . . ' she began.

The blizzard seems to have stopped,' he told her without looking at her. 'Jacques shouldn't be very long. We might as well put this fire out.'

She watched him as he worked, loving the fluid economy of his movements, aching to reach out and touch him. Just for a moment yesterday he had been hers; just for a moment she had held him and known that he needed her. But now that moment was gone.

Both of them retreated into silence as they waited for the helicopter. Rosemary had dressed this morning in her dry clothes. Nicholas's shirt was carefully folded along with the sleeping bag and tucked back into the nylon pack. At the first familiar sound of the helicopter, Nicholas went outside. Rosemary didn't follow him; she knew he didn't want her company. She saw the way he angled his head and knew that he was still in pain, but there was no point in her mentioning it; she knew that too.

She stifled the pain she could feel breaking into life inside her as the helicopter hovered loudly overhead, and waited for it to land before going outside to join the men.

Kit had listened round-eyed to the story of how she had got lost and been rescued, and Rosemary had used the opportunity to warn him against duplicating her foolishness. They had been back for several hours now, but she hadn't seen Nicholas. He had disappeared with

Jacques as soon as they touched down inside the chateau courtyard, while Madame Hubert had hustled her upstairs to the comfort of a hot bath. She had also warned Rosemary that the doctor had been sent for. 'He will want to check that you have come to no harm,' she responded when Rosemary demurred, claiming that she was perfectly all right.

*She* was all right, but what about Nicholas? She hadn't missed the way his hand had pressed against his ear when they took off, and his face had been taut with pain when they put down again. She wanted to ask if he was all right, but feared that to do so would be an intrusion into his privacy that he wouldn't want.

'You were fortunate that you fell so close to the hut,' Madame Hubert told her, when she brought up Rosemary's lunch tray.

It seemed that as far as the staff were concerned, they believed that she had unwittingly strayed too far from the chateau and that although Nicholas had seen her, he had been too far away to call her back. Only the two of them knew the truth.

The doctor arrived after lunch, a small, dapper man with twinkling blue eyes and a very calm manner. Rosemary's protests were good-humouredly ignored, as he went about his examination.

'Well, young lady, you don't appear to have come to any harm, but I suggest that you spend the rest of today in bed. These things are always a shock to the system, and our bodies have their own ways of making their protests felt. A sensible rest now will probably save several days in bed later on, once the shock catches up with you.'

'I don't feel like sleep,' Rosemary protested, grimacing when he suggested that he could leave her a mild sleeping pill.

'Very well then, I recommend a glass of hot milk with just a dash of brandy. That should do the trick.'

Rosemary wanted to ask him if he had seen Nicholas, but she was too afraid of betraying herself to those knowing eyes. What was the point of torturing herself unnecessarily? She already knew he did not want her.

As the doctor had predicted, the brandy-laced milk did the trick, and it was dark when she eventually woke up. She had been dreaming that she was back in the hut, still with Nicholas, and she moved restlessly in the soft comfort of her bed when she realised she was alone.

She reached out for her watch, astounded to discover that it was gone nine o'clock. She must have slept all afternoon and half the evening! She got up and hurried into Kit's bedroom.

The little boy was fast asleep, curled up in the middle of his bed. Already he was slowly becoming independent of her, which was only right and natural, and yet tonight, knowing that only added to her sense of lonely isolation. She still felt quite sleepy, but she knew if she went back to bed now she would probably wake up in the middle of the night and remain awake all night.

Instead she showered and dressed, then made her way downstairs, heading for Madame Hubert's private sitting-room.

It was rather a shock to discover that it was empty, because Madame, as she had discovered, ran the chateau to a strict routine, and normally at this time of the evening sat down to watch the television news and have a cup of coffee.

Frowning slightly, Rosemary went down to the kitchens. A red-cheeked, very young girl, whom she vaguely recognised, cast her a scared look as she walked in.

'I was looking for Madame Hubert,' Rosemary explained, smiling at her, as she tried to put her at her ease, before she realised that the girl might not speak English.

'Madame Hubert, *ou est-elle?*' she demanded hesitantly, wondering if the girl would be able to understand her very basic schoolgirl French.

After a few seconds' bewilderment, the girl's frown cleared, but the flood of French that followed was totally incomprehensible to Rosemary. Out of it, the only things she could translate were Madame Hubert's and Nicholas's names.

Was the girl trying to tell her that Madame was with Nicholas? It was possible, although she would have thought it unlikely, unless of course Nicholas was planning to return immediately to Paris and wanted to give the housekeeper some last-minute instructions.

The girl waited, then broke into another spate of French, which again Rosemary could not understand. The kitchen door opened and Jacques came in. The girl's face cleared, and she said something quickly to him. Jacques in turn frowned.

'Helene tells me that you wanted to see Madame Hubert. She is at the moment with Nicholas in his room. Since he lapsed into unconsciousness, it has been necessary for someone to sit with him all the time. The doctor does not want him to be moved until the specialist has had a chance to examine him. I am just about to depart for Paris to collect him. Why, *mademoiselle* . . . ' He caught her, just as Rosemary swayed forward, helping her into one of the hard kitchen chairs.

Nicholas was unconscious! They were sending for the specialist! It must be his ear . . . that last helicopter journey . . . She had known he was in pain. She stood up shakily, ignoring the concerned faces of her two companions. Nicholas—she must go to him. She wanted to be with him. She opened the kitchen door and hurried upstairs.

If Madame Hubert was surprised to see her, she hid it extremely well. For the first time, Rosemary saw the housekeeper looking less than immaculate and in control.

'Nicholas . . . ' Rosemary gasped.

'He is unconscious at the moment, although occasionally he does come round slightly. He is in so much pain, but the doctor cannot give him anything for it, not until he has seen the specialist. He fears that his condition has been aggravated by the cold.'

So indirectly she was the one responsible for his deterioration, Rosemary thought achingly, remembering his ski-clad figure and bare head.

'He was in pain while we were in the helicopter,' she told the Frenchwoman.

'Yes ... He came upstairs and passed out. Jacques found him lying on the floor. It is feared that he might have knocked his head as he fell and thus caused more damage.' Madame Hubert looked at Rosemary. 'Do you feel well enough to sit with him for a while?'

Well enough? She wanted to refuse, but knew she could not without explaining to the housekeeper what a torment it would be for her to sit with him, trying to control her love for him. Madame Hubert looked exhausted. She was not after all a young woman, and so, quelling her fear of self-betrayal, she chided gently, 'You should have woken me before.'

'The doctor said not to.' Madame got up stiffly. 'I pray to God that he will be all right. Already there has been so much unhappiness in his life. These headaches—I have known for a while that he suffered from them, but until tonight I had no idea . . . ' She looked at Rosemary. 'You knew?'



'About his hearing? Yes . . . yes. He told me when he came to see me in London.'

'He needs someone of his own to love and care for him.'

Maybe it was what he needed, but knowing his views about human emotions and needs, Rosemary doubted that he would ever allow anyone close enough to him to do so. The thought made her ache with pain—for him and for herself.

'You go and rest. I'll stay with him.'

Madame Hubert was giving her an odd look, almost as though in some way Rosemary had disappointed her.

'How long do you suppose it will be before the specialist arrives?' she asked fretfully as Madame walked tiredly towards the door.

'It could be some time. Nicholas has other commissions he wishes Jacques to undertake while he is in Paris. He managed to give him his instructions during one of his periods of lucidity.'

Rosemary smiled perfunctorily, too concerned about Nicholas to pay much attention.

She endured an agonising half-hour during which Nicholas continually tossed and turned, trying to throw off the bedclothes, his skin burning hot to her touch. Occasionally he moaned with pain, and although she tried to do everything she could to relieve the hot dryness of his lips, it seemed that he simply grew hotter and hotter.

She had been sitting with him for close on an hour when the door opened and the valley doctor came in. He examined Nicholas briefly, his manner totally without the jocular Rosemary had seen in him earlier. Then gravely he turned to her.

'He is worse, isn't he?' Rosemary asked anxiously.

'He is in the grip of a fever, yes. I suspect that the source of the infection is the same blockage which is pressing on his brain and affecting his hearing, but I am not an expert in these matters.'

'How long will it be before the specialist gets here? Why couldn't he leave immediately, why did there have to be this delay?' she demanded.

The doctor frowned at her, 'But surely you must know the answer to that yourself, *mademoiselle*? There is, after all, the licence to obtain and the legal documents to be drawn up. One cannot help but think that at such a time, such legal niceties such as settlements and wills could be left aside, but of course I can also see why Nicholas is so anxious to have everything safeguarded should . . . should he not survive.'

Rosemary felt as though it was impossible to breathe; a huge, galvanic pain gripped her body.

What was he saying? That Nicholas might die?

'He can't die!' she protested frantically.

'Every man is mortal,' the doctor chided her gently. 'But certainly I agree that when that man is Nicholas Powers, he needs something to cling on to, *mademoiselle*, or rather should I say someone. His life has not been an easy one. There is nothing more I can do for him at the moment,' he finished. 'I shall leave you to have some time alone with him before the ceremony.'

The ceremony? What on earth was he talking about?

Beneath the covers Nicholas moved restlessly. Already his tan looked more yellow than golden, already pain had etched sharp grooves into his face.

Rosemary leaned over him, smoothing his hair back off his hot face, hardly daring to touch him in case she unwittingly caused him more pain.

Shockingly, his eyes suddenly opened, the pupils brilliant and over large, as he tried to focus on her face.

'Rosemary , . . ' His voice was slurred and husky as though he was having trouble pronouncing her name. 'Give me your hand.' Incredulously, Rosemary slid her cool fingers into the heat of his. 'Has Jacques got back yet?' he whispered.

'No, but you're not to worry, the specialist will be here soon.' Tears stung her eyes. 'Nicholas, this is all my fault—if you hadn't come out after me ... '

'Too late to worry about that now . . . more important things ... to discuss.'

Every word seemed to drain him of even more energy. He should be sleeping, resting, not trying to talk.

She made to withdraw her hand from his, and was surprised by the strength in his fingers as they tightened around her hand. He lifted his head from the pillow and frowned at her.

'No, lie still, you mustn't move.' She prayed that he wouldn't see how terrified she was for him.

'I want you to marry me.'

At first she thought he was rambling, but when she raised a shocked white face to his she saw that he was looking at "her quite calmly.

'Don't argue with me, Rosemary. I haven't got any time to waste.' He looked exhausted, pain drawing unfamiliar lines on his face. 'You *must* marry me. If I die my mother and her family will fall on Powers Oil like a flock of scavengers.'

Oh God, did he really think he might die?

'You mustn't talk like that . . . You aren't going to die,' she told him urgently.

This time she was too late to stop him turning his head to look at her with cynical mockery.

'Don't treat me like an imbecile, Rosemary! If you don't already know what the chances are of my surviving surgery, then I suggest you have a talk with Monsieur Boudin when he arrives. I'm not asking you to do this for my sake, but for Kit's.'

'But surely . . . ' she began.

'You are Kit's guardian,' he overruled sharply. 'I can trust you, Rosemary. Kit needs you ... he is my heir. You must marry me.'

She saw that his eyes were glittering hotly and that the feverish flush on his skin was deepening. He moved his head and winced sharply with pain.

'Nicholas, this is absurd! We can't be married just like that.' Rosemary was playing for time, knowing that it would be dangerous to allow him to grow more disturbed. 'There are formalities,' she soothed, 'laws...'

'Jacques is seeing to all that. He is bringing my solicitor back with him, and a special licence. You will not suffer through marrying me, Rosemary. I intend to make you a generous settlement.'

'Pay me off, you mean!'

She fought down her pain and anger, but she couldn't stop herself from saying bitterly, 'Aren't you forgetting something, Nicholas? You might just survive, and then . . . '

And then you'll be stuck with a wife you no longer want, she had been about to say, but he had obviously guessed her thoughts, and he cut across her impassioned words and said tiredly, 'In those circumstances, the marriage will be annulled, Rosemary, and you will of course be adequately remunerated for your . . . help.'

What he was saying was ridiculous, and she was just about to tell him so when the door opened and Madame Hubert came in.

'Jacques is back,' she announced. 'The specialist is here and would like to see Nicholas alone.'

'I mean it, Rosemary,' Nicholas warned her as she stepped away from the bed. 'You *will* marry me.'

Downstairs in the small salon, Rosemary was introduced to Nicholas's lawyer, Philippe Robart.

'Everything is in hand for the ceremony, *mademoiselle*! Philippe Robart told her. 'We have obtained special dispensation for the marriage to take place here in the chateau, and I believe that Pierre has gone now to summon the pastor from the village. Nicholas will have told you of the financial arrangements he is to make. I have here the documents for you to sign once the marriage has taken place—if you would care to inspect them.'

A blur of print swam before Rosemary's tired eyes. How could Nicholas do this to her? Did he think she had no feelings, no emotions? Was she just a commodity to be used and then discarded when she was no longer necessary?

'You will see that Monsieur Powers is making you a very generous settlement in the event of . . . of either his death or the annulment of the marriage. You will know that even if he does survive surgery, there will always remain the risk that he could lose his hearing, and I know that in those circumstances he has no wish to tie you to this marriage.'

She wanted to scream at them that she had no intention of marrying Nicholas, but then she remembered Kit, and how much he would be at risk if she refused. There would be court battles, long-drawn-out custody hearings ... the sort of sordid legal wranglings that would be splashed across papers worldwide, and what would that do to the little boy in her charge? As Nicholas's wife, she would be in a secure position to ensure that the Powers empire eventually passed into Kit's hands. As Kit's fraternal aunt, she would be able to do nothing.

Madame Hubert came into the salon, accompanied by a tall, spare man with greying hair, and piercing pale blue eyes, whom she introduced as Monsieur Gilles Boudin, the specialist.

'Ah, Mademoiselle Stewart ... I would ask you to make all haste to conclude the formalities of the marriage. Monsieur Powers is in great pain, but refuses to accept any drugs until you are man and wife.'

'I can't marry him!'

The words were wrung out of her, anguish mingling with her own agony of mind. How could she marry Nicholas like this, knowing that all they were doing was legalising a financial arrangement; a means

of preserving all that he had worked for? Perhaps Nicholas did not even want to survive . . . perhaps . . .

'You can't mean this.' Monsieur Boudin was looking at her severely. 'Surely you must know what it would do to him if you were to refuse now? He is to undergo major surgery, and it is well known that one of the key factors in a patient's ability to recover is his own desire to do so. If you refuse to marry Monsieur Powers now, *mademoiselle*, I cannot speak for his chances of survival. Already he has left matters critically late. I warned him several months ago that he must undergo this operation, but he refused to listen to me. He claimed that he had too much still to do.'

Rosemary swallowed the tight ball of fear that had lodged round her heart.

'And if I do marry him, what . . . what are his chances then?'

'Of survival, quite good.' He pursed his lips and studied her thoughtfully. 'Perhaps as high as seventy- five per cent, but how much his hearing will be impaired, I cannot say. Had the trouble been located and treated when he was a child . . . but unfortunately ... it seems that Monsieur Powers, for all his financial success, is not so fortunate with the women in his life,' he concluded stiffly, his expression telling her what he thought lay behind her refusal to marry Nicholas.

Looking round at the disapproving, shuttered male faces, Rosemary wanted to cry that they were wrong, that she was not refusing to marry Nicholas out of greed or fear, but out of love.

'Which is it, you most fear, *mademoiselle*,' the specialist asked her cruelly, 'his death? Or his survival, with his hearing impaired?'

Both, but she feared neither as much as she dreaded facing the reality of having their marriage annulled should Nicholas decree it.

If she did marry him she would have to look on it as a business arrangement and nothing more. She knew that he didn't love her, didn't want her.

'Well, *mademoiselle*, time is running out. What have you decided?'

'I . . . I will marry him.'

There was a long collective sigh, then all three men started to talk at once, making crisp arrangements. She was no more than a pawn in a deadly chess game they were playing, Rosemary thought achingly as she listened to them.

They all went upstairs together, and at first when she went into his room she thought Nicholas was asleep, but the moment she approached the bed, he said huskily, 'Rosemary,' and, incredibly, held out his hand to her.

'How . . . how did you know it was me?' she whispered.

She saw him smile.

'Your perfume.'

She frowned as she looked down at him. 'But I don't wear any.'

'No. Nevertheless I recognised the scent of you . . . roses and fresh air.'

The others had now approached the bed, and Rosemary hung back slightly while Nicholas conferred with his lawyer. The door opened and Pierre came in with the pastor.

It was too late to turn back now, Rosemary thought helplessly, carried along by the tide of events.



There were documents to sign, and then a simple service in English. Nicholas slid a beautiful gold ring on to her finger. It was a little on the large side for her, but she doubted that she would be wearing it long enough to necessitate having it altered. Already there seemed to be a reassuring alertness about him that made her feel more hopeful about his chances of surviving the operation.

Nicholas didn't kiss her, in the circumstances it wasn't appropriate, but it still hurt that he could marry her like this, when surely he must have guessed how she felt about him. She turned her head to look at him, her pulses racing in fear when she saw his closed eyes and still form.

Instinctively she turned to look at Monsieur Boudin.

'He is in great pain,' he told her shortly. 'He refused to allow me to give him anything for it until after the marriage had taken place. Now, if you will excuse me...'

Everyone but Rosemary moved obediently towards the door, while she lingered, aching to reach out and touch the man lying in the bed, but knowing that it wasn't her touch he wanted.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the specialist fill a needle with a pale fluid. She wasn't wanted. She might as well leave. She turned to go, and was arrested with shock as Nicholas suddenly opened his eyes. It was too late for her to look away. She held his gaze, too mesmerised to look away, until the thick lashes dropped, shielding his expression from her.

'Stay faith me. Don't go.'

What was he saying? He couldn't realise who she was. His eyes opened again, the pupils hugely enlarged.

'Take hold of his hand, *madame*,' ordered the doctor, 'There are times when all of us need the reassurance of contact with another human being. He is in great pain.'

Numbly Rosemary reached out and took Nicholas's hand between both of hers. She felt the tiny shudder that ran through him, and prayed desperately for his safety and recovery as she watched the specialist inject the pain-killing drug into his vein.

'There.' Monsieur Boudin rubbed the tanned flesh briskly. 'We'll leave him for half an hour to give the drug a chance to take effect and then he will be flown direct to hospital. You will come with us, of course.'

'But Kit . . . ' Rosemary started to protest, but the specialist overruled her, frowning sharply.

'Surely the child will be safe enough here with Madame Hubert. You do not seem to understand, Madame Powers. Your husband . . . ' he seemed to stress the word, or so it seemed to Rosemary's too sensitive ears, 'is about to undergo a most serious operation. He will need you at his side.'

*Nicholas need her!* She didn't have the energy to correct Monsieur Boudin. It was ironic that all these men seemed to have the impression that Nicholas actually wanted to marry her; that she, for some reason, was holding back from such a commitment. She hadn't missed the looks they had exchanged when the terms of the settlement had been explained to her. Whether Nicholas survived or not, she would be an extremely wealthy woman.

If Nicholas lived, and she prayed that he would, she had no intention of accepting any financial recompense for agreeing to an annulment. She would give him his freedom for nothing, or was it that he was subtly trying to reinforce the fact that their marriage was simply a

business arrangement? If so, it was unnecessary. Did he really think she was so stupid or so venal that she could be paid off, like a . . . like a woman he had bought for a night's pleasure?

The flight to Paris was something she would re-live in her nightmares for years to come. Nicholas was unconscious throughout the trip, but the specialist had underlined how important it was that he be kept absolutely still, and Rosemary had remained at his side throughout the whole journey. Every time she tried to remove her hand from his, he started to move restlessly on the stretcher, and despite cramped, numbed fingers, and an aching back, she had steadfastly stayed where she was.

The flight seemed to last for ever, every change in Nicholas's pulse and breathing monitored and checked by Monsieur Boudin. Rosemary didn't need to question him to interpret his grave expression and quick frowns. Nicholas's condition was gradually deteriorating. She knew it without the necessity for words; she could sense it with that awareness of a woman for the man whom she deeply loved.

'He has a very strong constitution, but I suspect that he has stopped trying to fight,' Monsieur Boudin told her brusquely, after her sharp cry of fear had drawn him to Nicholas's side.

She had suddenly felt a betraying unsteadiness in the pulse beating in his wrist, and the doctor's comment confirmed her fear that Nicholas's condition was quickly deteriorating.

'Talk to him, *madame*,' the doctor urged him. 'Make him fight to stay with us.'

'But he's unconscious,' Rosemary protested. 'He won't . . . '

'Who are we to say what he can and can't absorb? You are his wife. Help him to find the will to survive.'

What on earth was she supposed to say? She was lost, completely and absolutely. Hesitantly she started to talk to Nicholas about Powers Oil, reminding him of how he had fought to establish the company, of how vulnerable and alone Kit would be without him, and, incredibly, by the time the helicopter eventually touched down on the private landing pad of the exclusive Paris hospital his pulse had started to steady.

Feeling strangely bereft, Rosemary stood to one side as hospital staff took over and Nicholas disappeared. A smartly uniformed nurse told her that a private room had been put at her disposal.

'Monsieur Robart thought that you would wish to remain here with your husband, rather than go to his Paris apartment.'

It was just as well that she had Nicholas's solicitor to lean on, Rosemary thought tiredly. She had not given a single thought as to where she was to stay. She even found that Philippe Robart had asked Madame Hubert to pack a case for her, and it was on his suggestion that she agreed to snatch a few hours' sleep, while Nicholas's condition was stabilised prior to his operation.

She hadn't expected to sleep at all, but she did, her body exhausted by the trauma of the last thirty-six hours. She awoke, feeling totally disorientated, wondering where on earth she was, until everything came flooding back.

She glanced at the shiny new ring on her finger. Married! She was actually married to Nicholas. He had apparently given strict orders that no information concerning his illness was to get to the ears of the press, or anyone else.

'You must see, *madame*,' Philippe Robart had explained carefully to her, 'if news of this got out, some of the shareholders would lose faith in the future of the organisation. The value of Powers Oil shares

would drop, wiping millions of pounds off the company's assets. No, we must await the outcome of the operation before any announcement can be made to the press.'

A uniformed maid brought her a breakfast tray that she felt completely unable to touch, although she did manage a few sips of the hot reviving coffee.

A message that Monsieur Boudin wanted to see her as soon as possible made her stomach nerves tense in anxiety, and after a brief telephone conversation with Kit to reassure him that he hadn't been completely deserted, she followed one of the nurses to the specialist's private rooms.

'Please sit down,' he invited her gravely, carefully pouring her a cup of coffee. 'You will be pleased to know that your husband's condition is now stabilised, pouring her a cup of coffee. 'You will be pleased to know that your husband's condition is now stabilised, and that we are to perform the operation this morning. 'I am not sure how much you know of what is actually involved,' he added.

'He has told me that owing to a neglected infection he suffered as a child, his hearing will gradually become more and more impaired.'

'Yes, that is quite correct, but there is also another problem. The original infection was never dealt with properly, and had only subsided. Now the infection is threatening to destroy a major part of the internal nerve and bone. It has also built up into a pocket that is causing pressure on the brain itself, in much the same way as a tumour or a blood clot can cause pressure. The problem we have therefore is twofold, in that first we must remove the source of the pressure—a delicate and dangerous operation at the best of times—and then we must assess how much damage has been done to the surrounding tissue. If the auditory nerve has been badly damaged . . . ' the doctor shrugged meaningfully, 'until we operate we can be

certain of very little. The disease can possibly be arrested, certainly the pressure can be removed, and if your husband survives the operation—as I sincerely trust that he will—then we shall be able to assess more clearly what his future will be.'

'He told me that he was likely to go completely deaf,' said Rosemary.

'Yes, there is that possibility, because the infection is one that can always recur. However, there is a new drug they are working on in America which shows promising signs of being able to arrest this condition. The trials on it are nearing the final stages . . . depending on how much of the auditory nerve we have to remove, it may be that with the aid of this drug, your husband will be able to retain full hearing in one ear, if only partial hearing in the other.

'No doubt you will want to see him before he goes into surgery.' Monsieur Boudin stood up and walked away.

Looking at Nicholas as he lay in the immaculate hospital bed, Rosemary thought it was almost impossible to believe he was so seriously ill. A night's rest had wiped the lines of strain from his face. His skin looked tanned, his hair dark and vigorous against the white pillow. She wanted to reach out and touch him, and she had to curl her fingers into her palms and press them rigidly into her sides to stop herself.

'You will find he is very drowsy from the medication we have given him. I shall leave you with him for ten minutes. I am sure he will find it reassuring to know that you are here.'

The doctor withdrew, and Rosemary was alone with him. He moved his head restlessly on the pillow, and she succumbed to the irresistible need to reach out and soothe him. Immediately she touched him, his movements stilled, his breath coming on a long sigh. His eyes opened, cloudy and vague as they focused on her.

'You came . . . ' he whispered.

Did he really know who she was, or was he confusing her with Monique?

His eyes closed, his head turning away. 'You're going to be all right, Nicholas,' she told him huskily. 'I'll be here, thinking about you.'

She touched his arm tentatively, surprised by his tension.

'Stay with me . . . ' He moved restlessly again. '*Je t'aime . . . Je t'aime . . .*'

Somehow Rosemary managed to swallow the lump of pain lodging in her throat. Who had he mistaken her for—his mother? One of his women? Bending close to him, she whispered aching, 'I love you too, Nicholas.'

His eyes didn't open, but he fumbled for her hand, his touch hot and biting.

She wanted to take him in her arms and cradle him protectively against her, to prevent him from ever being hurt again. She wasn't the one he wanted. Where was his family ... his mother? If he was hard and bitter who could blame him? Certainly not her.

'Don't leave me.' His skin was growing flushed, and Rosemary stifled her anguish. A nurse came in and gave him a quick professional look.

it is time for you to leave now, Madame Powers. I have to give him his injection.'

Nicholas was still holding on to her hand, although his eyes were closed.

'Could I just stay until . . . ' Rosemary begged.

The nurse looked at her compassionately.

'Very well,' she agreed.

As she watched the drug taking effect, Rosemary prayed as she had never prayed in her life before. Please God, let him survive ... let him not be reduced to being reliant on others ... Let him find the love and happiness he deserves.



## CHAPTER TEN

How MUCH longer? Rosemary paced restlessly up and down her room. It had been over two hours already, and still no word. Mousieur Boudin had promised to let her know the moment the operation was over.

The telephone beside the bed shrilled and she raced over towards it, but it was only Madame Hubert ringing to ask if there was yet any news.

'Nothing,' Rosemary told her dully. 'I've heard nothing at all yet.'

It was another half-hour before the door opened and Monsieur Boudin came in. He looked very tired, and Rosemary trembled inwardly with dread as she watched him.

'No ... it is all right,' he told her quickly when he saw the fear in her eyes. 'The operation was a success and your husband is now in recovery. The infection was severe, and very dangerously placed.'

'And his hearing . . . ?'

The doctor sighed. 'As I feared, there has been considerable damage to the nerve. I regret to say that there will always be a degree of impairment to his hearing in the left ear. However, I have every hope that with this new drug it can be controlled and that the situation will not become any worse. The infection built up so quickly and was so widespread that we had to remove a part of the nerve to prevent it spreading any further. I suspect that when your husband comes round he will be very angry and resentful. He is not a man who can accept any incapacity easily, but with luck he will retain perfect hearing in his right ear. Like many men of his calibre and personality, he will probably feel himself to be less worthwhile as a person because of his disability. Strangely, for a man who is so successful, he seems to suffer from an inner fear that he is in some way not worthwhile as a

human being. It will be your task to reassure him on that point, *madame*, and it will not be an easy one, I fear. He will need you now, although I doubt that he will ever admit it,' he warned her.

Rosemary couldn't endure any more. Turning her head away from him, she said huskily, 'I think you're forgetting the terms of our marriage, Monsieur Boudin. Once he realises that he is not going to die, I know that my . . . that Nicholas will demand that I comply with the terms of our marriage and give him an annulment.'

The specialist stared at her, frowning. 'But, Madame Powers, surely not! It was my understanding that the clause concerning the annulment was there purely for your benefit, so that you would not be tied to him. This is why I have been at such great pains to explain to you how very insignificant the eventual disability is likely to be, so that you will understand that you will not be married to a man who is in any real way incapacitated. I can, of course, understand Monsieur Powers' pride in not wishing to tie you to him, but I assure you he has allowed himself to fear that the disability will be far greater than I believe it is. You must surely know how much he loves you, *madame*.'

Rosemary went white and then scarlet. 'No,' she told him shaking her head. 'No, he doesn't love me.'

'I assure you, *madame*, that you are quite wrong. I myself heard him say with my own ears how much he loves you . . . but come, you must sit down. I can see that I have shocked you. Even so, I promise you that what I have said is the truth. You will find that your husband's lawyer knows it also.

'I think that between us we have done you a great injustice,' he added, 'I must admit that I found it hard to reconcile the tender concern you showed your husband, and your anxiety for him, with the mental

image I had of a woman who would only marry a man who loved her for financial gain.'

'I can't believe that he loves me,' Rosemary whispered, barely listening to what he was saying, 'I . . . '

'Both myself and Monsieur Robart heard him say how deeply he cares for you. His one wish when he knew he must have the operation was that your future be safeguarded.'

She hardly dared to let herself believe what she was hearing, but the specialist was not a cruel man, he would hardly tell her that Nicholas loved her if he did not believe it to be the truth.

'Perhaps you misunderstood. I think he could have mistaken me for ...'

'No, *madame*," Monsieur Boudin shook his head firmly. 'I promise you there was no mistake.'

'But he wanted that clause on annulment . . . '

'And he will fight to enforce it on you,' the specialist agreed bluntly. 'He is a very proud man, as I have already said.' He looked shrewdly at Rosemary. 'You probably understand better than I why he should have this belief that it is impossible for anyone to love him for himself. It will be your task to convince him otherwise, if, as I suspect, you also love him.'

'I do . . . but I can't believe . . . '

'Cannot, or will not? Are you sure that you are not secretly afraid of what loving him might entail?'

Was she? 'No! When can I see him?' she asked.

For the first time since entering the room, the specialist allowed himself to smile.

'Just as soon as you wish. He has not yet come round from the anaesthetic, but if you wish to sit with him ... '

If she wished? But first she must telephone the chateau and inform Madame Hubert of the outcome of the operation.

'How long will it be before he can return home?' she asked.

'Not long. We do not keep our patients bedfast for too long these days. Perhaps at the end of the week.'

'And the pain he had when flying ... '

'No, that will not trouble him now.'

To anyone else the afternoon might have seemed to drag. Nicholas remained deeply asleep, as Rosemary sat at his bedside, his body completely still beneath the covers, but she was more than content to simply sit and look at him. He loved her! She could hardly take it in, constantly swinging between a delirious excitement and then the crush of fear that the specialist had somehow been mistaken.

Nicholas moved, and opened his eyes, focusing them hazily on her face. Without thinking about it, Rosemary took his hand in her own and bent over to kiss him. Beneath her thumb she felt his pulse race.

'You're going to be all right, Nicholas,' she told him softly. 'Everything's going to be all right.'

It was easy to assure herself of the truth of that statement while Nicholas was an invalid, and confined to bed, but once he recovered,

once he resumed the reins of control . . . She did not delude herself that he would simply allow their marriage to stand without a fight, especially if the specialist was right in suggesting that Nicholas was too proud to admit to her that he loved her. No doubt he feared that, like his mother, she too could desert him.

She stayed with him until the specialist returned to examine him and prescribe a painkilling drug which would make him sleep.

Another phone call to the chateau reassured Kit that she had not forgotten about him, and then Rosemary herself went to bed.

The next day followed much the same routine. Nicholas again spent most of the day asleep. Whenever he awoke, he seemed immediately to look for her, but he was still very weak, and Rosemary was determined not to place too much importance on his apparent dependence on her.

The third day brought him awake for longer periods and he was intensely irritable. Only Rosemary seemed to have the right touch; only she seemed able to smooth his pillows and soothe his temper. He seemed edgy and tense, and she learned from Monsieur Boudin that Nicholas had subjected him to close questioning on the subject of his illness and its prognosis.

Rosemary had just left his room and was heading for her own, when a flurried nurse came hurrying towards her.

'Madame Powers, there is a lady here to see your husband. A Madame Susan Powers. She says that she is his mother.'

Alarm and caution warred inside her breast as Rosemary followed the nurse to the elegantly furnished visitors' room.

The woman standing there was both imperious and beautiful. It was from her that Nicholas got his eyes, Rosemary decided, fighting against the fierce anger burning inside her.

It struck her, as she studied the coldly closed face, that this was a woman who would allow nothing to stand in the way of what she wanted. And Nicholas was convinced that she wanted Powers Oil.

Trying hard not to let her feelings show, Rosemary walked towards her and extended her hand.

'I believe you wish to see Nicholas,' she said. 'I'm afraid . . . '

'Not only do I want to see him, I also intend to see him.' The soft Texas drawl was at odds with the hard determination in her face. 'Nicholas is my son. I'm his closest relative. I have no idea who you are, or what you're doing here.'

Her dismissive glance swept over Rosemary's pale face and simple clothes.

'I'm Nicholas's wife.'

The simple statement had a very satisfactory effect on the icy green eyes, and just for a moment the other woman's composure slipped.

'His *wife*? But . . . I knew nothing of this . . . '

'No, but then you and. Nicholas are hardly very close, are you?' Rosemary said quietly. 'We haven't been married very long, and I'm afraid I can't allow you to see him at the moment.'

'*You* can't allow . . . ' Anger tightened the immaculate make-up, revealing lines that Rosemary had not at first noticed. 'When Nicholas hears . . . '

'I know all about your relationship with your son, and I can't believe it's maternal concern that brings you here at this time. After all, you didn't even bother to attend your daughter's funeral, did you?'

'What do you know about that?'

'She was married to my brother,' Rosemary said curtly.

There was a moment's pause while this information was assimilated, then the other woman drawled cuttingly: 'Ah, now I see why Nicholas has married you! A very advantageous match from your point of view, of course, but the marriage won't last. You're obviously a much more intelligent woman than I realised . . . intelligent enough perhaps to realise that I would be prepared to make it worth while to, shall we say, end your marriage.'

For a moment Rosemary was too stunned to respond.

'You can't want to remain married to him,' Susan Powers continued. 'Not now. And just think of what you could do with a million dollars!'

A hundred different angry replies buzzed round in her head, but in the end Rosemary simply said quietly, 'I love him, and that's something that can't be bought.'

'You love him now,' the other woman sneered, 'but will you still love him when he's stone deaf?'

'I would love him no matter what his physical disabilities,' Rosemary returned shakily, 'but he's not going to be deaf.'

She had the pleasure of seeing the other woman look distinctly disconcerted. 'Oh, but my information was that . . . ' She broke off and stared at Rosemary, it seems that Nicholas has outmanoeuvred me!'

'He's asleep at the moment ... but once he knows you're here, I'm sure he'll want to see you,' Rosemary told her. Whatever she might think about this woman, she was still Nicholas's mother.

'You really think so? You're naively sentimental, my dear. I came to Paris for one thing and one alone.'

'Powers Oil,' Rosemary said under her breath.

The other woman smiled grimly. 'Quite right, but now it seems that I'm not to get it.'

'But why?' Rosemary protested. 'Why do you want to . . . destroy him? It can't be for money. Your family . . . '

'Money!' Susan Powers threw back her head and laughed bitterly. 'No, it's not for money . . . Shall I tell you why?' She smiled unkindly. 'Perhaps I should, and then you can tell your . . . husband. Nicholas is not my child.' She smiled grimly as she caught Rosemary's soft gasp of shock. 'After we'd became engaged, but before we were married, my husband fell in love with my cousin, and she with him. Lucille lived with us . . . she was very much the poor relation. I hated her even then. Paul came to me and asked to be released from our engagement, but I refused. He told me that he and Lucille had been lovers, and I told him that if he didn't marry me I would make the details of their affair public. I was not going to stand aside and be humiliated by my fiance ditching me to marry my cousin. For Lucille's sake he agreed to go through with the wedding, but he told me he would never live with me as my husband. He loved Lucille. She had a heart condition which meant that she was not to be subjected to any stress. In those days it was still considered shocking for an unmarried girl to have an open affair with a man.

'A month before we were due to be married, Paul found out that Lucille was pregnant. Once again he begged me for his freedom, and



once again I refused. For Lucille's sake he married me, and Lucille was sent away to a special place for girls like her who'd gotten themselves pregnant.

'She died three days after her twins were born. It was then that Paul told me that unless I accepted her children as my own, he would personally tell the newspapers what I'd done and how I'd forced him into marriage. We'd been living abroad, travelling through Europe, and it wasn't too difficult to pretend that the children were mine.'

She broke off and smiled cruelly at Rosemary's white face. 'Now do you understand why I feel the way I do about my "son"?' she asked mockingly.

'Does Nicholas know . . . ' Rosemary began.

'That I'm not his mother? No. It was amusing when he was a child to watch his pathetic attempts to get my attention.' Her callousness made Rosemary want to hit her.

'Now you know why I'd like to destroy Powers Oil . . . why I had to destroy everything that my husband had built up. He married me, yes, but he never let me forget that he didn't want me. He never accepted me as his wife.'

'And you hated Belle too?' Rosemary queried flatly.

'She, as a girl, was insignificant. It was Nicholas who was Paul's heir.'

It was a view that Rosemary considered archaic, and despite her revulsion, she was touched with pity for this bitter, resentful woman. It was obvious that she had spent her whole life trying to destroy first Paul and then his son, and to Rosemary it all seemed such a waste.

Did this woman ever wish that she had let Paul go to marry, his Lucille when he had first asked? It was not a question she felt she could ask her.

'It seems that this time Nicholas has won . . . but there will be other occasions!' And she swept out before Rosemary could even think of detaining her.

For Rosemary it was a long and restless night, while she tried to weigh the truth against what Nicholas actually believed.

In the end she suspected that he would suffer less from knowing that Susan was not actually his mother than from the shock of learning the truth. Her rejection of him would be easier to understand and accept, surely, once he knew that it was not the rejection of a mother for her child, but that of a woman for the child of her rival. Perhaps in her own twisted way she had once loved Paul, who could tell? Probably even she herself no longer knew the truth.

At the end of the week, as Monsieur Boudin had promised, Nicholas was allowed to leave the clinic and return to the chateau.

The journey was accomplished speedily and for the most part in silence, with Nicholas asleep for most of the time.

No difficult nursing was required, and Rosemary had undertaken to ensure that he took the drugs that had been prescribed.

'You will find him a difficult patient, I am sure,' Monsieur Boudin told her as she took her leave of him, 'but remember what I said about that touchy pride.'

Of course Madame Hubert and Kit were both anxious to greet them, and it was some time before Nicholas was installed in his own bed.

He protested that he was not an invalid and had no intention of being treated as such, but Rosemary was insistent, and when she went up to check on him a little later she found that she had been right, for he was deeply asleep.

During the days since Susan Powers' visit she had searched for a way to introduce the subject and tell him the truth, and it seemed that for once fate was disposed to assist her.

While she was sitting with him later that evening, Madame Hubert mentioned with concern that she had received a telephone call from Texas.

They seemed to know that you were in hospital,' she told Nicholas worriedly. 'I did not know what to say . . . I tried to deny it.'

Do you know anything about this?' Nicholas looked sharply at Rosemary, and quietly asking Madame Hubert if she would mind leaving them alone for a few minutes, she proceeded to tell him about her interview.

'So you see she's not your mother, and it was her jealousy that led her first to destroy your father and then to try to destroy you.'

He looked so remote and withdrawn that Rosemary dreaded that she had done the wrong thing. Perhaps she should have said nothing. Perhaps the shock . .

'I shouldn't have told you . . . ' she began worriedly.

'No.' Nicholas lifted his head and looked directly at her. 'You cannot know how many times as a child I fantasised about just such a possibility. To know now that she was not my mother is more of a relief than a shock. What I cannot understand is why my father ...'

'Perhaps he found it too painful,' Rosemary suggested gently. 'He must have loved your real mother very much.'

'I suppose she'd come to Paris to crow over my misfortune, although I would like to know how she learned about it.' He was looking at her in an odd way, Rosemary realised, and heat seared her skin. Did he think she . . . ?

'She learned nothing from me,' she told him fiercely. 'Do you really think . . .

'No, no—you're the last person who would do something like that. I might have wronged you in the past, Rosemary, but that doesn't mean that I am not fully aware now of your loyalty and your ... compassion. I had meant to apologise for those things, and for ...

'Marrying me,' she supplied bleakly, knowing what was coming.

'We have to talk. There is the matter of the annulment. Just as soon as I am able to leave this bed I shall send for Robart and he shall set things in motion.'

Gritting her teeth, Rosemary said curtly, 'No.'

'No?' Nicholas looked at her. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that I'm no longer in agreement with our marriage being annulled.'

For a moment he looked almost shocked, then he looked away from her. For a long time there was silence, and Rosemary held her breath. What was he going to say? Was he going to admit that he did love her, that he wanted her?

When he did eventually speak, all her hopes were squashed. His voice was like ice as he said grimly, 'The annulment was something that we

were both agreed upon. Why are you now saying that you have changed your mind? Is the settlement I have made not enough? Is that it, Rosemary? Are you hoping you can pressurise me into giving you more money?'

The cruelty of it, after his admission that he knew he could trust her, totally robbed her of any ability to defend herself.

How could he say that to her? Didn't he know . . . ? Rosemary looked at him and saw that his eyes were glittering with a fierce rejection.

Unable to endure any more, she got up out of her chair and left the room.

Two days of heavy, almost continuous snow made it impossible for Nicholas to send for his solicitor. Every day now he seemed a little stronger and a little more remote. He had even taken to spending an hour or more working in his office, something which Rosemary suspected Monsieur Boudin would not approve of, but she didn't feel brave enough to tell Nicholas so.

They had been back at the chateau for almost a week when the strain of Nicholas's illness and the uncertainty of her position finally caught up with her. She woke up one morning feeling totally unable to move, and simply lay in bed until Madame Hubert came to look for her, expressing concern when she saw her wan face.

'It's tiredness, nothing more,' Rosemary assured her. But it was a tiredness that didn't seem to go away, and at last, when Kit was safely tucked up in bed, she decided that she too would have an early night.

A long soak in a hot bath seemed like a good idea, because no matter how tired she was, nothing seemed to relax the tight knot of tension that gripped her body.

The heat of the water did have a mildly soporific effect on her, but, nothing seemed to be able to reach inside her and ease the perpetual ache of loving Nicholas and fearing more with every day that passed that Monsieur Boudin had been wrong and that he did not love her after all.

Wrapping a towel round her body, she opened the door to her bedroom—then stood stock still staring in shock as Nicholas got up out of the chair in which he had been seated.

He looked pale and strained, she realised sickly, his skin drawn far too tight over his bones. She wanted to go up to him and stroke away the lines of care tensing his face. She wanted . . .

'For God's sake get some clothes on, will you!'

The harsh sound of his voice jarred across her tender nerve-endings like a knife sawing at overstrung wire, and she shrank back from it.

'Nicholas . . . ' she began.

He ignored the aching pleading in her voice and strode over to the window, with his back to her.

'Madame Hubert said you weren't feeling well?' he said coldly.

Misery coalesced inside her. So this was simply a duty visit. 'I'm tired, that's all. I . . . all of us were very worried about you . . . '

He swung round then, his face tight with anger. 'What are you trying to say, Rosemary? That it is your . . . concern for me that has put those dark circles under your eyes, and made you lose so much weight that you look almost frighteningly frail!'

She paused on the edge of denying what he was saying, and then her body sagged, pride defeated by love.

'And if I am?'

She forced herself to meet his eyes, her heart turning over inside her breast when he was the first one to look away.

'I don't know what you think you're trying to do, Rosemary. I've already told you that . . . ' He broke off, his voice growing harsh. 'We both know that there is no future in our marriage. That we have nothing . . . '

She couldn't bear to listen to any more, and turned away from him, desperately trying to control the tears threatening to flood down her face.

Although she was aware that he had stopped speaking, she was fighting too hard to control her misery to hear him move, and when his hands descended on her shoulders, swinging her round so that he could look down into her tear-wet eyes, she could only stare back at him in dazed pain.

'You're crying!'

His voice was rough with pain. He reached out and touched the pads of his fingertips to her face, his eyes darkening with remorse.

'Rosemary, Rosemary, you're far too tender-hearted, but I can't let you tie yourself to me.'

'Hold me, Nicholas,' she wept.

She wasn't sure where the words came from, although the husky pleading voice whispering them was undeniably her own. She felt him tense, then frown down into her eyes as he tilted her face up so that he could look at her.

'Rosemary . . . '

She buried her head against his shoulder, her fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

'Nicholas, if our marriage must be set aside, if I agree to the annulment, will you . . . ' She looked up at him, and touched a nervous tongue to her lips. Her body was quivering with a mixture of pain and desire. 'Will you make love to me first?'

She saw the shock register in his eyes and then in his body.

'What? What the hell do you think you're saying?' His voice was rough, but her senses relayed to her the male arousal of his body, and her heartbeat quickened.

'I love you, Nicholas, and I . . . I want you to make love to me. Let me at least have that memory.' She felt no shame or doubt, only an intense feeling of feminine strength, and there was a new maturity in the way she met the look of incredulity darkening his eyes.

'You love me!' He sounded almost dazed, she recognised. He groaned suddenly deep in his throat, his teeth clenching as though against intense pain.

'Rosemary . . . Rosemary, you don't know what you're saying!' His fingers bit into her flesh as though he was about to push her away, and instinctively she pressed closer to him.

There was a moment of sharp realisation between them as their bodies clung together, and then his mouth was on hers, and she was kissing him with all the pent- up love and passion flooding her body. She felt him tense and then shudder as he wrenched his mouth from hers. His heart was beating against her like a sledge hammer.

'Rosemary, Rosemary!' He muttered her name against her mouth like an incantation and then he was kissing her again, their lips clinging together while they fought for breath.



Her body loved the sensation of his hands on it, caressing, touching ... She shuddered as he cupped her breasts, pressing herself eagerly against him.

She felt his harsh indrawn breath.

'God, what is it you do to me? You make me lose control totally and absolutely; you make me want you in ways . . . '

He broke off to stare down at her, and she felt the heady excitement race through her right down to her toes.

'Show me . . . Show me how I make you feel, Nicholas,' she whispered huskily.

She heard him give a groan of mingled resignation and need as he drew her back into his arms, spreading her hands against the warm flesh of his chest, mutely inciting her caresses. His skin felt warm and faintly damp. The sensation of the hair-roughened skin beneath her palms excited her and she shuddered tensely.

Her innocent responsiveness made Nicholas frown.

'We can't do this. I have nothing to offer you, Rosemary. Nothing's changed. In ten years' time I could still be completely deaf.'

'That won't stop me loving you.'

Instantly he went completely still, his fingers fastening in her hair, tilting her head back so that he could look into her eyes.

She made no attempt to conceal her expression from him, proudly letting him see what she felt.

'You can't love me—not after the way I've treated you, the things I've said . . . and even if you do, I can't allow you to throw yourself away on ... '

'On the man I love.'

She had managed to silence him, and she knew instinctively just from looking at him that, incredibly, the doctor had been right. There was no way Nicholas could disguise the way he was looking at her; the love and pain mingling in the darkened green eyes. She wanted to reach out and cradle him against her, but she sensed that this was the time for her to be strong. Her heart was torn with love for him as she witnessed his silent struggle with himself.

'I love you so much . . . ' He sounded as though his throat was full of broken glass, every word torture. 'But I can't let you do this.'

Rosemary held her breath. This was it. She had to throw in her final card. If she lost now . . .

'You mean your pride won't let you,' she said coolly. 'Or is it that you don't trust me, Nicholas? Do you think I'd leave you the way your mother did?' He went white, but before he could speak, she continued, 'If you tell me honestly now that you don't love me, I'll agree to the annulment, and I promise you I'll never ask you for a penny. You'll have kept your pride intact; you'll never have to worry if I'm staying with you out of pity, if I might leave you. You'll be secure and inviolate, just as you've always wanted to be.'

'Stop it!'

The pain in his voice tore at her tender heart. She wanted to tell him that she took every word back, that she would stay with him on whatever terms he cared to set, but she knew she couldn't. She must force him to make the choice—all or nothing, because if she did not he would always wonder why she had stayed. There had been so

much betrayal in his life, so much pain. He was like a child who needed to be shown that there were no limits to love's boundaries, no conditions attached to the way she felt about him.

Nicholas sank down into a chair, dropping his head into his hands, his breath rasping through his throat as he fought for self-control.

Seconds passed while Rosemary prayed harder than she had ever prayed before in her life, and then finally he looked at her, and she saw with humility and compassion that his eyes were damp with tears, 'I can't do it,' he said tensely, 'I can't let you go.' She flew across the room, to kneel at his side and take him into her arms, feeling the dampness of his tears against her skin.

'I just pray that there won't come a day when you hate me for this ... '

'Never!' She smiled up at him. 'I love you so much.'

Nicholas made a savage sound of despair deep in his throat and then covered her mouth with his own, kissing her with a muted violence and urgency that swept back all the barriers. Against her mouth he muttered thickly, 'I tried to keep you at a distance, to stop myself from loving you. I dragged Monique here from Paris, hoping that I could forget you in her arms . . . ' He felt her sudden tension and laughed sardonically, 'It was worse than useless—I couldn't so much as touch her. You'd destroyed my desire for any other woman. You'd made me see how empty and unsatisfying my relationships with women had been.'

'I was very jealous of her,' Rosemary confessed.

'There was never any need. *I* was jealous of Andre.'

She smiled faintly. 'That night when we were in the hut, I wanted you to make love to me.'

She felt the sudden surge of his body against her own and quivered in response.

'You'll never know what it cost me to keep you out of my arms. I wanted you so badly, I ached with it. Perhaps subconsciously when I insisted you marry me, I knew that I could never let you go. Are you really sure that this is what you want, Rosemary?'

'More sure than I've ever been of anything else in my life.'

'What would you have done if I'd insisted on going through with the annulment—walked out on me?'

She shook her head. 'How could I? There's still Kit—and the contract.' She grinned suddenly. 'I've just realised—by marrying you, I've broken it!'

He laughed. 'So you have. I think I can persuade the courts to take a lean view of your misdemeanour. What would you have done, though?'

Rosemary hesitated for a moment and then flushed slightly. 'I . . . I knew that you . . . that you wanted me.' She dared a glance into his eyes and what she saw there reassured her. 'And . . . '

'Nicholas silenced her by laughing again, before gathering her close to him. 'I never imagined my shy little virgin would even think of seducing me!'

Her body burned beneath the look he gave her, although she protested indignantly, 'You're laughing at me!'

'Not really. Love me, Rosemary,' he murmured against her mouth. 'Rosemary for remembrance—how appropriate. I should have known from the start how dangerous you were. And now it's too late.'

'Much too late,' she assured him firmly. 'I've got you now, and I'm never going to let you go.'

The face that she had once thought harsh and forbidding softened miraculously, the green-blue eyes wondering clear and alert.

'You know something, Rosemary Powers?' he teased softly. 'I think you've just won your first takeover bid!'

'My first and my last.' She snuggled up against him, and complained huskily, 'Are we going to spend all evening talking?'

One dark eyebrow rose.

'Do you really need an answer to that?' His hands moved over her body, his mouth silencing the words that rose to her lips; everything but the two of them faded into insignificance. He had fought a long battle against loving her, and he was now discovering that it was one he didn't mind losing at all.