

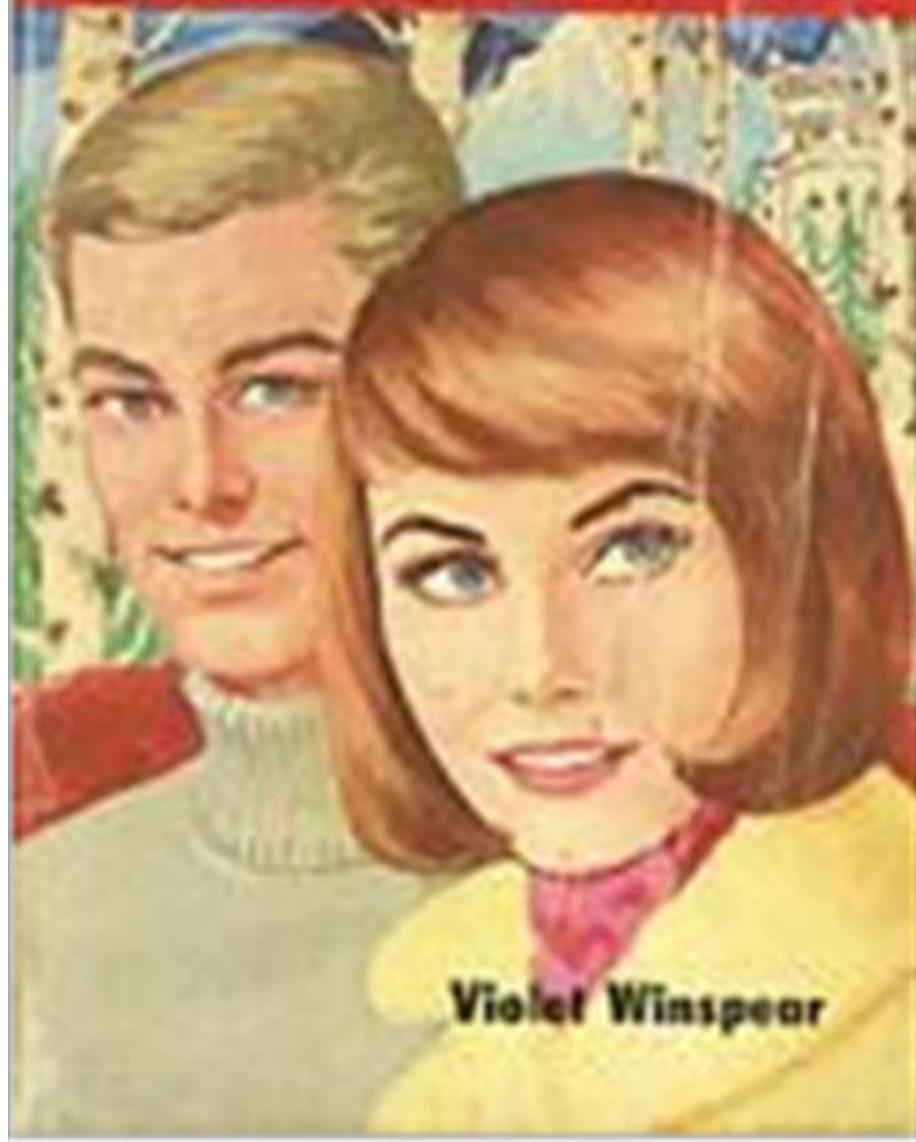


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W HARLEQUIN ROMANCE

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THE CASTLE OF THE SEVEN LILACS



Violet Winspear

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When the handsome Baron Breck von Linden offered Siran a job which involved staying at his fairy-tale home, the Castle of the Seven Lilacs, she knew that it was attraction between herself and the Baron that was taking her there.

But Breck's younger brother Kurt made no secret of his opinion of Siran and her motives.

CHAPTER ONE

A BUSY morning at the Danube Coffee House had just tapered off, and the young English waitress was taking a well-earned rest in the kitchen when Rudi, one of the musicians, came to tell her that a Baron von Linden was asking for her by name. The Herr Baron requested an interview with her right away.

Siran stared at Rudi in amazement. 'Whatever can an Austrian baron want with me?' she exclaimed. 'Do you think he's anything to do with the Opera House?'

Rudi shrugged his shoulders. 'He could be. Now off with your cap and apron, and go at once to speak with this man.' Rudi broke into a smile. 'He looks very important, and rather impatient.'

'Oh dear.' Her hands fumbled nervously with the sash of her apron, and her cap. 'There, do I look all right?'

'For a girl who has been busy all the morning you look amazing to me.'

She smiled. Rudi was her kind friend, and having worked at one time in London he could speak to her in her own tongue. He said always the encouraging thing, but before entering the dining-room of the cafe she took a quick look at herself in the wall mirror. Her glossy red-brown hair was bobbed smoothly to the line of her cheekbones, and her face had a delicate kind of strength and independence. A small cross on a chain filled the hollow of her throat, where a pulse beat nervously as she left the kitchen and made for the large dining-room, now empty but for a couple of waiters clearing the tables, and a tall figure standing near the door.

Siran hesitated to approach him, for he looked intimidating in a grey overcoat with an astrakhan collar. He beat impatient time with a pair of driving gloves, and the cool sunlight through the window shone on

his crest of silvery hair. Siran thought he must be middle- aged, then he met her eyes and she quickly changed her mind. There was a piercing quality to his look; a gleam of lake-grey beneath his heavy eyelids.

He was a man in complete command of himself, and a total stranger to her.

'You are Miss Siran Winters.' His English was faultless, his accent slightly grating. 'The young woman who was among those saved from a hotel fire about five weeks ago, in a court just off the Ringstrasse?'

She stared at his firm features, tanned no doubt by the mountain sports indulged in by men of his virile stamp. 'Yes,' she spoke clearly, though he made her heart thump with a certain alarm. 'I was staying at the hotel which caught fire, and my name is Winters.'

'*Guten tag.*' His look of autocracy gave way to something more human. With a click of his heels he gave her a formal bow. 'I have had some trouble finding you, Miss Winters. Why are you working in a *kaffee- haus* when I am informed that you are a dancer? I understand that you were to dance in the corps de ballet at the Opera House.'

His grey eyes took in her black silk dress with its frilly white cuffs, the copper shine of her hair, and the wand slimmness of a girl trained for ballet dancing.

'I hurt my ankle at the time of the fire and another girl took my place in the company. I am working here until "there is another vacancy for a dancer ... I thought, Herr Baron, that you might be connected with the Opera House. Aren't you?'

'Not in any capacity.' A trace of a smile touched his lips, as-if the idea amused him. 'My business with you has nothing at all to do with your

career, except that it might be said that it was extremely fortunate your career brought you to Vienna. Why was that?'

'The ballet company I was dancing with in England had the sad misfortune to lose its Director, and there were debts to pay off. All of us, apart from the principals, found ourselves out of a job. My teacher, who is Austrian, arranged that I dance here in Vienna ... then the night I arrived the fire broke out.' Siran gave a rueful little shrug. 'I twisted my ankle climbing out on to a windowsill with a baby in my arms ... anyway, you don't want to hear about that.'

'On the contrary,' his gaze seemed to pierce her, 'I am here because of the child you saved from the flames that night.'

Even as she looked astonished by what he said, he was glancing around the caff at the bare tables, and frowning at the lingering aroma of food. 'Can you get away for an hour?' he asked abruptly. 'We cannot talk here, and I have something to say to you that requires a calm, unhurried answer.'

Siran hesitated, and then remembering the child with whom she had crouched on a windowsill that night, she became curious about this tall stranger whose white-gold hair was so in contrast to his sun-weathered features. Her eyes flicked his mouth and she felt that it expressed a man of deep, controlled passions. He looked a man who could be kind to those he cared for, but merciless towards those who made an enemy of him. This she felt keenly. It was all there in his strong face with its thrusting cheekbones.

'Yes, I can get away for a while, but I must be back by teatime, when trade picks up again.' Her brown eyes met his, shy and intrigued, and aware of him as a haughty baron. 'Will you excuse me while I get my coat?'

He inclined his head. 'I will await you in my car, which is parked just around the corner.'

She hastened to the cloakroom, where Rudi was smoking a cigarette and awaiting her with a friendly smile. 'Well, is he a patron of the arts who has offered you a fabulous contract?'

'Nothing so good.' She smiled regretfully as she slipped into her tweed coat and buttoned the collar high about her slender neck. 'I think the Baron von Linden is some connection of the child I snatched out of his crib the night of the fire. I expect he has traced me in order to offer me some sort of a reward... he's very formal and serious about it all. I couldn't refuse to take a short drive in his car.'

'Be careful, *liebchen*.' Rudi's smile faded. 'A certain arrogance lingers still in these men of the old Austrian nobility. That *savoir rein* is not assumed, and young women are impressed by it. It's part of the privilege of being born with a crested spoon in your mouth.'

She laughed, for Rudi disarmed her rather than alarmed her. He made her feel the security of having a good friend to turn to in a strange city. 'I'll be careful,' she promised. 'I don't really think the Baron has a roving eye, but I will admit that a girl can't always be sure of a man's motives. Anyway, I'm probably too slim to appeal to an Austrian. Don't you like your women to be blonde and buxom?'

'I am Viennese.' Rudi took her hand and kissed her wrist. 'We admire a pretty face and a fine-boned ankle.'

'Which is all very nice, Rudi, but I haven't time to stay and be flirted with. The Baron is waiting for me.'

She ran through the cafe and out of the door into the cool sunshine of Vienna in the autumn. As always she was aware of a magic and charm in the air, memories of the waltz kings, and the Imperial guardsmen. There still hung about an old courtyard, as she passed by,

an air of having seen exciting times. Here the handsome *kavaliers* had leapt upon their black horses, resplendent in their scarlet and blue. *Der Rosen-kavalier* had been alive in all its gaiety ... and yet Vienna still whispered of romance. Of lovers who met in the woods of Wienerwald in the springtime, when the lilacs and lindens were out in bloom.

She paused beside a black Mercedes and the occupant opened the door for her. She slid inside and was at once aware of the things Rudi had warned her about. She cast a faintly nervous glance at the Baron's aloof profile, and was reassured. He was not interested in her as a young ballet dancer, a stranger to his country. He had something else on his mind.

He drove along the Ringstrasse in silence, leaving her to her thoughts .. and suddenly they were filled again by the clamour of firebells, the cries of people in distress, and the frightened sobs of a child left abandoned in a hotel room. She kept her eyes averted from the court where the burned hotel was boarded up; silent now, empty and forlorn, its scorched signpost still hanging above the door.

It still seemed a sad omen to Siran that a thing so terrible should have happened on her first visit to Vienna. She had arrived .with such high hopes, but they had tumbled down, and her single consolation was that she had awoken to the smell of smoke and saved the life of a child.

'What impression have you formed of Vienna?'

She gave a start as the Baron spoke, and saw the Burggarten looming ahead of them, a rambling place of lawns and birds and half-hidden steps leading to secret places. 'Vienna has an old-world charm about it,' she murmured. 'I love it.'

'You young people find the word "love" very easy to say.' There was a sardonic note in his voice, as if he thought her naive and unaware of what love really meant. Her heart felt that familiar ache. She had been privileged to know Cassian, the great *premier danseur*, and in her young and unawakened way she had loved him. He had been so wise, and so kind at times, and had predicted that one day she would be a real ballerina. It was still her cherished dream; she would not let go of it for anyone, not in any circumstances.

'I'm not a child, Herr Baron.' She spoke stiffly. 'You asked my opinion of Vienna.'

'You appear from your reply to fall in love very easily.'

'It's in the nature of a dancer to have lots of imagination,' she defended herself. 'I can feel the magic in the atmosphere of Vienna. I can see it in the lovely old buildings, and in the faces of the people.'

'What do you see in my face, *fraulein*?'

His question startled her, and she had no way of answering him frankly. She saw strength in his face, a controlled passion, and a certain relentless irony, as if at some time someone had made it hard for him to forgive a broken dream. Siran knew about dreams. As a mere girl of fifteen, straight from ballet school to the Cassian Company, she had looked at the lean, dark, gifted Director and dreamed of growing up to become his partner ... perhaps his girl. She had known there were other women, ballerinas of striking looks and graceful talents, but always when he spoke to her there had seemed a waiting look in his dark eyes.

A Hebrew on his mother's side, he had given her a special name. *Feigileh*, little bird.

'I see a question in your eyes, Herr Baron. You want to ask me about the fire.'

'Can you bear to talk of it?'

'I think so, although it was very terrible. Some people died.'

'I know.' His tone was sombre, and he was driving steadily towards the outskirts of the city, to where the Vienna Woods loomed in their autumn colours against the distant mountains. There was snow on the peaks, and soon it would mantle the sides of the hills and the long ski trails would gleam darkly against the white.

Her bobbed hair swung against her cheek as she glanced at the Baron. 'Are you a relative of the little boy's?' She recalled the very fair hair, the large blue eyes filled with tears, the expensive shawl in which she had wrapped the child in order to carry him to safety.

'Yes.' There was a long pause, and the car went faster, as if he needed to feel in control of the life and force of the powerful engine. Soon they were on the edge of the woods, driving in the shadow of the slender trees of Wienerwald, where masses of tinted foliage etched itself against the autumn sky, gilded like the sun before sinking to the ground.

All at once the car came to a grinding halt, and as the engine throbbed, the Baron turned to look at Siran, his grey eyes piercing her, a deep groove between his brows. Then he patted his pockets and took out a cigarette case. 'Will you smoke, Miss Winters?'

'No, thanks. It's bad for a dancer, who needs all her wind.'

'You will permit me the indulgence?' Again his smile was saturnine, as if her youthful seriousness amused him. As if to be a dancer was a flighty thing.

He applied the flame of his lighter to his cigarette and smoke jetted from the nostrils of his dominant nose. He wasn't exactly a handsome man, but he was distinguished, well-built, and well-dressed. A man to

be obeyed rather than liked at first glance. Well, she had come this far with him, but if he meant to offer her some reward for a humane act, then she would have to refuse him. It would be hard enough to talk about that night.

'So you have had bad luck since arriving in Vienna?' He leaned back in his seat so he could study her. 'And now you are working as a waitress. Such work cannot be too congenial for a ballet dancer. Did you not think of returning to England?'

'Yes, I thought about it.' Suddenly her heart was ach-ing again; she lowered her gaze and her lashes made shadows on her cheeks. 'But my reason for leaving was to get away from a personal sadness, and there seemed little chance of finding a place in a ballet company. There are only a few good ones and they are filled to capacity. It was a choice between dancing in pantomime, or coming to Vienna. I chose to come here and I shall stay if there is a chance of dancing at the Opera House. If not, I shall work at the coffee house until I have saved enough money to go on to Paris. I am ambitious, you see. I have made up my mind to become a dancer with a good company.'

'There is no one in England to raise objections?'

'I was brought up by a couple of kind, elderly aunts, who have since died. I have no one, Herr Baron.'

'Then the girl who falls in love with cities is not so vulnerable when it comes to young men, eh?' Blue-grey smoke drifted about the grey eyes etched by lines of authority. 'You have never let love for a person overrule your desire for a career?'

Siran thought this conversation had taken a very personal turn, and it faintly annoyed her that he should talk about love, that gift you gave without asking that it be returned. It couldn't be, not always, and this

man looked the demanding sort. He would see love in a different light from her.

'So you intend to stay in Austria for the next few months, working as a waitress, carrying trays from table to table, and too tired at the end of the day to keep up with what I believe is a strict training.'

'I have to live,' she said defensively. 'I have to pay the rent of my apartment. I am untrained for anything but being quick on my feet.'

'Quite so.' He stubbed his cigarette and was not looking at her as he said quietly: 'Tell me about that night at the hotel. I wish to know exactly what occurred.'

'You speak as if you have a right to know.'

'Believe me, Miss Winters, I have every right.'

Again that sombre note grated in his voice, and when she looked at him she saw a profile hard with tension, except for the movement of a muscle in his jaw.

'You said you could speak of it ... it is equally hard for me to listen.'

Her hands clenched together on her lap and she fixed her gaze on the trees of the Vienna Woods, as if it helped to look at living things when she had to speak of fire and the terrible death it had brought to three people.

She heard the sound of her own voice, speaking to this man who was a stranger yet who was strangely linked to what had happened after she had awoken that night to the choking fumes and smoke. She had scrambled into her dressing-gown and dashed out into the corridor, where the smoke was even worse, catching in her throat, smarting her eyes, and alerting her to the fear of fire in every human being. She had

run towards the staircase in the hope of escaping that way, and it was then she heard a child crying in a room with its door flung wide open.

By the time she had snatched the child out of its crib—there had been no one else in the room—the flames had reached the stairs and she had returned to her room, closed the door, and climbed out on to a fairly wide windowsill where she and the baby could at least breathe freely.

It had seemed like hours, crouching there on the sill, in pain from a twisted ankle, trying her best to comfort the child. Then out of the smoky darkness, shot with flame, filled with cries, had loomed a ladder and the reassuring face of a fireman.

'You are a brave young woman,' they said to her. 'But who is the child? Is he yours?'

She could only shake her head. She knew nothing about him, beyond that he was well cared for, and about a year old. He was also a handsome youngster, with a pair of deep blue eyes and hair so fair it was silvery.

Had she noticed the number of the room in which she had found him?

No, but she could tell them it had been about four doors away from her own room. And later, after checking the duplicate register found undamaged in the safe, it had been found that the room was part of a suite booked by a Frau Kristy. Whoever she was, whoever she had been, was uncertain. She had not been among the people rescued, and when later a woman's remains were found in the wreckage, it was assumed that she had abandoned the child and been caught in her flight by the flames.

Siran gave a shiver. What sort of a woman could leave her child all alone like that, to perhaps die from suffocation?

Silence followed her story, and when she glanced at the Baron she found him looking rather drawn. In his hand he was holding a blackened chain and pendant, and with some difficulty, for the catch was damaged, he opened it and showed Siran a pair of painted miniatures inside. Though somewhat blurred they were recognizable. A young woman with a pretty oval- shaped face framed by soft gold hair, and a young man with a rather dreamy dark face, handsome in a Byronic way.

Sitan gave the Baron a questioning look.

'This was found on the body of the dead woman,' he said huskily. 'It belonged to my young sister Kristy, and was traced to our family about a week after the fire.'

'How terrible!' Siran touched his hand with involuntary sympathy. 'I am so sorry for you ... then the child...?'

'Unquestionably the child was hers.' He snapped the locket shut and plunged it into his pocket. 'Kristy was not happy at home. She ran away from Mayholtzen about twenty months ago. Mayholtzen is in the mountains and something occurred around that time that made her hate the place. She may have known that she was to have a child ... we certainly didn't.'

He drew a deep sigh. 'It was not until I saw the boy that I realized the truth. The boy's likeness to his mother, combined with the locket found on the dead girl, confirmed my own and official opinion that she had been my sister. The name used by her was Frau Kristy, and I now believe that she may have been on her way home to Mayholtzen. She had stayed away from us long enough and had decided to bring her son home.'

He gazed sombrely from the window of the car. 'Then came the fire, and it was typical of Kristy to run away again. Always she has run

away in a crisis, thinking of no one but herself. This time,' he shrugged his broad shoulders, 'she ran into something from which there was no escape.'

'Did you never try to find her?' Siran asked.

'Of course I did. I am not quite a man of stone.' He looked angrily at Siran, and she drew away from him, seeing the power in his body and sensing something of the fear and uncertainty that must have been felt by his young sister when she found herself in trouble.

'I found her soon after she left us,' he went on. 'She was living with a friend at Interlaken. I told her she could come home any time she wished, but she refused. She said the castle and the surroundings had grown hateful to her. She would do as she pleased, and I could return to Mayholtzen and tell the rest of the family that she was now living her own life. My mother was extremely upset, of course. And later on Kristy told us nothing of the child we had some right to know about. You see, Miss Winters, she had a sweetheart, and he died from a mountain fall. He was the father of the boy. I am sure of it. If only she had let me know she was in Vienna I could have come for her and the tragedy need never have happened.'

His eyes dwelt broodingly on Siran's face. 'She was so impulsive, and it worries me that she may have been a little frightened of me. Do I look such a bear? No, she kept everything to herself and chose to conduct her life as if it were an operetta. She kept me from knowing my nephew for a whole year ... he is a fine child. I think she must have been proud of him, in her way.'

Siran supposed so, and tried not to think of the baby crying all alone in that smoke-filled room.

'You could not have run and left your child in that way, eh?' Suddenly he reached for Siran's hand and enfolded it in his own. 'We have you

to thank for the boy. You saved his life, Miss Winters, and you must be rewarded --'

'No,' she broke in, 'it's reward enough that he's with you, safe and sound.'

'I have to insist.' He smiled, but she saw the look of command in his eyes. 'I came looking for you so I could express my own gratitude, and my mother's. She invites you to come to Mayholtzen to meet her, and to perhaps stay for a holiday.'

'That's so kind of her, but I couldn't ---'

'You are full of refusals.' His smile became slightly dangerous. 'It is hardly good for a dancer to work as a waitress. Not only is the occupation a tiring one but you will find no time to keep up with your training.' He paused as if to let these words sink in. 'You are aware that your talent could become impaired ... then what will happen to you?'

'I am young, Herr Baron, and only as yet a dancer in a corps de ballet.'

'But all the same you value your talent ? You have talked of being ambitious for the future.'

'Yes --'

'Therefore would it not be better for you to enjoy the freedom of our mountains for a few weeks, where you will not be rushed off your feet in a coffee house?'

'I need the money I earn. It's kind of you to invite me to your home at Mayholtzen, and I'm sure I would have enjoyed such a change of scenery, but it just isn't possible.'

'I see no impossibility,' he said suavely. 'If you are concerned about money, then it is no effort for me to write a cheque.'

'I'm sure it isn't!' Colour stormed into her cheeks. 'But I happen to be an independent person and I wouldn't dream of accepting money from you.'

'The boy's life is worth every penny I have, Miss Winters. It would give me pleasure to make you financially secure for a year, let us say, until you are established with a good ballet company.'

'No.' She shook her head firmly, and her pewter hair bobbed against her cheeks. 'I like to stand on my own two feet, and I don't wish to be known as a dancer who was kept by an Austrian baron --'

He laughed sardonically. 'I would not advertise it, *fraulein*. It would be our secret.'

'When a thing is kept secretive it always seems worse when someone else stumbles on to it. You're generous, Herr Baron, but my answer is no, thank you. I like to work for my living. I like the feeling of self-respect.'

'You are very British,' he said, and his grip tightened on her wrist. 'You won't give in without a fight.'

'I won't give in if we sit here till the moon rises!' She tried to pull her hand free of his and found steel in his fingers. 'Nor will I beg, Baron. But I will remind you that I am a visitor to Austria, and so far I have found only courtesy and gaiety, and respect for the ways of a stranger.'

'Obstinate as well as fearless, eh?' He smiled down into her eyes, and she was abruptly aware of being alone with him in his car, on the edge of the Vienna Woods.

'I—I must be getting back to the coffee house,' she said. 'Herr Wilder will sack me if I'm not there to serve the teatime customers. I had trouble finding work, being English, and I can't afford to lose this job.'

'What if I offered you another... at Seven Lilacs?'

Her eyes looked into his, large and startled. Brown eyes with little gold lights in them, and a faun slant to their corners. Rather unusual eyes for an English girl, but then her mother had been a rather wild young Cornish girl who had liked to wander the beaches and the moors, and who had pined away the winter her young husband Tor did not return from a fishing trip to Arctic waters. He and all his crew had died at sea in a fearful storm, but Siran had been but a baby and all she remembered of her childhood was being reared by a pair of kind, elderly aunts who without spoiling her had not stopped her from following her dream of becoming a dancer. She had a natural, willowy grace inherited from her mother, who had climbed the cliffs and roamed the moorlands up until the day Siran was born. The aunts said always that she had her mother's eyes and her agility, but from her seaman father she had the heritage of independence, and the will to face up fearlessly to life.

looked at the Baron von Linden and thought of the strange twist of fate which had brought about their meeting. She saw that he had the strength of will to get what he wanted, and equally the pride to turn his back if he-found himself unwanted. He had done so in the case of his young sister, Kristy.

He was an intriguing man, Siran had to admit, and though capitulation would be easier than argument with him, why should she give in to him? What possible sort of a job could he offer her? And what sort of a place was Seven Lilacs? It was a romantic name, but she mustn't be carried away by that.

He must have read the questions in her eyes, for he replied to them without being asked. 'Our castle in the mountains is known as Seven Lilacs. The trees were planted by an ancestress of mine, and in the springtime they bloom all shades of mauve, violet and pink. There is a legend that while the lilacs bloom at Mayholtzen there will always be Lindens at the castle. You have made the legend come true for young Lorenz. Now he will grow up at the castle, and I find it hard to put into words the gratitude I feel. Miss Winters, I offer you a position in my household if you will not stay as my guest.'

'What sort of a position?' Though interested she forced herself to look and speak coolly. As she had admitted to Rudi ... a girl could never be really sure of a man's motives.

'As dancing teacher at the local school in the valley. It's a rather delightful place, and I am sure the young girls would enjoy being taught ballet. What do you say, Miss Winters?'

'I don't know what to say, Herr Baron. Surely the staff at the school are chosen by the local authorities, and it would be for them to add a dancing teacher to the pay roll.'

A trace of a smile quirked his lip. 'Mayholtzen and the valley belong to my family. I am part of the local authority, and if I put forward the idea that it would be educational for the schoolgirls to learn the art of ballet, then very few objections will be raised.'

'You mean you hold a rather feudal position at Mayholtzen?' Siran said drily. 'Your word is law?'

'My suggestions are not enforced, nor do the people lick my boots, but as the head of an old-established family I have a voice in what goes on. Though the old titles mean less in this modern age, *the* people of the mountains like the idea of a baron to whom they can bring their troubles. My brother Kurt is always a little amused, or he

pretends to be. You may have heard of Kurt von Linden? He risks his neck bob-sledging and winning ski trophies when he isn't climbing mountains.'

'I know the name of every renowned dancer,' Siran smiled, 'but I'm afraid I don't know much about sportsmen.'

'Then it will make a change for Kurt to meet a young woman who has not fallen in love with his picture in the magazines.'

'I haven't said I'll come to the castle.'

'But you will come.'

'You don't ask, you command.'

'It is only my way. Does it stiffen your resistance?'

'Yes, a little. Do you intend to pay my wage yourself?'

'Would you object to that?'

'Only if you offer me a ridiculously high sum.'

'I promise not to.' He smiled sardonically. 'I dare not corrupt that shining independence of yours.'

'I suppose I shall be expected to live at the castle?'

'My mother the Baroness will expect you to do so.'

'Your brother Kurt is also staying there?'

'At present. He plans to climb a mountain we call the Glass Turret. Some time ago he attempted it with a party which included that young man of Kristy's. Helmut fell, and Kristy blamed Kurt for the

accident. He feels he must conquer the mountain, and I shall not persuade him to abandon the climb. He must make up his own mind.'

'You are not allowing me to make up mine,' Siran protested. 'You want me to say right away that I shall come to Mayholtzen. You feel you owe me something, but you don't owe me a thing.'

'I perhaps owe the world a dancer. With us you would have the freedom and the atmosphere in which to keep in trim, so that when the time comes for you to join a corps de ballet you will be ready for it. You will not be run down and tired by a tedious job. Come, your dancing instincts must respond to what I offer you.'

'They do,' she admitted. 'I'd be foolish to turn down such a chance, but I can't come right away. The proprietor of the coffee house was good enough to give me a job, so I must give in my notice and work there another fortnight.'

Baron von Linden frowned. 'If I spoke to him he would release you from the necessity to work off your notice. Won't you permit me to do so?'

Siran shook her head. 'You must play fair, *mein herr*. You are a little too ready to take control of people and events, and that may have been why Kristy was afraid of you.'

'Are you afraid of me?' His eyes challenged her. 'Do I seem a hard, demanding man to you, one who has no understanding of the fears and affections of a young woman?'

'You are one of the strong people,' she replied. 'The world can't frighten you, so you are yourself a little frightening. People sense your impatience with their weaknesses.'

'What a brute I am,' he drawled. 'Dare you come after all to Seven Lilacs?'

'If you dare me, Herr Baron, how can I resist?' She smiled, but meeting his lake-grey eyes beneath those brooding lids she felt her heartbeats quicken with the alarm he engendered. 'Is your brother Kurt like you?'

'Does it worry you in case you find yourself in the mountains with a pair of tyrants instead of one?' A smile of irony gleamed in his eyes. 'Well, Miss Winters, I am going to leave you to decide for yourself about Kurt. I am but a man, so what would I know about the reactions of the female heart?'

'You are too modest, Baron. I am sure you are rarely at a loss to understand women. You struck at my weak spot right away; you knew I couldn't resist anything to do with ballet, so you contrived this job for me. What if I am a bad dancer?'

'I am certain you are a good one.' His eyes flicked her slender body in the tweed coat, and dwelt on her face with its faun-brown eyes above the delicate definition of her cheekbones. An elusively attractive face, lighting up in a smile, a little sad in repose. A dancer's face, just as her legs and ankles were fine to look at and yet supple and sure in performance.

'I imagine if your ballet company had not come to grief you would soon have danced solo?'

'I hoped for that. Our Director had confidence in me --' She bit her lip, for it hurt to talk about the lean, dark man who had told no one that he was suffering heart pains the night of the *Sleeping Beauty* ballet. Dear Cassian, exciting and terrific, who had died after dancing the Blue Bird *pas de deux*. Still with a flying movement he had entered the wings, and there he had dropped like a shot bird. They had been stunned, all of them, and then had come the pain, the cruel realization, that never again would Cassian, the kind tyrant, dance or direct, or look at a girl with a waiting smile deep in his dark eyes.

'There will never be another Cassian,' she said quietly.

'You cared for him?'

'Yes.' She met with a frank directness the grey eyes of Baron von Linden. 'To know him was to love him.'

'Such people are rare, *fraulein*. One usually needs to adjust to an attraction, *to* assess its meaning; to feel the magic deepen or decline. Perhaps your feeling for this man was a form of hero-worship ... you are but a girl even yet.'

'Girls grow up fast in a ballet environment. Ballet is an art in which the body has to be understood if it is to express correctly all the emotions.'

The Baron stared at her, the glint of his eyes under the heavy eyelids a disturbing combination. Then with a startlingly quick movement he caught her by the shoulders and pulled her to him. Her swift reaction was to fight his touch. Her entire being was shocked into protecting itself ... and then he started to laugh.

'You are as innocent as the day you were weaned,' he mocked. 'Do you need this pretence because I invite you to my castle? The wicked baron and the ballerina!' He laughed drily. 'You are a nervy young thing. Not at all the controlled, efficient heroine I expected to find.'

'I'm sorry to disappoint you.' She felt his hands still holding her and wanted to wriggle out of them, to retreat into a corner of the car, away from the power of his body. To be close to him was to be aware of the primitive things between a woman and a man. Dusk was falling in the woods, and he was a masterful stranger.

Then he did the most prosaic thing, he glanced at the watch on his wrist. 'It grows late and I have to attend to my business. Could you travel to Mayholtzen on your own, in two weeks' time?'

'I travelled to Vienna on my own.' She could smile now, with the relief of being released. 'I'm really a very efficient person and perfectly able to take care of myself.'

'You make me wonder if you will change your mind about coming to the castle.'

'If I promise, then I shan't break my word.'

'The Baroness would be most disappointed. You saved her grandchild and it was at her insistence I came to Vienna to find you.'

'Your mother may not find me a very dramatic heroine.'

'She will find you a very human one, Miss Winters.'

After that he drove her back through the falling dusk to the coffee house, and there by the car he bent over her hand and clicked his heels in that imperious way, making her think of operettas about princes who fell in love with poor girls they were forbidden to marry.

'Until we meet again, *fraulein*. You will hear from the Baroness. She will send instructions for your journey to Mayholtzen.'

'*Auf wiedersehen*.' She half smiled at him.

He looked into her eyes, 'Ya, in two weeks I will see you again, Miss Winters. *Auf wiedersehen*.'

She watched the Mercedes drive away, the street lamps glimmering on the dark shape of it until it was lost to sight. She had a feeling of having made a promise she was half afraid to keep. Yet she should feel excited by the prospect of staying at a castle in the mountains, and of being able to practise her beloved ballet at this village school in a valley.

She had struck lucky ... yet when she thought of that strong, formidable Austrian face she was unsure as never before in her life. There were elements of tragedy to meet with at his castle home. A girl had fled from it, her sweetheart lost to her in a fall while climbing with Kurt von Linden. Kristy had blamed her brother Kurt for that fall, and in her unhappiness she had run away to Switzerland to bear her child alone.

As Siran entered the *Kaffeehaus* to begin her evening's work, she heard the voice of Frau Wilder ordering her to put on her cap and apron. There were trays to carry, customers to serve, a busy time ahead of them.

Siran realized that she need tolerate this kind of work for only two more weeks, and suddenly she smiled. Whatever awaited her at Seven Lilacs, it could not be as tedious as carrying trays of cakes and coffee back and forth. Herr Wilder was a jovial man, but his wife had a sharp voice, and right now she was hustling Siran into the kitchen, scolding and clucking like an agitated hen with a truant chicken.

'Frau Wilder,' Siran faced her with a flash of her brown eyes. 'I wish to give in my notice. I shall be returning to my ballet dancing and leaving the coffee house in two weeks' time.'

CHAPTER TWO

SIRAN travelled by train to the mountain village of Mayholtzen, and from the window she watched the scenery flash by. It was fascinating to have passed vineyards at the outset of her journey, and now to have come in sight of the snowy peaks with a spread of forest around them, deepening into valleys where farmsteads clung to the hillsides.

Even as the train sped beneath the shadow of the mountains snow began to fall, drifting down past the windows like little white feathers. It was like travelling into a wintery picture of blue-white crags and chalets set among pine trees.

Siran began to feel excited and a trifle apprehensive, as a girl should who had left behind her the security of a job in Vienna to come and teach the schoolgirls of a valley school the intricate art of ballet dancing. The end result could be wholly charming, like a fairytale come to life, but it was hard work and she was glad she was taking on girls who were used to skating and skiing. Their young bodies would be supple and they would have a sense of rhythm and timing. She had started training when she was nine, and at the age of twelve she had started her *pointe* work. She had learned stillness and poise, lightness and grace, and all this she had to teach these children, with the hope in mind that they would enjoy it, and their parents approve of the lessons.

Wisely or not she had chosen to come to Mayholtzen, and she could feel her senses responding to the picturesque views glimpsed through a ballet of snow- flakes. The train thundered through a tunnel cut into the mountains, and when it broke out on the other side it slackened speed as a small station came into sight.

Siran jerked her Robin Hood cap down over one eye and looked rakishly attractive in a tan suede jacket, a short skirt, and green jester boots. She reached for her suitcase, and the smaller case which held

the things she would need as a ballet mistress, and waited for the train to come to a standstill before alighting on to the platform. She breathed the tang of pine and fir trees, and saw the smallness of the station set against a tapestry of wooded hills and snowbound peaks.

She had arrived at Mayholtzen, and she stood a moment, feeling tiny and overawed, as the train whistle echoed up the slopes and it slowly gathered speed and left her alone on this wayside platform. Everything went very quiet, and as Siran stood and felt the snowflakes on the wind she had the lonely feeling of having been dropped off in the mountains with no one to care, after all, that she was here.

No one had come to meet her, as the Baroness had promised in her letter, unless the man awaited her outside the station. She picked up her suitcase and walked to the barrier. There was no one to take her ticket, so she left it on the ledge and passed through the turnstile. There was a narrow road fronting the station, with not a soul in sight. No man, no black Mercedes, nothing but hills all around and already a thick furring of snow on the road that sloped into the mountains. She felt her heart sink a little ... and then give a bound as a figure appeared suddenly from among the trees and the crunch of his footfalls on the snowy road drew nearer and nearer.

He was tall and broad in the shoulder, and Siran braced herself for her second meeting with the Baron von Linden. His long strides had brought him within a couple of yards of her tensed young figure when she realized that this man was a stranger to her ... a stranger who was yet familiar. He had a mane of tawny hair sweeping back from a pair of arresting blue eyes. He wore a chunky sweater over ski trousers tucked into leather boots, and Siran knew in an instant that he was no manservant sent to meet her.

His gaze passed over her ... his eyes were as brilliantly blue as the tip of an iceberg, and about as friendly.

'*Guten tag, fraulein.*' His voice was deep and crisp and cool as snow. 'I take it you are the ballet teacher, though for a moment I thought you had come out of the woods.'

A flush stung her cheeks at the way he looked her over, taking in her rakish cap of green and her slim legs beneath the short hem of her skirt. She was about to answer him when he introduced himself as Kurt von Linden ... the trophy-winning brother whose manner matched his name.

'The Baroness planned to come and meet you, Miss Winters, and then it started to snow again and she is like a cat who prefers the warmth of a fire to the feel of the wind.' A smile quirked the arrogant lines of his mouth. 'We are having an early winter this year, or have you brought it with you?'

Siran put a hand to the flying bird brooch on her lapel, a quiet fire in her eyes as they dwelt upon this man's unfriendly face. He was mahogany brown from the mountain sports, and this made his eyes glint even more above a set of rugged features. This was the man from whom Kristy had fled; it was he who had invited her dark-eyed young man to join a climb from which he had not returned. In a flash all Siran's doubts came rushing back, and if the train had been standing in the station at this moment she would have snatched up her suitcase and dashed away from a man who seemed as hard as the rock and ice and danger of this mountain country.

He looked down into her wide brown eyes and seemed to read them. 'Have you been warned about me?' he drawled. 'Have you heard that I am dangerous to know?'

'I know about your sister Kristy. I have been told her story,' Siran admitted.

He picked up her suitcase with a deliberate movement and glanced towards the station. 'I don't think you have had much to do with people like us, Miss Winters. You are a city girl; a dancer who is used to the bustle and gaiety of a theatre. You might find a winter at Mayholtzen not much to your liking. When the snows fall hard we at the castle are sometimes cut off from civilization, and then the things that have happened to us begin to play on our nerves ... you as a stranger might be caught like a moth in our web of drama. The castle is like that. One has to love its isolation, or it can seem like a place of captivity.'

His eyes were narrowed against the snow glare as he turned to gaze up the mountainside. 'You would be wise, I think, to await the four-thirty train that will carry you back to Vienna.'

Siran's fingers clenched the brooch that was her talisman. It had been a gift from Cassian on her birthday last year, and now to feel the little gemmed wings was to regain a measure of her composure. 'I have come to take up a job at Mayholtzen,' she said. 'I can't walk out on it ... because you don't happen to want me at the castle. Your brother the Baron offered me the position, and your mother wrote me a charming letter endorsing his offer.'

'Have you taught in a school before?'

'I don't think that is any of your affair, *mein herr*.' Annoyance tautened her slender figure, and yet she still felt tiny and somehow insignificant beside this man. There was an arrogant strength about him, vital and untamed as the mountains he set out to conquer.

There was a devil in him that no woman had conquered.

'I like children,' she said stiffly, 'so I am confident I shall get along with the pupils of the valley school.'

'Do you speak German?' he demanded.

'You really are the limit!' she gasped. 'You ask more questions, and make more demands than the Baron himself. I—I can speak a little of your language. My own teacher in England was from Austria, and it was through her that I came to Vienna in the first place. I am sure I shall manage quite adequately, Herr von Linden, and having spent my early childhood in the country I think I shall manage to enjoy some aspects of Mayholtzen.'

The wind blew his tawny hair as he looked down at her. 'I don't think I shall be among them, from the tone of your voice,' he drawled.

Siran met the steely zircon blue of his eyes and once again she felt like running back to Vienna and the friendly smile of Rudi. Yet why should she allow this man to frighten her away? She had come at the invitation of his brother and would be under his protection. She need fear no one if she had the friendship and gratitude of Baron von Linden; he was the master of the castle and the suzerain of this remote, craggy, almost mythical place.

'So you want me to take you to Seven Lilacs?' he said.

'I would be grateful if you would drive me there.'

For the first time he really smiled, the sun-lines deepening in his face, his teeth glimmering white against his brown skin. 'Then let us be on our way, Miss Winters. I see you are wearing boots, so I gather you expected snow?'

'A friend warned me that the snow starts early in the mountains.'

'Do you ski?'

'No. I think I'd be afraid of injuring a leg.'

'Are you a coward?'

'No,' she said indignantly. 'I'm a dancer, and a badly broken bone has been known to end a career in ballet. If that happened ... it would seem like the end of my life.'

He glanced at her. 'I note that you have the dramatic temperament. Would it really be that bad? I am sure you aren't unaware that some men find you attractive.'

She flushed and gave his tall figure a look of dislike. He could say such a thing because he obviously didn't ~ find her his type. It would have satisfied him if he could have scared her away with his talk about a snowbound castle and a web of drama. He didn't want her there ... perhaps because his brother did.

They reached a bend in the road, and parked in the snow stood a sleigh, painted scarlet and with bells attached to the harness of a black horse with snowflakes on his windblown mane. At the approach of people he tossed his head and the bells jingled.

Siran was surprised, and delighted by the prospect of a sleigh ride to the castle, but Kurt von Linden put a check on her pleased comment, and in silence she took her seat in the sleigh and wrapped about her knees the fur laprobe he handed her. He put her suitcase down by her feet, making it a barrier between them, and took the leather reins in his hands. He called out something to the horse, who gave a skittish leap and then started off at a tinkling trot.

The sleigh was open to the mountain winds, but with a rug of warm fur tucked around her Siran didn't feel the cold. The wind flushed her cheekbones and made her eyes sparkle ... there was pleasure in the airy touch of the snowflakes, and she tried not to feel the hostility of the man beside her.

She let herself imagine that she was a ballerina of the old imperial times, who in a *troyha* was being taken to the castle of her benefactor

by a wild, blond Cossack. She smiled to herself, and in that instant he looked at her. The snowy wind had tousled his hair, and his eyes were startling ... blue like the sky pierced by those icy peaks.

'When in England I have never seen a horse-drawn sleigh, so I take it this is a novel ride for you, Miss Winters?'

'Yes,' she admitted. 'It's a colourful way to get about. One can enjoy the countryside, breathe the fresh air, and listen to the music of the sleigh bells.'

'Quite romantic, eh?'

'That aspect depends on one's companion,' she rejoined. 'Why, look at that! How charming!'

They passed a wayside shrine with a tiny bell in its tower and her eyes shone in her slender face; the green of her hat was a foil for her red-brown hair. She noticed the wide, deep gables of the mountain chalets, and saw shaggy-maned ponies racing about on a hillside. She felt a thrill at the awesome beauty of the towering crags and glaciers etched against the sky. They were fascinating and at the same time fearful. A man who dared to climb those could have little fear of anything else.

There was an air of drama about the place, and the spicy scent of the pines tingled in her nostrils as this narrow road curved around the rim of the valley, in which lay half hidden the slanting roofs of houses and the colourful steeple of the village church.

'That is the Chapel of the Little Nun,' she was told, and the bells were ringing as they passed, a silvery sound on the pure air. She felt a sense of enchantment. Here in such a place she might adjust to the loss of Cassia Ji, who had befriended her, and believed in her dancing ability. She had wanted so much to be a great dancer, but fate with its ironic touch had made her a teacher of the dance instead.

'The mountains look superb from here, as if made of crystal, but believe me, they are full of dangers. There are glassy walls of ice, chasms that are bottomless, great waves of snow that engulf climbers before they can bat an eyelash. There are snow-bridges that crumble beneath one's feet, ropes that give way, howling tempests that keep you stranded for days in a freezing tent.'

'Then why do you climb, *mein herr?*' she asked. 'It all sounds very risky and uncomfortable.'

'Why do you dance, *fraulein?*' His long whip sang through the flying snow without touching the horse, whose dark mane was spattered with flakes of crisp white snow.

'You mean ... you enjoy it?'

He gave a laugh that came deeply from his throat. 'I am, as Breck says, a crazy fool who will one day break his neck or plunge down a crevasse. Yes, I enjoy the challenge of the climb.'

'Who is Breck?' She gave him an enquiring look.

'My brother, *fraulein.*' His smile was faintly mocking. 'The Baron von Linden.'

'Oh, I see.' Her fingers clenched the laprobe. 'I didn't know his first name.'

'But you were curious about it.'

'Not unduly so. He's my employer and one isn't usually on a first-name footing with the man at the top. You speak to me as if I'm a gold-digger who has come here with the intention of making a play for the Baron. It was he who found me. He who tendered the invitation to Seven Lilacs. I was quite willing to work as a waitress until the chance of returning to ballet came along.'

'I daresay Breck is grateful to you for saving the child.'

'Yet you asked me if I were a coward.'

'People are sometimes driven to do a thing that deeply frightens them. Often we act on impulse.'

'How could I leave a child who was crying bitterly in a smoke-filled room? I admit I was frightened, but I didn't think about that, and if that is acting on impulse than I am glad I can, because I should hate to be a person who thinks only about herself.'

'If looks could kill,' mocked the tawny Austrian, 'I might have been struck from the sleigh by the flash of your eyes. You have quite a temper, Miss Winters. Frosty and biting like your name.'

'You have a provoking way of saying things.'

'I want you to have no illusions about us. Mayholtzen is no place for pets.'

'Is that what you think I am?' She looked at him with indignation, firing the gold flecks in her brown eyes. 'A chorus girl who charmed your brother into offering me free lodging at the castle for the winter?'

'Confession is said to be good for the soul, so I confess I did think something of the sort.' He spoke with an unrepentant note in his voice, and when Siran glanced at him she saw a deep groove of amusement beside his mouth.

'You can't have much of an opinion of your brother's good sense with regard to women,' she said tartly.

'No,' he agreed.

He didn't bother to elucidate, but slackened the pace of the sleigh as they came in sight of a cascade that tumbled down the mountainside. She hadn't realized how high into the mountains the train had climbed so that she and Kurt von Linden seemed alone above the world. They gazed together at the cascade, misty and colour-shot as the sun touched the spray. The snow- flakes danced into it and were gone for ever.

It was a lovely, unforgettable thing, and then Siran felt again the skimming movement of the sleigh on its runners. Siran half closed her eyes. She had just shared beauty with this man who was so much a part of these mountains, and it had made her feel curiously defenceless, and aware of him as a person who had his hurts and his dreams, and his reason for not wanting her at the castle.

She came as the stranger who knew all about Kristy. Kurt resented her because in a way she had the right to know everything, and the right to come to Mayholtzen. She felt him to be her enemy, and was glad that Breck von Linden would be *her* protector.

The mountains formed a high, awesome chain around Mayholtzen. Their great shadows loomed over the sleigh as it sped scarlet through the snow. Their lower flanks were clad in evergreens, their peaks were glacial blue, stabbing at the small clouds that sailed over them.

'You have gone as pale as the snow.'

She gave a start at the sound of his voice. Did he guess something of her thoughts? Did he sense that she was rather afraid of him, a girl seeing for the first time his world of glaciers and storm-gods? He was like one himself, with that thick tawny hair sweeping back like a mane from his broad forehead, and those blue, smouldering eyes.

'I suppose I'm feeling strange, and rather apprehensive about meeting your mother. The Baroness sounded kind in her letter.'

'Don't worry, my mother is kind, and still very much the charming Viennese woman who gave up her light- hearted life in Vienna to come and live among the mountains. Things have happened which might have broken her spirit, but they never did.'

'Please, won't you tell me about her?'

'Breck has not talked about her to you?'

'There wasn't the time. I snatched an hour from the coffee house the day he came to Vienna to see me.'

'It took but an hour for you to decide about him as an employer?' A rather cynical smile slashed a linedown the brown cheek. "Some people find him intimidating. He takes very much after our father.'

'He is now called the Baron, so your father --?'

'My father has been dead for years. I was small, but I remember him. A tall, fair man, both stern and kind. A man of deep principles who rose from a barrister to be a judge. It was on a winter's day that he was ordered to go to Germany. The next my mother heard was that he had been judged himself as a political offender against the regime then in power. It made no difference that he was an Austrian ... he was imprisoned. We heard no more of him for a long time, and even powerful friends of my mother's could do nothing to get my father released. We as his sons, she as his wife, were made virtual prisoners at the castle, and the good people of Mayholtzen brought food to us, and news of the war and how it was going. Not that they heard much, but rumours of the English and Allied victories did filter through sometimes.'

He paused as if living it all again, the guards daringly eluded by the villagers, the daily concern for the father who had been stern but greatly loved, the longing to be as free as the other children, the

awareness that they lived in danger as the sons of a man who had spoken out against a regime that made its own terrible laws.

'About two years after my father's imprisonment my mother was sent a small parcel by the authorities.' Kurt von Linden drew a harsh breath. 'It contained ashes... they said he had died of heart failure. The Baroness knew otherwise, and she grew even more fearful for Breck and myself. At last she found someone to conduct us over the mountains into a neutral country, while she remained behind at the castle and pretended we were still there. When they found we were gone, she could have suffered imprisonment herself, but her family was important in Vienna. She was bullied for days despite this. They tried to extract from her the identity of the man who had helped her to get her sons out of Austria. She still bears upon her cheek the scar made by the heavy ring of the officer who slapped her face.'

Siran gave a small cry of distress. 'How could they!'

'Easily, *fraulein*. They were men without souls. But how good it was after the war to return to the castle and to find it was our home again and not a prison. Much of the furniture had been stolen; the chandeliers, the paintings, the carpets and the Buhl cabinets, but they had not managed to get my mother's jewellery. All the time it remained hidden in the belfry of the Little Nun chapel, and piece by piece it was sold to help rebuild what those brutes had destroyed. It was only a year or so ago that Breck was able to trace and buy back the pieces best loved by Trinkka. That is our name for her.'

'Trinka,' Siran murmured, and a picture began to form in her mind of a small, indomitable, still lovely woman, who with true Viennese spirit had lived by the principle of '*biegen, nicht brecken*'. Bend but do not break.

'*Mein herr*, I don't quite understand about your sister ... Kristy.'

'Our young adopted sister,' he explained. 'Trinka always wanted a daughter, and Kristy was orphaned as a baby. A small golden imp whom Trinka adored and adopted.'

'It must have been so sad for your mother when she heard ... about Kristy?'

'Yes, it was a great shock. But she has the boy, thanks to you.'

'You really mean those kinds words, Herr von Linden?'

'But of course.' His glance was piercingly blue. 'Though had I been Breck I should have used my influence to find you a place in ballet. It's where you belong, is it not?'

His frankness had about it the shock of a blow, as if nothing could make him like her, or want her at the castle. The story of his childhood had not been a play for her sympathy ... he wanted her to know that it wasn't only the memory of Kristy that haunted Seven Lilacs.

But if he had shocked her, he had also stirred her ? imagination and she was eager to meet the Baroness.

It was only moments later that she glimpsed the castle turrets rising above a forest of trees. The sleigh j entered the forest and the path ran on for about half a mile, the evergreens and pines scattering their shadows and their needles beneath the runners. The sleigh bells made an enchanting sound among the trees, and to Siran's delight they emerged beside a lake with the castle situated on the rocky verge of it, the wooded slopes of the mountains towering above its turrets. It was built of stone, as carved and weathered by the winds as the ice-bound crags. Two round towers guarded the front of the castle, rising to conical roofs white with snow. A place so dangerously romantic that Siran caught her breath.

'It's wonderful... like a fable!'

'As old as heaven, as we say, *fraulein.*'

The sleigh made a curve around the lake, a broad expanse of cold blue water set with small islands. The runners skimmed over the cobbles to the front door under a stone hood ... and there around the base of the flowers stood the seven lilac trees, bearing snow on their branches instead of blossom. They were old, strong trees and when in bloom they would curtain the weathered stone with colour and send their tangy scent wafting in through the latticed windows of the castle.

It would be a sight to behold, and Siran wondered if she would be here in the spring to see flowers breaking open on the boughs that were today laden with snow.

Kurt von Linden gave her a hand from the sleigh, and her sudden nearness to him made her aware of how defenceless certain men could make a girl feel. There was about this man a vitality akin to the mountains, a tang of the piney air, a hardihood that made him impatient of a girl who danced for her living.

She drew away from him and assumed an air of coolness.

'*Danke schon, mein herr,*' she said, with a touch of humour.

'For the sleigh ride, but certainly not the advice I gave you, eh?' His hands gripped her elbows and she was forced to meet his gaze and to see in his eyes a promise of more opposition in the future. They antagonized each other ... a glance, a word, was enough to set them off.

'Surely you can see for yourself that I prefer to work for my own dish of herbs,' she said. 'I worked hard at the coffee house, and I shall work equally hard at the school.'

'I think you would prefer to work at dancing instead of teaching it. Will it satisfy your ambitions to be in charge of schoolgirls who in the main will be as graceful as a pot of turnips?'

'It will be my job to set those turnips hopping and spinning, *mein herr*, and I'll do it, despite your doubts. I happen to like children ... don't you?'

'I am not sentimental about them, *fraulein*.'

'I doubt whether you are sentimental about anything, even your beloved and challenging mountains. You seem very self-controlled to me, and such people are usually cool in their feelings.'

'You sound as if you are challenging me, Miss Winters.'

'I am making a statement about you, Herr von Linden.'

'On such short acquaintance?'

'You dared to assess my character, let me remind you. You summed me up as useless and decided I should return to Vienna.'

'For your own good.'

'What can possibly happen to me here and what harm can I do, even if I don't produce a classroom of young Pavlovas?'

'You aren't a child yourself. You must know that you could disrupt our lives just as one of us could cause havoc to yours.'

'Why on earth --?' Her brown eyes widened. 'I fail to understand you. What possible havoc could be caused because a dancing teacher comes to Mayholtzen?'

'Miss Winters, I refuse to believe you as innocent as you sound.' He quirked a blond eyebrow, and with deliberation his blue eyes roved her face, taking in the shape of it, the winged look of her brows, the flush over her cheekbones, the delicate cleft in the centre of her chin. 'You are not exactly retiring and dowdy.'

'I have heard that you aren't exactly retiring your- J self!' She stood taut between the iron grip of his ; climber's hands. 'Do you imagine that like other girls I am going to throw myself at your head ... when I have the time from dancing lessons, and aiming myself at your brother the Baron ? Even if I felt so inclined, I've only to look at you to see I'd be wasting my time. You don't like me, and I don't like you, so let us call a truce on the understanding that we'll stay out of each other's way as much as possible.'

'But we will be polite in front of Trinkka, eh?' 'Of course. I wouldn't want to upset your mother. I imagine she is fond of you.'

His lip quirked. 'As a climber I make this rule. When the mountain is quiet, listen for the slightest disturbance ... the avalanche comes when one is least expecting it,'

'And what do I surmise from that remark, *mein herr?*'

'A climber can't afford to be impulsive, therefore he suspects impulse in other people. You are a stranger who gives me the same feeling I have sometimes when I am climbing ... that tingle of the unexpected just around the corner... that suspicion of having one foot on a snow-bridge that will send me hurtling into space. If only you were the sensible, solid type, Miss Winters!'

'I must apologize for being the flighty type instead,' she said tartly. 'But despite it I don't need a keeper --'

'Don't you? It isn't so long ago since you lost the one who used to be your Director.'

'He didn't regard me as a nuisance and a danger.'

'How did he regard you?' A glint of curiosity came into Kurt von Linden's eyes. 'Was he in love with you?'

'How dare you ask me that?' She felt deeply shocked by this stranger who pried behind the curtain of her secret dreams and sorrows. He had no right to speak as if he would have the bother of her while she was here. She came at his brother's request!

'Shall we go in before we really start to fight?'

He laughed in that lazily mocking way of his. 'Perhaps it would be a prudent move, and I daresay my mother is eager to meet you.'

'It will be nice to see a friendly face.' Finding herself free of his touch, she turned to the hooded door, but he motioned her to proceed him to the left-hand tower while he followed with her suitcase. She paused in front of the latticed glass doors that framed the ruddy glimmer of a firelit room, and noticed also that among the lilac trees had been planted a linden tree. It had heart-shaped leaves and she touched them with a sense of delight. She wouldn't allow the younger son of the Baroness to blight her pleasure in this rare old place beside an Austrian lake. She would ignore him ... but even as she resolved to do this, his hand brushed snow on to hers.

'The linden tree ... do you know the superstition | attached to it?'

'Is there one, *mein herr?*'

'Yes, they are planted beside a doorway to keep a witch away.'

Her eyes clashed with his, and she could have hit the smile from his sardonic mouth as he opened the glass doors. 'Please go in, *fraulein.*'

'You would really like to shut me out, wouldn't you?' Her voice shook ... she told herself it was from temper.

'Perhaps so. I think, little witch, that you bring more trouble to Seven Lilacs, and in all conscience we have had our share of that!'

And to these words that held no tinge of welcome, Siran stepped past the linden tree and entered the castle. It was a stove that glowed warmly in the centre of the room, and Siran was aware of snow-bear skins covering the floor, and of books covering the walls. A black piano stood at an angle to catch the light, and a marquetry music cabinet stood near by. Assorted chairs and sofas gave the room a cosy look, while a carved old side-table supported a small keg and some painted tankards.

It was a room with a lived-in air about it, as if here in the leisure hours the family gathered to read, to smoke, to take a drink, and to listen to music. Apart from the piano there was a radiogram with a spacious rack of records, and Siran knew already from her stay in the capital that Viennese people loved their music.

She looked about her for the Baroness, but the room was empty of an occupant. There was, however, a chair drawn close to the stove, with its cushions disarranged and a book face down on the arm of it, as if someone had been reading there and had left the room for a few minutes.

Siran glanced at Kurt. 'It's a charming room,' she said.

'Yes. Trinkä said to bring you here. This is her favourite room, where she has her books about her, and her music. I daresay she has gone to take yet another look at the child. I think she imagines that a being from the forest will fly in to carry him off.'

'Love makes people anxious,' Siran pointed out.

'Of course.' He seemed to be mocking her again as he strolled to a table and bent to a carved box. 'Dancers don't smoke, eh, or do you relax the rules now and then, as I do?'

'Never, when it comes to smoking.'

'Your dedication is complete, eh?'

'Isn't yours? I should imagine that it takes a lot of fitness to climb a mountain, or to win a skiing championship.'

'I manage, and my self-indulgences are really very few, despite the opinion you have formed of me as a playboy sportsman.'

'I couldn't be bothered to form an opinion of you, Herr von Linden.'

'Really?' He smiled through the smoke of his cigarette, and his face took on a saturnine look in the growing dusk of the room. 'You have decided that I am opposite in all ways to Breck, and as it happens you are not far wrong. He takes his responsibilities to heart and will sacrifice himself to the traditions of this old Austrian house ... I see you look at me askance, Miss Winters, as if I speak a sort of treason. *Ja*, the castle is an enchanting place and I am fond of it. Mayholtzen draws me to her mountains each year, and I am proud to be the son of a brave man. But in my philosophy each man has his own path to tread, his own life to live, and I see beyond Seven Lilacs to other horizons. My brother works and plans and lives for this place.' Kurt von Linden flicked ash into the stove in a significant way. 'He is bound by tradition and it will rule all his decisions. I am different and I will decide my life as I decide which part of a mountain to climb ... or which woman to love.'

He gave a sardonic smile. 'You have large eyes, Miss Winters, and they speak for you. You think me a terrible egotist.'

'You speak as if a sense of duty is a tedious thing. What if you had been the eldest son?'

He quirked a rough blond brow. 'I should no doubt have turned the castle into a hotel for skiers, and developed Mayholtzen into a sporting centre. There, does that shock profoundly your sense of what is proper ... and improper?'

'Really, Kurt, have you managed to shock our young guest so soon?' The voice held the lilt and charm of Vienna, and Siran turned eagerly towards the door. A woman had quietly entered and she carried a tray to a sofa table. 'My dear, you must be feeling in need of a cup of coffee after that long train journey. It is a slow train, I know, crawling as it does through the mountains ... Kurt, will you please light the lamps so I can see if this child is as attractive as Breck told me.'

Siran's heart seemed to miss a beat. To be thought attractive by the Baron was as unexpected as it was pleasant. More than that ... it made up for being , thought an interloper by his brother.

Tall in the shadows of the room Kurt went from lamp to lamp, and as they bloomed alight Siran met his mother's eyes and was startled to find them almost as blue as his, and set like jewels in a face with elements of tragedy in it as well as charm. A face that stirred the onlooker, like a painting of depth and true beauty.

Such wonderful bone structure, and there against the black velvet of her dress gleamed a large uncut topaz in a claw of silver, an almost barbaric stone that must be part of the baronial jewels once sold and then redeemed by Breck von Linden.

'So at last we meet.' The Baroness came forward and held out both hands to Siran, slender hands with a musician's grip. 'My dear, you can't know how I have waited for this moment. To be able to tell you in words how deeply in your debt I feel. *Mein liebe* Lorenz would

have been lost to us if you had not been courageous enough to save his young life. Siran—you must allow me to call you so—you are welcome to stay at the castle for as long as you wish, and I hope we will be such friends. Indeed I am sure of it. You are a dancer in ballet, and there was a time when I could have become a concert pianist.'

The blue eyes smiled, but a little sadness lurked in them. 'I chose love instead. *Liebesleid*. You know what it means?'

'Yes... I think so.' And as she spoke Siran was aware of the glance that came swiftly from the tall son of this petite and charming woman. At once she felt gripped by shyness and wished she had pretended not to know the meaning of the word.'

'Say it for us,' drawled Kurt, 'in your nice English way.'

Siran gave him a look his mother could not have missed, a flash of the eyes that spoke their own language.

'It means love's agony, Baroness. A lovely word but a little cruel.'

'As there is some sadness to real beauty there is also a certain pain connected with love ... but this is not the time for us to be talking of such profound things.' The Baroness smiled and indicated the sofa near the stove. 'You must sit here by the warmth and we will drink coffee, enjoy apple cake and discuss the matters that will be of little interest to my son. Tell me, did he give you a pleasant welcome at the station?'

Siran had to smile, for the mother was looking at the son with every indication that she knew him well, and when he bent over the maternal hand his blue eyes met hers in quizzical affection.

'As I am not welcome here, Trinkka, I shall take myself off to my workshop. I can see you are delighted to have Miss Winters here to talk to.'

'Are you jealous, Kurt?' With the audacious hand of a mother she ruffled his tawny mane, and Siran watched amazed. It was as if someone stroked a proud young lion, putting a hand through the bars of his cage, daring him to snarl or bite. Siran could imagine no one but his mother having the love to approach him so closely.

'You have always been a heart-stealer, Trinkka.' He carried her hand to his lips and smiled as he kissed it, and with a lithe stride he was at the door, where he turned for a moment to give Siran an enigmatic half bow.

'I hope you enjoy your stay at the castle, Miss Winters. When the snows come early this usually means that our winter will be a long one. I hope you won't find our mountain life too monotonous, but you must say so if you do, before we become snowbound and the railway tracks freeze over. It will happen this year ... mountain climbers sense these things.'

'And yet you will climb ... that mountain?' Trinkka put out a hand to him, as if in appeal, but he looked unmoved, and gone was his smile. His jaw was hard like stone, and Siran looked into eyes that were ice-blue and strangely impenetrable. He was a man who was so" used to facing hazards that he had become curiously aloof from other aspects of life ... he seemed quite sure that a dancing girl like herself would come apart at the seams of her *tutu* when the mountain winds howled and spread the snow in thick layers over the countryside.

'I'm looking forward to my stay at Seven Lilacs.' Her eyes dwelt on his chin above the rolled neck of his jersey, and then lifted quickly to meet his gaze. 'I'm not an unworldly child, you know, though I must admit I enjoyed the sleigh ride.'

'Did you indeed?' A devil danced in his eyes as he took in the slightly defiant tilt to her chin. 'I'm gratified, *fraulein*.'

'Being shown some of the scenery was most enjoyable,' she emphasized.

His sardonic laugh seemed to linger after he closed the door behind him and left her alone with die Baroness.

'You mustn't allow Kurt to ruffle your feathers,' she smiled, pouring coffee into the cups and indicating that Siran help herself to cream and sugar, and one of the delicious-looking apple cakes still warm from the oven.

'My sons are very Austrian, and for a while they will overwhelm you. Their creed is that if you climb, climb to the very peak. If you love, love the night through.'

The silver gleamed in the firelight, spoons tinkled against china, and the Baroness laughed softly. 'We are a little feudal, Siran, here in our mountain *schloss*, but I think in time you will grow used to our ways. I don't think it will be necessary for Kurt to take you away when the snows begin to close our roads. I can see you have a lot of spirit, and I know it because today, tomorrow, and in the time ahead I can hold my grandson in my arms.'

The fine blue eyes filled slowly with tears. 'Kristy was so foolish to run away from home. You know that her young man was killed while climbing with Kurt?' 'Yes, I was told. It has all been very sad and tragic for you.'

'Sadder for Kristy, and perhaps for Kurt. The girl blamed him hysterically for what happened ... did Breck tell you about it? Helmut died on the Glass Turret, a notorious climb which our young men seem driven to attempt. A snow-bridge gave way and Helmut plunged down a chasm while tied by a rope to Kurt. It dragged him to the very edge, where suddenly it was severed by the sharp rock, saving his life. He came home after long hours of searching for the

boy, dazed, soaked to the skin in a thunderstorm that broke over the mountains, to be met by his sister's accusations.'

The Baroness paused and her gaze dwelt sombrely upon the warm glow of the stove. 'Kristy accused him of cutting the rope so he wouldn't be swept down the chasm with Helmut. Wolfgang, his guide, was lower down the ice-wall when the accident occurred. He examined the rope and testified that it had been torn by the rock ... and Kurt still carries about his body the mark of it. It cut through his clothing and scarred him. But Kristy would not believe Wolfgang or anyone else. She ran away as she did to punish Kurt... and because of her he will climb that awful mountain again. Like her he will not listen to reason, and I have to let him do it. Until he risks his life again where Helmut died, he will not be at peace.'

There was a dramatic little silence, and then Siran gave a shiver as a cold draught seemed to brush the nape of her neck. She recalled the look on Kurt von Linden's face when he had warned her that like a moth she might be caught in a web of drama if she stayed at the castle of the seven lilacs.

Yet how could she leave when the Baroness made her so welcome? How could she go when she longed once more to meet Breck von Linden? It would be foolish to run away because the younger son reminded her of the icy crags that towered over the castle.

'A little more coffee, my dear?'

'Yes, please.' Siran smiled, her mind made up. She would stay and let this sad, romantic place weave her into its web.

CHAPTER THREE

THE sun was setting over the castle when Siran followed a young maid to her room. From the window she could see the lake, fired by the final red blaze of the sun, and she heard the sigh of the wind through the reeds and the willow trees at the edge of the water. Gazing from the partly open casement, she caught a whiff of cigar smoke and wondered if Breck von Linden had arrived home and was smoking alone in the falling dusk. She pictured him with his astrakhan collar turned up about his strong-boned face to shield it from the snow. He seemed to her more worldly than his brother Kurt. Less fond of the elements and doing battle with them.

With a smile she glanced round her room and saw the big goose-feather bed, looking like an illustration for the tale of the princess and the pea. Its tall bedposts reached almost to the ceiling and the great puff of a eiderdown was embroidered with berries and pine trees. The walls of the room were smoothly white, with shadows thrown by the china lamps. The furniture was of polished pine, with rugs of thick coloured wool, and shelves filled with books and small wooden animals...'

the sort of oddments a young person would collect.

Siran put a hand to her throat, where her pulse beat rapidly. Had Kristy slept here? Had this room been that of the girl who had run away, unable to forgive Kurt for returning alive from the climb which had killed her lover? Siran glanced slowly around the room. No, the Baroness was too kind to have put her in a room haunted by a ghost. The books and the little animals had belonged to one of the boys. Here in this room overlooking the blue lake, a child had curled up in the windowseat and gazed at the mountain peaks.

A yearning child who couldn't go out to play unless watched by dark-uniformed guards; who had felt so much a captive that as he

grew into a man the mountains had seemed to offer the ultimate freedom of spirit and body.

This room had once belonged to Kurt von Linden!

As the realization swept over Siran she had the feeling of being an intruder. Though this room was now too small for that towering Austrian, it had once been his youthful sanctuary and he might resent her presence here.

Well, it couldn't be helped, and with a little shrug Siran took her sponge-bag along to the bathroom, which the maid had shown her, and found it old-fashioned but well supplied with hot water from a grumbling geyser. She found pine-scented bath crystals in a jar and added them to the water, and later when she emerged she felt invigorated by the alpine smell. Her skin tingled pleasantly, reminding her of the touch of snow, and as she towelled down she caught a glimpse of a smile on her lips, reflected in a rather steamy mirror on the wall. Tendrils of hair clung in coppery brightness against her white neck ... and in that moment she thought of Kurt von Linden's remark about some men finding her attractive.

Was he afraid that his brother might become attracted to her ... yet why should that matter to him? Unless he thought that a dancing girl was not quite good enough for the Baron of Mayholtzen!

Her cheeks stung. What thoughts to be having, draped only in a towel, but like other girls she was curious about love, and the love she might have found with Gassian had not been fulfilled. Her eyes grew a little sad as she tied the cord of her long green robe and remembered those times alone with him. Those lessons in ballet when the rest of the Company had left for the day, their walks along the Embankment, and the warm, tight holding of his hand when they crossed a busy road.

He had been waiting for her to become a really fine dancer. He had wanted that for her, holding back the words that had lain slumbering in his dark, faintly slanting eyes. The eyes of a faun, people had said, and one of his best dancing roles had been *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*.

She recalled something he had once said to her at that little coffee place in the Strand, not far from their studio near the Covent Garden theatre. 'If a person is to be great in music, song or ballet, then she must be detached. Human attachments fray the bond between the artist and her work. Loyalties change. Ambitions are lost in the love for another human being.'

He had been warning her that love would demand first place in her heart, but with Cassian it would have been like loving one and the same thing. He had been a part of ballet. It was from now on that she could never form an attachment that would steal her away from the dream of becoming a perfect dancer. She would make that dream come true, come what may.

She met her own reflection in the mirror and saw a young and rather lonely girl, far from all that was familiar to her, with no one to turn to for guidance any more. On her way back to her room she collided with someone and gave a startled gasp as a pair of hands caught hold of her in her silky robe.

'Miss Winters --'

'Mein herr --'

She was terribly confused, for in the shadowy light of the corridor she had once again mistaken Kurt for his brother the Baron. They were of a similar height, and she had caught that whiff of good cigar smoke clinging to his jacket.

She looked upwards into his blue eyes, felt the crush of rock-calloused hands, and knew from the sardonic face that he would

filch not only his brother's cigars but his girls as well... if he felt so inclined.

'You smell of the pinewoods,' he drawled, 'early in the morning when a man sets out on a climb and the air is pure.'

'Please --' She struggled to escape from him, and she noticed even in her panic how the black of his dinner jacket offset the tawny mane of his hair. His shirt was very white against the tan of his throat. He was hard of nerve, keen of eye, physically splendid as young men are who have skied the mountain slopes all their lives, and dared the highest peaks.

He looked down into her eyes, and there was in his look a sudden disturbing intensity. 'You have been given the room that used to be mine,' he said, and his grip on her waist seemed to tighten. 'Though I no longer sleep there, I keep some of my things in a chest I had as a boy. I wanted something.'

'Then—you had better come and sort out what you want.' She was alarmed not only by his touch, but she knew how vulnerable her thoughts of Cassian had left her. 'I—I hope you don't mind that I have your boyhood room?'

'It's a nice room and it overlooks the lake. I hope you will like sleeping there.'

A lazily deliberate look came into his eyes as he spoke, and she forced herself to be composed. 'Shall we go and look for what you want?' she asked.

'It had better wait. The dinner bell will ring very shortly ... and catch you still not dressed.' His fingers pressed her waist, a subtle hint that he could feel how little she had on. She pulled away from him and he let her go, but still his touch lingered as she hastened from his tall figure in the corridor. Never had she felt so unsure of anyone. His

moods were like those of his mountains; the ice might break suddenly, or the avalanche wait but a breathless moment away, to sweep a person off her feet.

She closed behind her the door of her bedroom, in which he had once slept, a boy, then a youth, and soon a man who had to bend his head to avoid the slant of the ceiling beams. She leaned thoughtfully against the door that shut him out, and then aroused herself as in the distance she heard the sound of the dinner bell. She must dress at once, or be late downstairs, and luckily she was a girl trained in ballet to dress swiftly, to have her hair neat and glossy in seconds, her face a picture of composure as she sped on-stage to the opening bars of the ballet music.

With equal lightness she sped down the stairs without appearing to touch them with her feet, the skirt of her dress fanning out to show her legs. She had bought the dress in Vienna, after she had lost everything in the hotel fire, all but her handbag which she had snatched from the bedside table as she fled to safety with the abandoned baby. It had a full skirt of many-coloured stitchings, with pockets in which a pair of kittens could have nestled. The neckline was embroidered and the sleeves were puffed to just below the elbows. It had about it something of the goose-girl and the woods, and suited her mood as a guest at a castle.

As she reached the foot of the stairs, a great dog stirred and rose to its feet. A mountain dog, all white and big as a bear. Siran stood hesitant, and then someone spoke: 'There is no need to bristle, Bruno. This is our visitor from the world of ballet.'

It was Kurt again, appearing to find her at a disadvantage. She wasn't afraid of normal-sized dogs, or men, but the castle seemed a place of giants. There was about it a tang of mountain winds and mystery. Of wine among candles, of music and tears. Cruelty had left its shadow,

and love was now a whisper, a muted waltz that wouldn't swing into gaiety.

'May I touch him?' she asked. 'Or will he bite my head off?'

'Not while I am here.' A smile flickered on Kurt's mouth, as if he took the point of her remark.

'I thought for a moment that a bear had got into the castle.' She smiled and ran a brave hand over the dog's handsome head. He growled deep in his throat and accepted the caress of the stranger with something of his master's suspicion. Then he retreated and stretched out again like a bearskin against the dark polished wood of the floor.

Siran glanced about her and noticed the lamps held by bronze figures, the panelling with its gothic tracery, the arched windows of coloured shield glass, and the high ceiling braced by carved beams. She and Kurt were reflected together in a great mirror surmounted by a worn eagle, and she was startled by the way she reached only to his heart, the embroidery of her dress bright against the darkness of his jacket.

Suddenly there came the chiming of bells and she looked at him with enquiring eyes.

He studied her image in the mirror, and his blue eyes glinted as if amused by her smallness beside him. 'The bells are rung each evening in the bell-turret. They guide home a climber, or someone lost in the forest.'

'It's a nice thing to do.' The luminous brown of her large eyes dwelt on him. 'Like bells at sea. The cottage I lived in as a child was close to the seashore and on foggy nights I used to lie in bed and listen to the bells and be glad they were there to guide to safety the little ships. My father and his crew were lost at sea ... the ice floes caught them in Arctic waters, but I was too young at the time to realize that he wouldn't come home again.'

Then, as if she regretted saying too much to a man who was curiously ice-bound himself, she glanced away from him. 'Shouldn't we go in to dinner ... your mother will be waiting for us.'

There was in her voice a note of eagerness she couldn't quite restrain, and Kurt was looking sardonic as he strode to a door and held it open for her. 'Yes, only my mother awaits us, Miss Winters. My brother is still detained in Bavaria ... on business, he writes to say, but I suspect that some other interest holds him there.'

Siran felt her cheeks grow warm at his mocking tone of voice, and she hated him for being right. She had been looking forward to seeing the Baron again; that man of command and presence, with his crest of silvery hair and his lake-grey eyes. It was disappointing to hear that he was absent from the castle.

She swept past Kurt, bunching her full skirt in her hand so she wouldn't be in contact with him. He might resemble his brother in looks, but in ways they couldn't be more different. The Baron was courteous and kind, but Kurt treated life and women as if they were a challenge, to be conquered but never loved.

'Ah, there you are.' The Baroness turned with a smile from the window and the curtain fell into place, shutting out the darkness that had fallen over the mountains. 'What an attractive dress, my dear, and how well it suits you. You look like Giselle, poised on the threshold with Prince Albrecht.'

Kurt gave a sardonic laugh. 'I have hardly the build or the temperament for ballet ... take a look at Miss Winters. She doesn't know whether to laugh or weep at the Idea.'

He drew out his mother's chair, and Siran sat down quickly at the other side of the table, hiding a reluctant smile as she unfolded her napkin with its little silk coronet. She was amazed that a woman so

gracious and willowy could have a son like Kurt. He made his mother seem breakable, and yet Siran couldn't help but notice his gentleness with her ... the one person whom he loved, perhaps.

'In this room we used to have Bohemian chandeliers, but they were stolen away from us, like other things.' A shadow darkened Trinkka's blue eyes. 'They were such a delight to my boys, with their blown-glass flowers and leaves. Their crystals used to chime very softly if the door was closed too hard.'

'Don't let us talk of days that can mean nothing to our young guest,' said Kurt. 'She could not have been born.'

'Yes, how young you are.' Trinkka shifted a table vase so she could gaze across at Siran. 'It amused Breck to find you such an independent young thing. He said you refused to come here unless he found you a job, and you are to start school next Monday, which gives you time to settle in at the castle. Is this your first visit to a place like Mayholtzen?'

'My very first.' Siran tasted her soup, in which tiny fluffy dumplings bobbed about. A dumpling melted in her mouth with a delicious taste.

'Are you not afraid that our Austrian fare will spoil your dancer's figure?' drawled Kurt.

'Luckily I never put on weight,' she returned. 'I seem to burn it off-and remain as light as when I was sixteen.'

'You have a cool name but an ardent disposition, eh?' Mockery seemed to glint in his eyes as he studied her. 'I have in my mind a picture of some of those solid schoolgirls in the valley who have been brought up on dumplings and *strudel*. Miss Winters, I hope you have patience, and will be able to control your red-haired temper.'

'My hair is not red,' she protested.

'No, Kurt.' His mother gave a laugh. 'If you had an ounce of artistic temperament you would notice that Siran's hair is the colour of that copper coffee-pot of mine, which gleams when I make coffee beside the fire. Really, you have eyes for nothing but your snowy crags and your cool cascades. You are a man of ice, Kurt!'

'You are saying I have no feelings, Trinkka?'

'I sometimes wonder.'

He shrugged his broad shoulders with a look of unconcern, and helped himself to a veal steak and cabbage salad, adding a liberal spoonful of cream sauce.

Temper, indeed! Siran was more than ever certain that she and Kurt von Linden had best keep out of each other's way if the fireworks were not to explode. Her eyes smouldered as she caught him looking at her, and she felt like a cat in a room with a large teasing dog, and knew it would have soothed her nerves to scratch him. Her thoughts shocked her. She had never wanted to hurt anyone, and was by nature a kind girl.

She was glad when Trinkka began to ask her questions about the ballet. Kurt did not join in. It was as if the subject were beneath his notice.

'We are taught to express the emotions,' she said. 'We are not puppets going through a series of postures.'

'There are many emotions ... have you felt them all at your age?'

Siran gave a little start when Kurt spoke, and then replaced her wine glass on the table in case he made her drop it. 'We have to portray character, also pain, pleasure, joy, and fear. One doesn't have to be a dodo to have experienced those, *mein herr*.'

'I thought ballet had to do with love, *fraulein*.'

'It does,' she said, concentrating on her apple baked in pastry with cream. 'Love is not always a happy emotion, is it? Very often it causes heartache.'

'And you are taught to dance this, eh?'

'A good dancer can express a whole range of feelings without saying a word.'

'Are you a good dancer?' He was leaning back in his carved chair, a wine glass held casually in his hand, the lamplight reflecting in the shield glass of the window behind him. Overhead the ceiling was honeycombed in dark wood, and the upright chairs and circular table were of the same darkness. The walls were smooth and white, giving way to a few modern paintings, bought to replace the old masters which had been stolen. It was a severe yet beautiful room, as if monks might appear through the panelled door and chant a prayer.

It was strange, somehow, that she should think of monks as she looked at Kurt, and Siran almost laughed at the vision. 'I'm not a bad dancer,' she replied. 'I hope to be a better one, and I shall live and work for that.'

'Only for that?' he mocked.

'Now, now,' the Baroness reproved. 'Why so quarrelsome, you two?'

'Your son thinks that Mayholtzen is no place for a girl who dances for her living.' Siran met Trinkka's blue eyes and was reassured by their warmth, so in contrast to Kurt's coolness. So lovely a woman should be painted on canvas so that in future years other eyes could look at her and respond to her looks with the admiration she deserved. Her plaits were still a thick dark gold about the small crown of her head; her skin was fine and only faintly lined, with the tiny mark of a scar on her left cheekbone. To look at her was to know without being told that she came from one of the ancient and noble families of Austria.

Siran, who had lost her own mother while still a baby, was deeply disturbed, even confused, to find herself so swifdy fond of Kurt von Linden's mother. This was a woman with whom one could share secrets, and Siran had never known that kind of a relationship. Her two old aunts, her girlhood guardians, had been kind but a trifle eccentric. More often than not she had found herself looking after them.

She smiled, and there was a grave charm about her smile. And then she saw Trinkka press a hand against the pearls at her throat, as if a young girl at her table reminded her poignantly of Kristy, who had not found herself able to share her secret with the woman who was Kurt's mother.

'Kurt is full of opinions, *liebbling*. You must not allow his opinion of your profession to annoy you. Some would say that mountain climbing is only for him who has his head in the clouds.'

'Perhaps it makes him feel lordly to climb a mountain,' Siran said daringly, taking a sip at the wine that was sweet and old.

The Baroness laughed and glanced at Kurt for his reaction to this remark. Without speaking he raised his wine glass in mocking acceptance of it, but there glinted in his eyes a promise of retaliation. He and Siran had become opponents in a duel that would demand surrender and flight on her part ... if he should win. She was determined not to let him win, but dared not look at the firm chin that brooked no sort of defeat.

He would climb again the Glass Turret in order to prove to a pair of dead lovers that he was no coward who had saved his own life at the cost of another's. Such a climb would take nerves of steel, for in the wind he might hear again a cry of agony; in the lonely snows he might see a shape that beckoned.

He was strangely unapproachable in Siran's eyes, like the high mountains themselves, yet she hoped that when the Baron returned to the castle he would find a way to persuade Kurt not to make that climb. It would surely break Trinkka's heart to lose for the third time someone she loved. Kurt was her son, and a mother remembered the little things, the childhood things, which were too deeply embedded to be torn out by even the cry of Kristy that he had killed her sweetheart.

At the end of the meal they retired to the music-room to drink their coffee. The room that curved to the shape of the tower, with the linden tree at its entrance, with branches still and heavy with snow tonight. It had ceased to fall for a while, and everything was hushed but for the warm crackling of the pine branches on the stove. A lovely old brass coffee-maker bubbled over a flame, with a tap at the side, and a decoration of imps and berries around the handles and the lid.

'I've never seen a more charming room than this one.' Siran explored it with her eyes, and hoped the Baroness would play some Schubert on that mellow-looking piano. Had she played to herself in the evenings long ago, after her boys had escaped with a guide from the castle, or had the music-room been locked against her as a punishment?

'Good, I am pleased you like my den.' The Baroness smiled and poured their coffee into small cups, and Siran concealed a smile at the toylike look of such a cup and saucer in Kurt's hand. He seemed to threaten everything in his mother's room, towering there in the glow of the stove, restless, Siran felt, for the clasp of skis on his feet, or the feel of an ice-axe in his fist.

'Why do I climb?' Abruptly he took up the subject again, as if her thought communicated itself to him. 'Because most, things out of

reach are fascinating, and to reach the snowy summits is to possess them for only as long as a man can withstand the biting winds. Sunset over the Himalayas gives the peaks a look of warmth, like diamonds and gold, yet take off a fur mitten and the hand will freeze within minutes.'

Siran shivered. 'How can you dare?' she asked.

He gave her a deliberate look. 'They attract with all the dangerous force of love, and I am sure, *madchen*, that you think of love in terms of danger and thrill.'

'You always seem sure of my reactions,' she said. 'Am I nai've, or are you a clairvoyant?'

He quirked an eyebrow at his mother. 'Whoever started the rumour that British girls are shy?'

'We might be shy of some things,' Siran murmured, 'but not of a challenger.'

'You think you are being challenged by me?'

'I know I am.' She met his eyes, and told herself she would not be daunted by him. He was but a man even though he looked more elemental than other men. More capable of being ruthless towards women, whom it amused him to taunt but never to love. Siran looked at him and knew with all her instincts that he had chosen to give his love to the high crags that burned in the sun like diamonds and froze the hand if you dared to touch them.

To what lengths would his ruthlessness carry him if ever she found herself alone with him? Even as she wondered she was pinned like a moth on the blue steel of his glance and dared not pursue the thought ... he mustn't guess that she felt alarmed lay the thought of being alone with him.

And then as if he had prowled enough he lay back in a large winged chair, and to Siran's delight the Baroness went to the piano and sat down in front of it, spreading the skirt of her pearl-grey dress over the red silk of the cushioned stool.

'What will tame you tonight, Kurt?' she asked. 'Take a look at him, Siran. The tiger who sprawls in his cage with every muscle alert for action. Take a tip from me, my child, never attempt to stroke him or he will take a bite at you. He's quite untamed.'

'A little more of such talk, Trinka, and Miss Winters will depart so hastily that she'll melt the frost under her feet as she runs away.'

'No, Kurt, this child does not run away from a challenge ... you heard her say so.'

His gaze drifted from the logs that had fallen into a kissing cross as they burned, red with flames like the ruby-glassed lamps, and his lashes concealed his eyes so she could only guess at the smile they held. She was shaken again by the flagrant strength and carelessness of this man who might be capable of many things ... everything but the one thing Kristy had accused him of. Kristy had been hysterical with misery or she would not have said it, or believed it. To look at Kurt was to know deep inside that he feared nothing; that he would have died with Helmut if that rope had not broken.

'The rope marked him,' his mother had said.

Siran's eyes were hidden by her lashes as she let her gaze pass over those wide shoulders under the dark broadcloth, over the throat that was brown against the crisp white shirt, and she had a mental picture of that scar like a snake across his chest, biting deep, leaving in him the venom of Kristy's accusation.

'Play some Schubert,' he said casually. 'Somehow it seems appropriate in the firelight, with a ballerina for a guest at the castle.'

The music was tender and lovely, like the echo of a lost love, and Siran relaxed to listen to it, her skirt of many-coloured stitchings spread round her like a fan. The music made her think of Cassian, and her sadness gave her the strength, somehow, to stay here and be a teacher of ballet until she could become the ballerina whom Kurt von Linden so softly, so deliberately mocked.

Then all at once the Baroness broke the mood she had created with her music and began to play a lively Viennese waltz. She laughed as she played. 'Our moods change like the rhythm of the waltz, did you know that, Siran? Come, you two, dance and pretend we are in gay Vienna. Kurt, I command you to dance with Siran ... I won't have altogether a social disgrace for a son.'

Siran was startled, and then she smiled and told herself he would not be commanded by anyone and would go on lounging there by the stove like a big cat who liked the feel of the warmth.

Her heart gave a jerk when instead he rose to his feet and came to her with a look of deliberate intent.

'No --' She shrank away from him as he reached for her. 'I don't want to --'

'You said you weren't shy.' He caught hold of her hands and drew her to her feet with remorseless ease. 'Come, you aren't trembling, are you? I do this to please Trinkka, not myself. She's the only woman I ever bother to obey.'

'You just want to embarrass me,' Siran whispered fiercely, and then he put his arms around her and she felt how easily he could have crushed her. Hateful man! He didn't have to try to make her tremble. She had never trembled like this in her life before, not even that first time she had danced for Cassian. She wanted to thrust Kurt away from her, and in a second he had drawn her so close and hard to him

that all she was conscious of was the thudding of her heart and the warm pressure of his hand through the material of her dress.

'For Trinkka,' he breathed. 'Only for her, not for you ... or me.'

Why the insistence that he waltzed with her only to please Trinkka? He whirled her around and she found him supple and sure and far from clumsy. She was amazed, and when she glanced up at him he gave her an impudent look. How naive of her to be amazed by this man! Being a sportsman he would be co-ordinated in air things; and being a man he had danced before tonight with a girl.

'Does this very natural and ordinary accomplishment bring me down to earth?' he asked, sardonically.

'I thought you were contemptuous of the dance,' she said, and felt the swing of her skirt, and the rhythm of the music, and the longing that always came to dance on and on.

Out of the door they whirled and the music became an echo behind them as she became aware of a smoother floor underfoot. Moonlight was streaming through long windows, and a pair of dancing ghosts flitted in and out of mirrors lining the walls. It seemed like a dream, but his touch was too real for dreaming. The Strauss music belonged to another time, and yet was as vital as it had ever been.

'We dance in the empty grandeur of the ballroom,' said Kurt, and his voice was deep above her head. 'There were lovely things in this room long ago; cherubs above the mirrors, sparkling chandeliers overhead, and sofas in the alcoves. Breck has had exact copies made of the chandeliers and they will be sent here soon from Vienna. Everything will look the same, but the old magic will be gone. No copy can be the same as the original. The silk drapes at the windows, will smell of newness, not of the musty scents a boy remembers from hiding among them to watch the dancing. I was six years old and it

was the last time a ball was held here, and perhaps I remember the occasion so clearly because of that. One of my mother's friends discovered me behind the curtain. He was a conductor of music and very famous in Vienna; he sat me on the piano and gave me chocolate cake to eat.'

Kurt gave a nostalgic laugh. 'The next day when Breck found out he was wild with me and he pelted snowballs at me ... until I fell in the lake.'

Siran gave a gasp and stumbled. Of course, in those days Breck would have been the bigger of the two boys, but right now the hard feel of Kurt's arms made it seem impossible that anyone could have got the better of him.

'Breck pulled me out, so don't die of shock,' he drawled, mocking her. 'Already you have put him on a pedestal, eh? The handsome Baron who marched into your life and saved you from being a waitress. It's quite a romantic story, isn't it?'

'Why do you spoil everything?' she asked.

'Perhaps it is in my nature ... to be destructive.'

The music of the waltz died away and they came to a standstill beside a window. In the moonlight the snow was drifting down again, and the lawn lay under a silvery mantle to the edge of the lake. She pictured Kurt falling into the lake and told herself Breck had not meant to hurt him. He had made it sound a little cruel in order to disillusion her ... he would use any weapon to make her run away, and again she wondered why he was so opposed to her staying here.

She didn't take up too much room, being quite a small thing. She had saved his nephew's life, and his mother seemed lonely for feminine company since the loss of Kristy.

Was he afraid that like Kristy she might hurt his mother in some unforeseen way?

She glanced up at him, but his face by moonlight was a mask of mystery and his eyes could not be read because he chose to watch the falling snow. 'You have never been sleigh riding by the light of the moon, have you?' He spoke abruptly. 'It's quite an experience, and you would look more than ever like a *barishnaya* in a Cossack fable. I wonder if you would dare to take such a ride with me?'

She shook her head, for she must never be so alone with him, out there in the snows where she would be at the mercy of his unpredictable nature. 'I think it might be wise of me to forgo the pleasure of such a ride ... with you.'

'Are you hoping my brother might invite you to ride with Mm?'

'If he did so, then I certainly wouldn't refuse him.' She turned away from Kurt, saw the direction of the door and made for it. She heard him laughing to himself, there by the window where the soft shadows of the snow fell one after the other. Siran met his mother in the hall and they went upstairs together.

'I am going to the nursery to take a look at Lorenz,' she said. 'Will you come with me? He looks so pretty when he's asleep.'

Siran smiled and followed the Baroness into the baby's room; it was softly lit by a tiny lamp and there he lay fast asleep in his antique cot, a curl adrift on his forehead, cared for and safe in this castle of the seven lilacs. Siran stole a look at Trinkka and saw on her face a pensive look of love. Of which son was she thinking as she gazed at Kristy's baby?

'He is a darling, is he not?' Trinkka spoke softly, and her fingers stole over the carving of the cradle, as if they knew intimately each small

detail. 'Siran, how do I really thank you? What do I give you in return?'

'You don't have to give me anything,' Siran assured her with a smile. 'There isn't anything I want --'

The Baroness glanced up and caught Siran's gaze. 'There is always something ... I'd give you one of my sons ... could you love Kurt?'

'No!' Siran backed away as if from a blow. No, she couldn't have been invited here for that! If Kurt knew what lay in his mother's mind, then no wonder he had told her to return to Vienna ... no wonder he had warned her that she'd be glad to run away if she stayed.

'Forgive me.' Trinkka held out her hands in appeal. 'I talk like a foolish mother who worries too much about her son ... I see that he is not the kind of man you could ever care for. He seems like the mountains themselves, and you prefer the music of life, the joy and beauty of warm things. Forget what I said. Please.'

'It is forgotten,' Siran assured her, and she let Trinkka clasp her cold hands and kiss her burning cheek.

'I have upset you, *liebchen*? *Nichte*' Not too much, but I hope Kurt...?'

'Kurt will always go his own way, despite his mother's wishes.'

'Does he know your wishes, Baroness?'

'Perhaps, but don't be frightened of him, *liebchen*.'

'I'm not,' Siran said, with more spirit than conviction.

She bade Trinkka goodnight and went to her room, and as she entered she felt uneasy about sleeping in a room of Kurt's, disturbed by the things the Baroness had said. Her nightdress lay on the bed where his

pyjamas had once lain. He had slept in that bed with its puff of a eiderdown and its goose-down pillows. He had listened to the wind across the lake, and dreamed of the mountains.

She hummed to herself as she prepared for bed, opening the cupboards with the wild flowers painted on them, doing her best to keep her thoughts at bay.

Each nerve in her body seemed to give a jump when there was a sudden tapping on her door. Her hand went nervously to her throat, pulling together the lapels of her wrap as she opened the door and found Kurt standing there. 'What do you want?' She spoke with panic in her voice, like a girl in a Victorian novel.

'Don't look so alarmed.' That sardonic smile pulled at his lip. 'All I want is something I keep in that wooden chest under the window. May I fetch it?'

'No—I'll get it for you. What is it?'

'Only a book in a blue cover.'

She went and opened the chest and found the book in a corner. It had a leather clasp around it and the letter K was stamped into the cover. It had the look of a private journal, and Siran didn't dare meet his eyes as she handed him the book. He, had been afraid that she would look inside and see written there his private thoughts and feelings. As if she cared what they were!

'It's a journal I take with me on my climbs,' he said.

'I am sorry to have troubled you.'

'You don't trouble me,' she said. 'And you needn't have worried that I'd read anything private. I'm not that sort of a girl, nor am I that curious about you.'

'I never supposed you were, *fraulein*. I need the diary so I can refer back to my notations on a certain climb. I write for the *Alpine Journal* and I wish to check over an article so it can be posted tomorrow morning. *Gute nacht*, Miss Winters. I hope you sleep well in the room I slept in.'

With almost a click of the heels he was gone, striding away from her until his tall figure was lost among the shadows. She heard the echo of a closing door, and as she closed her own door she could still see that sardonic face with lines carved into it from the mountain winds, the eyes as cool as blue ice. She was convinced that he had come for the book tonight in order to confuse her. He had known that to find him on her threshold as she was about to go to bed would shake her coolness.

She took up her hairbrush, then put it down again and stared at her own face in the mirror. The lamplight was in her hair, and her eyes were wide and dark, and there lingered in them a look of angry confusion.

Kurt von Linden had come to her room tonight with the deliberate intention of seeing her like this... and it was as if something intimate had happened between them. As if he had touched her when he had looked at her ... this man who desired only what challenged him!

CHAPTER FOUR

SIRAN awoke and felt as small as an egg lost among feathers. The light that streamed into her room was bright and snowy, and for a few moments she couldn't think where she was. She heard no city sounds, only a curious stillness. She sat up and saw from the clock that it was eight-fifteen and for a moment she was in a panic. She had to get to the coffee house ... and then in a flash she remembered that she had left her city job and was many miles from Vienna.

At once she slipped out of bed, tied her wrap, and went to look out of the window. She caught her breath at the sheer majesty of the mountains, diamond-hard and sparkling in the morning sun, their lower slopes furred by snow and the evergreen of pine and fir trees. So near did they seem in the clear light that she felt she could have stretched out a hand to touch them. The lake below was blue and icy, with water-birds skimming across it.

Siran's brown eyes glowed in her slender face. This was a wonderful place, and this morning her courage had returned in full force, so that she felt able to cope with the people she had come to live among ... these people of the snows with their burning secrets.

'*Guten. morgen, fraulein.*' It was the young maid with her breakfast tray, blonde and smiling and bringing with her the fragrant smell of fresh-baked bread and steaming coffee in a blue pot. There was butter and plum jam, and a pastry filled with fruit.

It was a delightful breakfast, and Gerda hummed a song as she moved about the room opening cupboards and laying out Siran's clothes. The cream sweater and pleated skirt, *ja?* The woollen stockings instead of the nylon ones if the *fraulein* was going out.

'Yes, I'm going as far as the village to see the school. I shall be starting work there in a few days.'

Gerda understood a little English and she replied that everyone was eager to meet the English young woman who was to teach dancing to the pupils at the school.

Siran had expected some curiosity from the villagers, and now it occurred to her that she must be quite a talking point among them. The Baron had arranged for her to come here and there must be speculation as to his interest in her. She was young, single, and not unattractive, and she saw Gerda looking at her as if already there had been some talk at the castle. It made her feel confused, and it also made her wonder if during that brief meeting with Breck von Linden he had become interested in her in a personal way.

Her pulses quickened. He was an attractive, compelling man, but she was a girl dedicated to a dream a man must not interfere with.

Siran quickly finished her breakfast and prepared to face the day ahead. In a wool cap to match her sporty attire she made her way downstairs and glanced in a couple of the rooms. They were unoccupied and she guessed that the Baroness was with her grandson, giving him his breakfast and his bath.

She stepped through some glass doors and found herself in the courtyard, where she took a deep breath of the pure mountain air. It was a real autumn morning, with the sun shining mistily through the snow-boughed trees. The grass by the lake was frozen and it shattered like glass when she trod upon it. Soon the water would be turned to solid ice and she imagined skating parties at the castle and the merry sound of laughter winging across the lake. There had surely been such parties before Kristy had run away ... and then Siran tensed as she caught the sound of someone crunching through the snow towards her. At once she was on the alert, the wind at play with a strand of her red-brown hair, a chain of small footprints leading to where she stood.

Kurt came, obliterating her footprints beneath his own, his eyes intensely blue against his wind-tanned face. The cool sunlight made his hair seem very light, a chunky white sweater was high about his throat and his legs were long in dark fitted trousers. Shafts of sunlight fell across his tall figure and he looked superbly fit, and craggy as the mountains that loomed over the castle.

He loomed over Siran and she had to tilt her head in order to meet his eyes. Never before had anyone made her feel so slight and unworldly, and at the same time so ready for a battle.

'I saw you gazing across the lake at the mountains,' he said. 'Does the look of them unnerve you, Miss Winters?'

'They make me feel rather tiny,' she admitted. 'Even someone as tall as you, *mein herr*, must feel dwarfed by their majesty.'

'I do indeed.' A smile flickered on his firm lips. 'My arrogance—as you no doubt think of it—is as nothing compared to all that strength and danger. But I have the advantage of having known them all my life and I am used to the way they crown the sky ... it takes times for a stranger to look and not feel a small clutch of fear and uncertainty.'

He gazed fearlessly at the ice-bound peaks. 'In cities things are man-made, but here at Mayholtzen one is aware of natural forces at work, of the things beyond our complete control. That is why you lose your breath when you look at the mountains ... they are out of this world, and yet if one is prepared for the hazard they can be conquered.'

He looked at Siran as he spoke and his eyes were intensely alive, so that it came as a shock to meet them, no longer icy but flame-blue. How he loved the lonely grandeur of the glaciers! They moved him, stirred him as love for a woman might stir another man. Siran took a

step away from him, in retreat from his eyes, and from the memory of what the Baroness had said last night.

'... could you love Kurt?' she had asked.

She might as well have asked Siran to go and climb those high and lonely crags that could not be warmed even by the stroke of the sun. He seemed to Siran so aloof from loving a woman that her heart shrank from him ... even from the strange attraction of his face and his proud strong body.

'I wonder if you have heard of the Nanda Devi?' he said.

'No...'. She felt the crackle of ice at her heels, for her nervous step away from him had taken her a little too close to the ice that was not yet ready to bear even her slight weight. She stood on the edge of the ice rather than take a step forward and find herself close to Kurt von Linden ... he seemed to her more perilous.

'It was an inaccessible peak on which the Princess Nanda took refuge in order to escape a would-be ravisher. Now she is called the Goddess Nanda and for many years no climber could reach the peak of the Goddess because of the guardian chain of sheer rock all around her. It seemed as if no man would find a way up those jagged cliffs and over the deep gorges and torrents of icy water, but climbers are persistent and in the end Nanda Devi was conquered.'

'From the way you speak, *mein herr*, I think you prefer your lonely goddess to a living woman.'

'She can only give a man frostbite, or lure him down a crevasse.' A cool little smile glinted in his eyes. 'A woman of this world can be cruel in ways more subtle.'

'If some women are like that it's usually because some man has hurt them in the first place.'

'As I hurt Kristy, eh? So that she ran away and left me accused of cutting a rope in order to save my own neck.'

'It was at your suggestion that Helmut attempt the climb, and she loved him, and expected to marry him.'

'I thought to climb a mountain would make a man of him.'

'Not every girl wants a superman.' Siran stood tensely between the ice at her heels and the flame that glimmered suddenly in Kurt's eyes. 'Women have loved poets and shoe-menders, as well as those who dare the unknown and those who fly higher than your mountains to the moon itself. Women love for unknown reasons.'

'You speak like a romantic, Miss Winters.'

'I wouldn't want to be a goddess with ice in my veins.'

'No, you want to be a famous ballerina with men at your feet.'

'That isn't true at all... how dare you say that?'

'It's in my nature to be daring, and you told me yourself that your greatest hope is to be a great dancer. You want that above all.'

'Yes, I wished to dance when I was quite young, and every dancer hopes to be a ballerina. Just as you always hoped to conquer the Nanda Devi.'

'What if you fail to achieve your ambition? Will you remain in the corps de ballet and be content?'

'I—I shall be dancing.'

'You have given your heart to a ghost, and for him you will always dance, eh?'

'That is none of your affair!' In her sudden flash of temper Siran forgot that she was so near to the ice and her left heel was through it before she realized. Even as she gave a gasp of alarm and felt the ice giving beneath her a pair of strong arms swept her clear of danger.

With relief, and yet with exasperation, she felt the crisp snow under her feet and the hardness of Kurt's hands holding her about the waist. He had saved her from a ducking in the icy water of the lake, but he had provoked her in the first place and she wasn't grateful to him.

'Don't I get a word of thanks for saving you from a plunge in the lake?' he asked mockingly. 'You would have enjoyed that even less than you are enjoying the feel of my arms around you. When we danced in the ballroom last night I noticed how tense you were ... is it that when we are together we are like electric wires that should not come into contact with each other?'

'I—I am sure we both feel our dislike of each other.' She pressed away from him, feeling beneath her hand the muscular chest and chunky-wool, the warmth and the masculine danger. 'Your reflexes are admirably quick, *mein herr*. I would not have enjoyed a swim in icy water, but now may I go to the village?'

'You intend to walk?' He looked down at her with a smile that set her nerves tingling. How different he was from Cassian, with his wind-browned, daring face, and his touch that held no tenderness. He was unknown behind his smile, and not to be known.

'It's several miles to the village, Miss Winters, and you could go astray.'

'Is there someone who could drive me?' she asked, standing slim and tense between the hands that were more used to the feel of rock than the fine bones and soft skin of a girl. She had a panicky image of

being held closer still to him and being kissed against her will. He had such hard lips ... they would surely bruise rather than caress.

'You may remember that I have a parcel to post in the village,' he drawled. 'Permit me to drive you there in the sleigh.'

'No—yes.' She had to submit, for there seemed no one else available to take her. 'I wish to see the school where I shall be working. I wondered if it might be possible to meet the principal?'

'I am sure Franz Donrier will be delighted.' Kurt took his hands from her waist and added that he would fetch the sleigh if she would wait a few minutes. He strode off, and with a sigh of relief she adjusted her woolly cap, smoothed her skirt, and took a look at her face in the small mirror of her powder-compact. Her eyes were huge and doe-like from the shock of being held captive by him. For a moment she was tempted to run while she could, and then common sense returned. They were going only as far as the village school, not in the direction of the mountains, and if he touched her again she would slap his face and have done with it. He was only a man, after all. It was absurd to behave as if he could do just what he liked with her!

There was a jingle of bells, the whisper of the sleigh runners over the snow and the steady beat of the horse's hooves as they sped along.

Siran saw pine trees jewelled by the frost, and she smuggled closer into the fur rug. Smoke rose against the sky, spiralling from the chimneys of the chalets tucked into the hillsides, and she couldn't help but feel pleasure in this land of fable and drama, cradled for ever by the blue-white peaks of the mountains.

A wanton curl of hair danced on her forehead and the wind took her breath away, carrying with it the sound of a train on its way to Vienna, reminding her of what Xtirt had said about the cold winter

cutting them off from civilization. She felt his glance and knew he was thinking the same. There would be no running away when Mayholtzen became snowbound... but by then the Baron would have returned. There would be no need to be nervous of Kurt when his brother came home to Seven Lilacs. Breck must like her. He had told his mother she was an attractive girl. . Siran stared at the taut leather reins in Kurt's hands, and at the dancing black mane of the horse. Breck had said he found her attractive ... yet why had the Baroness asked if she could ever fall in love with Kurt?

Siran felt a strange little lurch of apprehension, which she tried to ignore as they came in sight of the village and she glimpsed a cluster of rooftops and gables and the pink steeple of the church, set in a valley with the mountains all around, great stern guardians of the place.

'We leave the sleigh here at the top of the hill and walk the rest of the way.'

He brought it to a standstill, tethered the horse to a tree, and offered a hand to Siran. She would have liked to ignore his proffered hand, but that would have underlined her awareness of him. As it was she saw a faintly sardonic smile edging his lips as he assisted her from among the furs, gripping her hand in his until it seemed lost.

'Here we are, *liebchen*, upon the path that leads down to the village.'

People had been walking it, and there were ski-trails in the snow as well, and a snapping of frosty twigs as Kurt brushed past them with a swing of his arm. He carried a large sealed envelope addressed in a bold handwriting ... his article for the *Alpine Journal*. Siran would not have thought of him as a writing man, but there could be many aspects to a character so complex, and she didn't want to think about that.

They came to the village and she saw a cluster of old- world shops around the market square, the baker's loaf and the butcher's lamb chop carved in wood and painted and hung above the doorways. There was a charming old inn with woodcarving all over it and a wrought-iron sign, and it was as if Kurt von Linden had brought her by sleigh into the heart of a Grimm fairytale.

The school itself was fronted by a rambling garden of graceful old trees bent under burdens of snow, and there was a silent fountain framed by an arched doorway leading into the hall. As they stepped through the doorway Siran could hear young voices singing a hymn, and there was an unforgotten smell of chalk dust, floor polish and the binding of books.

'I could close my eyes and imagine myself back at school,' she murmured. 'One is so carefree as a child, so unaware of the decisions one has to make as an adult. Schooldays are the smiling days ...'

There she broke off and glanced at Kurt. He stood tall and silent beside her, gazing at the framed photographs of students on the panelled walls, and she wished belatedly that she had not mentioned the days of childhood to him ... for how could he forget, ever, that he and his brother had been imprisoned in their own home, the sons of a brave man who had spoken out against tyranny and suffered for it?

It came as a relief to hear the approach of footsteps, and a few moments later she was being introduced to the headmaster of the school. Even as they shook hands Kurt bade them goodbye for a while. He had business to attend to in the village and would return for her in about an hour.

A pair of shrewd eyes studied Siran through the lenses of glasses that sat halfway down the bridge of Franz Donner's nose. He looked a brown owl of a man, she thought. His moleskin jacket and bushy moustache gave him a look of wisdom and curiosity.

'So you come to teach my girls how to pirouette, eh?'

'You make my job sound trivial, Herr Donner.' Her chin took a tilt. 'Did you agree with reluctance to take me on as a teacher at your school?'

'The Baron's suggestion did come as a surprise, but now I must admit that it will be interesting for the girls to have lessons of such an artistic nature. It will take off their baby fat, *hein*, as well as introduce them to classical music and stories.'

'I'm sure they will love everything to do with ballet,' Siran said, still with a touch of defensiveness. 'I was unsure of taking on this job. I felt that anything so unusual would meet with a certain amount of opposition. If you are opposed to having me on your staff, Herr Donner, I should like to be told so before I begin work.'

'Now we have met, Miss Winters, I can see for myself that you will be a tonic for my girls. My other teachers are older than yourself, more set in their ideas, and you bring a breath of spring air into our old school building. And now if you will come to my study we will discuss the matter more fully, and take a cup of coffee together.'

'I should like that,' she smiled, and walked with him to his private sanctum, a cluttered, leathery, book-lined room, where she sat down in a deep chair and heard a bird chirping in a tree outside the window. She was reminded again of her own schooldays; of being sent for by the Head because she wouldn't concentrate on her sums and had her mind filled with dreams of the ballet.

She hoped Franz Donner would not regret his decision to let his girl pupils learn an art form so far removed from the more studious subjects.

Coffee was brought to them by one of the pupils, who stared at Siran's red-brown hair and slender figure. The girl's eyes widened with

amazement as if she and the others had been expecting a martinet with a long stick to tap on the floor to keep the dancers in order. Siran smiled at the girl, but in shyness she fled.

'I think I've come as something of a surprise.' Siran stirred cream into her coffee, while the headmaster gave a chuckle.:

'I am going to tell you now, *fraulein*, that the Baron is usually a down-to-earth man, so you must have bewitched him.'

'Herr Donner!' She was shocked that he should put into words what everyone seemed to be thinking, that she was a young witch who had gone to the Baron's head. 'He wished to find me a form of employment I would enjoy. I was of service to his family in a certain matter --'

'The matter of the child, ;a? I was told the story by the Baron himself. You were brave, Miss Winters. Cool in a crisis as the English always are.'

'I just happened to be there. It was like fate.'

'You believe in fate, *fraulein*?' Franz Donner gave her a shrewd look that did not deride her belief. 'Strange things happen to us when we are young, eh? They are part of the excitement of living. What of the Baron's brother? What opinion have you formed of that stormy young man of the mountains?'

'His opinion of me is that I should have stayed in Vienna.'

Herr Donner met her eyes and a little twitch of amusement moved his moustache. 'I can see that you are perplexed by Kurt von Linden. Well, you are not alone in that. Like a young lion he is born free and in the way of such creatures he is hunted and blamed when a tragedy occurs. Quite naturally it is now in his nature to be on the defensive, and strangers are especially aware of this. They never know if he will

pounce or puitf, and a girl like yourself would feel that he is best left alone.'

'The trouble is,' she clasped her hands together in almost a prayerful attitude, 'I don't know if he'll leave me alone. I—I'm not being vain. I don't mean to imply that he finds me attractive or anything like that, but he enjoys teasing me. I think to him I'm like a dancing doll on a musical box, and if he were not at the castle then everything would be perfect.'

'The poor young man!' Herr Donner blinked owl-ishly at her through his glasses.

She flushed. 'I know it's wrong of me to dislike someone I've known only a short time, but his mother is such a kind and charming woman, and the Baron was courtesy itself when I met him in Vienna. With Kurt I fight and wrangle all the time and it spoils what would otherwise be a marvellous visit.'

'All castles, *mein kindl*, have a spell cast upon them which must be broken before happiness can come to its occupants. Perhaps fate intended you to come here for more reasons than one. Perhaps you will break the spell of sadness that has lain over Seven Lilacs for many years now.'

'How—?' Siran's wide-apart eyes were filled with wonder, and something of fright. What happiness could she bring? The casde was to be her home until she returned to Vienna, but even so she had her own life to live, her own ambitions to fulfil, her own sad loss to overcome. Kurt had said of Cassian that he was the ghost for whom she danced, but in her thoughts he was so alive still, lean and dark and with a magic of his own.

'It isn't my wish to become involved in the von Linden drama,' she said. 'I hope to remain only a visitor with a job to do.'

'A pretty girl in the house of two bachelors?' Franz Donner looked quizzical, and cast an eye over her hair with its burnished tint of red. 'Already your arrival has set the folk of this village talking. Here we are far from the city and tucked among the mountains, where every marriage and every birth is a matter of lively interest. The people are bound to wonder if it will be Kurt or the Baron who will win your heart.'

'My heart is given to my career, Herr Donner.'

'You don't say so?' He polished his glasses and the twinkle in his eye could be seen more dearly. 'I warn you that a career, and perhaps some trout fishing, are not very exciting substitutes for love, and I speak from experience. When you are my age, *madchen*, will you look at your ballet shoes, your trophies, and your press-cuttings, and be as sure as you are right now that stage triumphs are warmer bed-fellows than a man of your own? Stars are remote and lonely things, shining at night but forgotten during the day.'

'I am sure that could be said of many wives,' Siran retorted. 'Why is there so much discontent among women if their lot is so satisfying?'

'Because they will ask questions of life instead of allowing it to carry them along as the Danube carries the cargo and the flotsam. Life and love are mysterious things. To try to understand them is to break down a lovely piece of music into black and white notes, or to take a flower apart in order to find its secret scent. Women should revel in the mystery of things, and remain themselves the deepest mystery of all.'

'So you don't advocate careers for women?' Siran spoke with a smile, for she liked this man and the way they were speaking together like old friends. 'I think you are a little old-fashioned, Herr Donner.'

'I am proud of it, Miss Winters. I left Vienna many years ago and I return only to visit my relatives now and again. I have become a part of Mayholtzen, a familiar figure coming from my chalet each morning puffing a pipe on my way to school. I love this place. The vista of mountains, the clear air, the bells, the beauty of the snows followed by the loveliness of our springtime and our summer. You will fall under its spell, *madchen*. I can tell just by looking at you.'

'Already I feel the spell of the place,' she admitted. 'But places can't hold on to one as people can. I have taken a vow not to become deeply involved with anyone. I want friends, but not lovers.'

'You may be loved against your will, Miss Winters.'

'You smile when you say my name ... just as Kurt von Linden smiles.'

'Your name is such a cool contrast to the warmth of your hair.'

'Men always assume that auburn hair means ... passion.' She fingered an ornament on his desk, a curious plaything of crystal with a thousand colours trapped inside it. A rainbow in the hand.

'How else could you be a dancer without some fire in your veins? How else could I be the principal of a school if I were not a shrewd old fellow with a fondness for mathematics?'

'I was always being scolded for not doing my sums right,' she smiled. 'Are you sure you want me to teach your girls the dance? It can be most distracting.'

'I consider that grace in a girl comes before scholarship, and that is a secret between you and me. My other teachers would be rather shocked.'

'How did they react to the idea of a ballet dancer on the staff?'

'My fellow-men were rather intrigued, but my lady teachers were a trifle disapproving. All will be well when they get to know you.'

'I suppose they think of me as the Baron's protegee?'

'A certain amount of gossip is to be expected when a handsome man like the Baron takes under his wing a young English ballet dancer.'

'But I'm not his baronial pet,' Siran said in exasperation. 'I'm not an operetta girl who needs a titled protector because I have no talent.'

Franz Donner looked amused by her outburst. 'You are on the defensive, maybe because you find him attractive and a possible danger to your independence?'

Her fingers clenched the crystal ornament. 'I've already loved someone, Herr Donner, and I don't intend to let it happen again. It hurts too much to lose someone special, and he died so suddenly that I still can't believe that I shall never see him again. He was a great dancer. A man who was all heart and talent, a flame that burned out at the height of its brilliance. I can't imagine how I could care for anyone else.'

'Yes, it is sad to lose someone very much loved, especially when one is young. It seems a cruel blow, because to the young to die is the greatest cruelty, yet your very youth will be the enemy of your grief. It will make you smile again, and enjoy the things you don't want to enjoy because he is no longer with you. He filled a great part of your life, but now he is gone and you mustn't let him haunt you.'

'I don't want to forget Cassian,' she said ardently. 'He was truly like a flame and you felt warm and alive just to be in the same room with him. It was cruel that someone so alive should be suddenly so ill... it was like seeing a wonderful bird-shot down in flight... none of us could believe it. It was as if our particular world came to an end, and in a way it did. The company disbanded, most of us went in different

directions, and I'm still bewildered to find myself in a mountain village. I keep asking myself if I've done the right thing in coming here.'

'I think you have.' Franz Donner gave her a long, wise look. 'It is good to come to the mountains when one is feeling lost and uncertain. Each day you will see them, eternal and symbolic of forces greater than ourselves. You will learn from them that for each cruelty there is a joy. For each loss a discovery. For each shadow a ray of sunlight.'

Even as he spoke a shadow darkened the glass doors that led into his study. Siran glanced over and saw Kurt Von Linden standing there. He had a remote, very still look, almost like that of a tree or a statue standing alone in a garden. He was looking in upon them, but with the same air of remoteness, as if they were strangers to him and he was indifferent to their talk. His eyes were unsmiling in the face that wind and sun and snow had beaten so relentlessly, carving deep the lines from cheekbone to jaw, squaring off the chin until it seemed like rock.

Siran gave a little shiver, as if a chilliness had crept into the study and touched her. She took hold of her scarf and wrapped it around her neck, and she gave Franz Donner a slightly nervous smile. 'My escort awaits me, I see.'

'Yes, looking as if carved from the rock itself, eh?' The headmaster's smile was quizzical as he rose to his feet and went over to the glass doors. Siran followed, bracing herself for the cool shaft of air as they were opened.

'Hullo, Kurt. We have discussed Miss Winters' appointment at length and I look forward to having her on my staff. I suppose now you have come to return her to the castle?'

'I am on my way home.' The deep crisp words were like a snowball thrown into the warm atmosphere of the study. 'I wish to put in some ski practice, but, Miss Winters tells me she dare not ski for fear of damaging a leg.'

'Perhaps she will enjoy watching you?' Franz Donner slanted a rather wicked look at Siran. 'She may not be aware of how expert you are on the snow slopes, one of Austria's leading exponents of the sport, and the daring leader of our local tradition of skiing down the slopes with flaming brands on the night of the Baron's birthday. That is really something to see, Miss Winters. All the young men are clad entirely in black so that only the torches seem to stand out against the snow. Like dark angels they seem to drop from the sky with their emblems of flame.'

'It sounds a very dramatic occasion,' she said. 'But my visit might be over before the Baron's birthday comes round.'

'My brother celebrates his birthday in three weeks' time,' Kurt drawled. 'I daresay you will still be here, won't you? Herr Donner would not employ a teacher who did not intend to stay for the winter term, at least.'

'You're so clever, Herr von Linden, that you must have been a star pupil here at the school when you were a boy.' She spoke quickly, not pausing to choose her words, forgetful in the heat of the moment that Kurt and his brother had been kept from attending the school by order of a dictator. They had not been allowed to mix with the other children. They had not run laughing down the valley to the sound of the morning bell. Not a single photograph of a classroom group included them. Their father had been judged a traitor for speaking in defence of freedom and justice.

Shock registered in Siran's eyes. She hated to hurt anyone with an unthinking remark, but the next instant she saw a sardonic smile flit

across his face and realized that his armour was proof against anything she might say or do.

'Shall we be on our way, Miss Winters? The horse stands in the cold waiting for us.'

She winced a little, for he was well aware of her own vulnerable nature. He knew just by looking at her that she could be hurt more easily than she could inflict it. It was to his advantage that from a boy he had been hardened against pain, and it was a hardness that made her want no contact with him as they walked to the sleigh. She gave the horse a pat on the neck and his harness bells jingled as he arched his head. She then hopped into the sleigh and tucked the laprobe around her knees. The wind blew snow from the boughs of the trees as they started on their way to the castle.

'You Seemed to enjoy meeting Franz Donner,' said Kurt.

'I found him a very pleasant person,' she replied, 'and I think I shall like working at the school. No doubt you were hoping for the reverse, *mein herr*. I know you don't like having me at the castle, and I've a good mind to rent a chalet.'

'My mother wouldn't like you to do that.' He gave her an intent look. 'Nor, perhaps, would my brother.'

'But in a chalet I should be nearer to the village and I wouldn't have to bother anyone to take me there in the sleigh.'

'If you learned to ski you could use the slopes and travel there like the children do.' The smile he gave her was faintly mocking. 'Or are you still afraid to trust yourself to my skill? I really have no wish to see you break a leg, and as a ballet dancer you know that it's far less risky to take lessons from an expert than from a ... friend.'

'I—I should have to think about it.' Her gaze was on the snow slopes, steep and burningly white in the cool glow of the sun. Her glance travelled higher and she caught her breath at the perfection of the peaks, and the certain disdain of cold, untouchable beauty. One could admire that chaste loveliness, but how could anyone love what was so distant and so without warmth?

'You will miss a lot of fun if you don't learn how to ski,' Kurt added. 'We often go out in the moonlight and ski over slopes that seem made of silver ... you catch your breath at the idea, eh? Think about it ... there is something of the chamois about you - that should make of you an agile pupil.'

She shot him a startled look. His mane of hair was ruffled by the wind and she was reminded again of a young lion. Even Franz Donner had applied the term to him ... did the lion hope to chase the chamois over the snow slopes? Did he see further sport in teaching her a sport he excelled in?

'You are giving me a strange look.' He gave a laugh. 'Do you imagine I shall lure you away to the Siebeng- birge?'

'I've never heard of the place.' Her fingers gripped the laprobe, which was made of the soft furs of hunted creatures.

'It is the Seven Mountains of the Grimm tales, where lovely maidens are held captive in black castles.'

'You are talking about fables,' she forced a laugh. 'I have noticed that Austria has quite an effect on the imagination ... when we arrived yesterday at Seven Lilacs it reminded me of a rhyme I used to know.'

'Won't you recite it, *fraulein*? I might also know it.'^v 'I—I'm not good at recitation, *mein herr*.'

'Perhaps you are shy of me?'

'One is always a little shy of new acquaintances.'

'You seemed to get along with Franz Donner without a trace of it. I watched you laughing with him as if you had known each other much longer than an hour.'

She bit her lip, for how could she retort that Herr Donner was a kindly man old enough to be her father? Kurt himself was a vigorous young man, who had in his eyes a look that made a girl feel as if she would be helpless to fight back if he ever took hold of her ... a blue flame of a look that ravished the breath ... let alone the body!

'We seemed to find ourselves in accord,' she said. 'He's a kind and tolerant man.'

'You think I am neither of those things... now don't bother to deny it. I can read your eyes.'

'I wasn't going to deny it.' She glanced away from him and gazed at the pinewoods, through which the turret and walls of the castle could be glimpsed as they approached at a fairly rapid rate. The sun was not warm enough to melt the snow and it was hard-packed beneath the runners of the sleigh and little balls of it were thrown up by the hooves of the horse.

Siran couldn't help smiling a little. The scene touched her heart, and it couldn't be denied that Kurt was exciting to fight with. He said whatever he pleased and so made it possible for her to retaliate ... while their battles stayed verbal all was well, but she intended never to find herself at the mercy of his lips in any other way. Though they were held in a firm line, there was a dangerous curve to the lower lip ... a promise of passion that Siran didn't wish to put to the test.

As they drew nearer all the time to the castle there ran through her mind the lines she couldn't speak aloud to Kurt. Was it shyness, or the

fear that he might laugh at her? She couldn't tell what he would do....
he was too unpredictable.

The rhyme seemed to take on the rhythm of the sleigh as it raced
through the snow ...

*Rare are these six things,
A nun who never sings,
A maid without a man,
A lake without a swan,
A fair without a tune,
A day without a boon,
A castle without a secret.*

Seven Lilacs was a place of mystery and sadness ... and there her
thoughts broke off as something dashed from the pinewoods and
startled the horse. He flung up in the shafts, the dappled thing of the
woods sped on, but the sleigh swivelled on a patch of ice, hovered as
on a knife-edge, and then plunged over on its side, burying Siran in
furs and snow.

'Oh ... really!' Hands caught at her and pulled her free, and with her
woolly cap askew she met blue eyes that laughed openly and
wickedly at her predicament.

'Let go of me!' She fought with him, but couldn't break free of his lean
hands, as wind-whipped of surplus flesh as the rest of him. His
strength panicked Siran as something had panicked that fawn, and her
only weapon was words and she used them without measuring their
truth or their falsity.

'I can't bear to be touched by you,' she cried out. 'Your hands make me
shudder!'

'Why?' His face and his voice were harsh. 'Do you believe what
Kristy said about me? Do you think these hands cut the rope that sent

her young man plunging to his death ? Look at me!' He forced her to do so. 'Yes, it's there in your eyes... the same accusing look ... the same wish to hate me. Go ahead and hate me, *liebchen*, but first let me give you a reason!'

He bent his head swiftly and Siran's cry of protest was trapped between his lips and hers. The black horse whinnied, impatient of the overturned sleigh. There was a flurry of snow as the wind shook the pine branches, and a strand of Siran's hair was bright against the whiteness of Kurt's sweater.

She had been kissed before ... but not like this. Cassian's kiss had been a warm flick of the lips across her cheekbone ... this angry kiss from Kurt found its way to the bottom of her spine, and when he let her go she stood nerveless, his face a blur against a background of trees and turrets. It wasn't until she started to run from him that she stumbled and felt the tears on her cheeks. His loveless kiss had brought back aching the loss of Cassian and his affection for her. Little bird. His dancer, and perhaps his dream, never to be realised.

She ran on until she came to the forecourt of the castle. A sleek black car was standing there between the twin towers, the snow-laden lilacs bowing over it. It was a Mercedes, and as she came to a breathless halt she remembered that she had driven in such a car to the Vienna Woods, and there in its comfortable gloom the Baron von Linden had invited her to stay at Seven Lilacs.

The Baron was home again .. . Breck had returned, and the castle beckoned.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEY met again at *mittagessen*, when he was polite but distant. He asked her how she was and they exchanged a few formal remarks, then he devoted his attention to his mother and Siran ate her lunch and listened to Kurt on her left, in conversation with the surprise guest the Baron had brought home with him.

The girl was called Maria Landl and she had been introduced to Siran as the daughter of the business associate Breck had been staying with at their lodge in Bavaria.

She was quite lovely, with a fragility about her of a Meissen figure. She wore a dirndl and a blouse embroidered with snow-flowers, baring her throat and her shoulders. A raven braid of hair encircled her, small and beautiful head, her face was a vivid oval, and her eyes were dark, sparkling, and faintly slanting.

'*Meine liebe,*' she said softly, each time she addressed the Baroness, and whenever she said it her almond eyes seemed to look sideways at Breck. She seemed not to notice Siran's presence at the table. It was as if she knew already that she had charmed the Baron and could do the same to Kurt whenever she chose. She was poised and amusing and she knew all about winter sports ... not once did Kurt bother to glance at Siran, or to say a word.

Art-hour before he had punished her with a kiss, and now between them at the lunch table there was an arctic barrier.

'I shall be pleased to show you my workroom, Maria,' she heard him say, and never with her had there been that friendly note in his voice. 'I make some of my own climbing gear, and I have also been working on skis that are both light and strong on a steep run. You may like to try a pair? They can be adjusted to the female height and weight.'

'How can I resist your invitation, Kurt?' She spoke seductively and just loud enough for everyone to hear her reply. 'It will be a thrill to ski with the man who made that daring jump two years ago and gave me his ' golden medal to wear on a chain. I still have your gift to the schoolgirl I then was. It's my talisman ... to bring me luck and the things I wish for.'

'Does a beautiful girl need luck?' he drawled. 'Surely you have only to look at a man and he becomes your devoted slave?'

'It's easy enough to enslave boys, Kurt. The men I like are no woman's vassal.' She laughed and looked at the Baroness. 'These men of yours are proud because no woman has them beneath her slipper.'

Trinka quirked an eyebrow, more delicately yet with something of Kurt's irony. 'How right you are, *madchen*. My sons are like the mountains of Mayholtzen ... not easily conquered.'

'They are a challenge,' Maria said softly. 'Each in his own way.'

Breck glanced up from his lake trout with spicy butter and Siran noticed how he studied the girl from Bavaria ... as if she were a lovely portrait upon which the eyes could be feasted. Siran had never wished for beauty, but when he flicked his grey eyes over her face she felt the pain of being compared to Maria Landl, whose features were so perfect, whose poise was so finished. She was not from a village in a remote corner of Cornwall, where the fisher-folk were superstitious and still believed in witches.

'You visit us at the right time of the year, Maria. You and our little English guest. In late autumn, if the snow is not too cruel, our lilacs sometimes bloom with a sort of Indian madness.' The Baroness put her hand upon Breck's sleeve, as if the reality of him, home safe again at Seven Lilacs, was a blessing she had to cling to. 'They say in the

valley—though I have known Kurt to laugh at the idea—that when the lilacs bloom late at the castle there is a wedding in the air.'

'There is wishful thinking in the air,' Kurt said mockingly. 'Trinka sees a satin slipper pressed lightly upon your neck or mine, Breck.'

'Most mothers are matchmakers.' The Baron smiled in his thoughtful way, and in his iron-grey suit he looked attractively severe. 'I think, Kurt, that when Trinka watches you set off on a climb, cowed like a monk against the icy winds, she fears in her heart that you will never fall in love with a woman as you have fallen for those cold monarchs... the Monte Rosa, the Nadehorn, the Glass Turret.'

'Breck!' His name broke on a note of pain from his mother's lips. 'Please don't mention that awful place!'

'Not to mention it, my dear, is to make it all the more sinister.'

'It is sinister.' Her fingers gripped the sleeve of her older son, even as her blue eyes dwelt entreatingly on her younger son. 'Kurt, must you torment me by climbing there again? Can't you forget, and accept that it was an accident, what happened there?'

'I know it was an accident,' he said grimly. 'Everyone else knows only what Kristy called it. For my own sake I must return to the Turret, to climb again, and prove myself no murderer. I did not cut the rope, but I did take Helmut up that mountain and for that I must answer.'

'No --' Trinka shook her head emphatically. 'Breck, speak to your brother, make him understand that the gods can be greedy. They have taken from this house before and they may do so again ... Kurt, don't you care at all that I am afraid? Is your own pride all that concerns you?'

'I am a son of Karel von Linden and I need to remind other people of the fact. Trinka,' he smiled, and spoke her name gently, 'I have

climbed the Nanda Devi, a devil of a mountain. Why should I be afraid of the Turret?'

'Because it took Helmut, and in a way it took Kristy as well. You are my son and I don't want anything to happen to you.'

'I shall live to be a hundred, *liebchen*.' He laughed and changed the subject, but an atmosphere of drama had entered the room and it was with relief that Siran escaped when the meal ended.

'I wish to write a letter to a friend in Vienna,' she explained, and she left the family and their Bavarian guest to drink coffee in the music-room. Halfway up the stairs she turned, feeling a pair of eyes upon her. A little tremor ran all through her. Breck stood lighting a cigar and he was watching her intently, his thick fair hair crisping above eyes with a steely glint to them. His white teeth gripped the cigar, and his stance was one of authority, there in the hall with its great oriel window, dark oak floor, and white walls.

Abruptly he came to the foot of the stairs and beckoned her down to him. She approached cautiously, one hand gripping the stair rail, pausing about five steps above him. His eyes held hers, a smile waited on his mouth... as if he had been awaiting this moment when they would really meet again and greet each other.

'*Gruss Gott!*' he murmured. 'You are exactly as I remembered, a slim young thing, with a quiet fire in your eyes. Are you a little angry because we did not speak much at *mittagessen*? A little hurt, perhaps?'

'No—why should I be, Herr Baron?'

'Because you are a woman.' His gaze passed over her, the smile travelled to his eyes. 'We cannot speak right now, but I wish to see you later on. Meet me beside the lake as the sun goes down.'

'Is it an order?' She hoped the nervous quiver in her voice went unnoticed, and felt an eager leaping of her heart, a response to the look of him. His was an arrogance combined with a charm no girl could resist when he chose to exert it.

'Yes, an order.' He bowed slightly, turned on his heel and strode to the arched door of the music room. As he entered the sound of Maria's laughter drifted out to the hall. Unlike Siran she was without shyness. The Baron von Linden would not have sent her in flight up the stairs, heart pounding because he made a secret rendezvous with her.

Siran closed her door behind her and sank down breathlessly on the feather puff that covered her bed. How ridiculous of her to feel so shaken! A dozen pirouettes in succession couldn't do this to her when she was dancing!

She lay back on her bed with her head pillowed upon her arms and wondered what he meant to say to her. Behind the smoke of his cigar his eyes had smiled, and it seemed to matter no longer that she wasn't beautiful like Maria, or clever enough to say always the right and charming thing. He seemed to remind her of Cassian though they were so unlike to look at. If she closed her eyes she could almost hear again the wise and whimsical voice of the man she had loved, talking about the abiding attraction of certain dancers.

'There is a type of beauty that turns the head,' he had said. 'And another kind that touches the heart. Pavlova wasn't all that lovely to look at, but when she danced she was beauty as a man dreams of it. She was eternal youth and innocence. Woman in flight, untouched and uncaptured. The butterfly that kisses in the air and dies in a net. The most striking of women cannot compete with this kind of magic. You have it, Siran ... you are fey.'

Siran cooled her face in a pillow and wondered if she dared meet the Baron by the lake. An attraction between them could not lead to

anything permanent. His mother and the people of Mayholtzen would expect him soon to marry, and he could hardly marry a dancing girl. Nor could she give up her dream of being a ballerina.

Her cheeks tingled with the shock of a sudden thought. Perhaps he wanted an affair with her. A romance here in the snowlands, amid the strange unreal beauty of it all. Something for him to remember when she went away. Something to replace for her the aching loss of her dearest Cassian.

Tears stung the back of her eyes. She was so far away from all she had cared about. Morning exercises at the *barre*, eating her lunch perched on a costume basket, wrapped in a dream of dancing the role of Juliet, for which Cassian had been training her.

Perhaps it would be a long time before she heard again the ting of the bells, summoning the corps de ballet on stage, costumed and eager to dance.

She stared at the window that framed the cold blue peaks of the mountains. Could she ever feel for all this the same warm fondness felt for those shabby yet lively rooms in London where she had lodged with other girls of the ballet? Could she ever care for another man with the ghost of Cassian between them?

There was a compelling charm about Breck von Linden, and each evening when the sun drowned itself in the lake there was »no lovelier place than Seven Lilacs. The turrets and towers against the skyline took on a dramatic look, as if the place had been fashioned for tragedy and love and it would not be wrong to let the heart be swayed, as the willow trees by the lake were swayed by the wind.

If she met him there he might only talk about her job at the school ... if she didn't meet him he might assume that she was afraid of him.

She was drawn to the window that framed the mountains, as if some kind of magnetism drew her. She couldn't look at them without a tiny shiver of fear, and she knew she could not have kept that rendezvous if Kurt had been the one to ask her.

It was he who made her feel afraid.

He lived with danger and would cause his mother great anxiety while he climbed again that fateful mountain she hated so much. Breck had not tried to dissuade him ... he knew it was a waste of breath to argue with his brother. He had described him as cowed like a monk against the icy winds, and it was curious, the feeling Siran had that the high peaks had made him theirs and closed his heart to the warm love of a woman.

Breck wasn't like him. Only in looks did they resemble each other; in ways they were as apart as those towering crags, one so cool and dangerous, the other tipped by gold as the sun touched it.

When the sun set she would meet Breck by the lake. It was exciting to think of seeing him alone ... of being the one he wished to be alone with this evening of his homecoming.

To settle her thoughts she sat down to write to Rudi in Vienna. He had insisted that she let him know that all was well with her, that she found the Baroness kind, and the brothers congenial. She smiled and nibbled her pen. He had said that Austrians who lived in castles had a certain arrogance, a swagger that might turn Rudi's head and make her forget that she was a girl of integrity. Dear Rudi—he was afraid she might fall a victim to the Baron's charm, and she dared not admit, even to herself, that the danger existed.

'I think I shall like it here,' she wrote. "These people have known very sad times and Trinkla von Linden is a rather lonely person, who plays Schubert as you would love to hear it played. I seem to have stepped

into a family tapestry with certain of its threads sadly torn, and I hope to help in some way, to bring a little joy if I can.'

She signed and sealed her letter, then ran downstairs to place it on the hall table for posting. The Baroness had told her to do this. Gerda and one of the other maids went home each evening—skiing down the slopes of the valley—and they took any letters or parcels that needed posting.

As Siran placed her letter with others on the pewter tray, she thought of Kurt making the excuse that he must post his article in the village himself ... he had done so in order to drive her there in the sleigh, so that he might impress on her not his desire for friendship but his warning that he would make her stay a difficult one. To him she was the outsider, the girl who didn't ski or attend the winter sports as Maria Landl did. She was a ballet dancer from London, who would, he believed, pine for the bright lights, the applause of an audience, the attentions of a *premier danseur*.

Yes, she missed them even as she wandered into the room where the long mirrors had once reflected the dancing couples invited here in the old days, when the chandeliers had sparkled overhead, and a small boy had heard the music and stolen in to watch and listen.

She missed the life she was used to with a deep ache, but she wouldn't pine, she wouldn't show it. Siran had a dash of spirit that was reflected in her red-brown hair and her quick, slender limbs. She would prove Kurt wrong in everything he thought about her.

She paused in front of a mirror and saw reflected the long empty length of the room, and the scars of the many dancing feet showing against the marble. She saw archways crowned by stucco-work in white against the blue. Windows reaching almost to the ceiling, with a long sweep of blue silk curtains, worn in places so the daylight showed through. There were a pair of antique tables and one of them

was deeply scarred about the legs, as if someone had sat there and swung a black leather boot, marking the carved wood, leaving a memento of those unhappy days. One of the wall panels was damaged, as if a brutal hand had flung a glass and left the stain of wine on the wall. The covering of a stool was ripped ... and it was strange, somehow, that the Baroness had left this room to harbour memories that must be painful to her.

Was it here that she had said a last goodbye to her husband? Was it at one of the long windows that she had stood alone, after a guide had smuggled her boys across the mountains to safety? Was it here she had been interrogated?

Siran could only imagine all these things for her the ballroom was a place of bruised loveliness, where she had been forced to dance with Kurt. He imbued everything with a sense of drama. He left her wondering each time he spoke a name, mentioned the past, insistent that she be under no illusions about the beauty of Seven Lilacs. It was a house in which people had suffered, and he seemed to imagine that Siran had lived in a ballet costume all her life and had not been touched by the realities of living.

She stared at herself in one of the long mirrors and it was true that she looked young and untouched ... a girl who found it easy to respond to music and who lost herself when she danced. But that didn't mean she was the dancing figure of Kurt's imagining. She was as real as anyone else at the castle ... more real, perhaps, than Maria Landl, who didn't need to work for her living, or to have any ambition beyond looking lovely in the clothes provided by her wealthy father. Siran wasn't envious but it did rankle that she should be treated by Kurt as the useless creature.

She knew how hard a girl had to work to succeed in ballet; at the beginning there were the long hours of training, then if you had the luck to be selected for the corps de ballet you earned far less than a

good secretary. The ambition had to be there, the inborn awareness that you were born to dance ... the best of dancers had something unique about them, an extra dimension of personality, a gift for creating beauty in movement.

As Siran stood there in the empty ballroom she became aware of the sound of music drifting across the hall from the music room. It was *La Captive* by Berlioz, and as if compelled she began to dance to the music, her slim feet as light as thistles on the black and white marble. She felt no sense of shyness. She was in her element when dancing, as a bird is when it takes to the air.

The shyness gripped when she caught suddenly a glimpse of another figure in one of the mirrors. She became as still as a chameleon when it sees an enemy, her eyes large and startled as they dwelt on the reflected tallness of the one observer who could make her feel foolish. He walked towards her with deliberation and she knew from his ruffled hair and the brilliance of his eyes that he had been out on the slopes with Maria.

'I was passing,' he smiled slowly, 'and it seemed a pity not to provide such a charming performance with an audience.'

'You—you think me foolish,' she gasped.

'Not at all,' he drawled. 'I too have been young, and a ballroom is the place for dancing. Please continue. I will watch and perhaps learn why men go mad for ballet dancers.'

At once she went to pass him, but he put out a hand and caught at her arm. It had made her happy to dance, now he came and spoiled it. 'Let go of me!' she said tensely, and her eyes flashed to meet his, full of those not so quiet fires that Breck had spoken about. 'I don't want to be tormented by you...'

'I was paying you a compliment.'

'I—I don't ask for flattery from any man.'

'All the same it's pleasant to get it, eh?'

'If sincere.'

'And you doubt my sincerity?'

'How can I help it, when you've shown me that you think me useless, when you've said frankly that I should return to Vienna? You made up your mind at the station that I had little to contribute to this household. I suppose you expected me to be carrying a pair of skis over one shoulder and a pair of skates in the other hand. Well, I'm not the sporting type. I'm a ballet dancer and I expect I've worked as hard at the *barre* as you have ever worked at winning a gold medal.'

'You think me a mere playboy,' he drawled.

She shrugged. 'You've said yourself that your brother is the one who works to maintain Seven Lilacs. You only please yourself. You won't be tied down by a sense of duty and responsibility. You have to be free to climb mountains.'

'Yes,' his smile was sardonic. 'I have to feel free, and because of it I gave up training to be a surgeon. I believed I wanted that. I felt an inclination to mend people, but after three years of study I felt closed in, desperate for air that did not smell of drugs and pain. I broke away from medicine. I turned to the mountains and found I was more at home among them than in the laboratory and the lecture room.'

'A-^surgeon?' She looked at him in frank amazement, and he laughed outright at the expression on her face.

'Don't be so incredulous,' he mocked. 'I could return to it and become qualified in a couple of years. As it is I'm handy to take on a climb.'

Several times I have saved a man from losing his fingers through frostbite, and my hands are adept at setting broken limbs.'

'You would sooner waste your life on the mountains than do good with your knowledge?' He seemed to her more reckless than ever, as if some devil drove him to those greedy monsters of ice, where one day he might lose his own fingers and not be able to be a surgeon. She looked at his strong, firm-jawed face —she remembered that as a child he had been locked up in this castle. It had happened then, the trauma that made him break free of every bond. It might now be too late for him to give himself to a career.

'Oh, what a waste!' she protested.

'He who becomes a surgeon must be totally dedicated. Miss Winters,' his smile was half mocking, 'are you actually sorry that I have this divided nature, wanting one thing and driven to seek something else? Are you giving me a little pity?'

'Yes,' she admitted, 'even though you don't deserve it. You have at your fingertips the chance to be of real use to people, yet you gamble with your life up there on those cruel peaks. You torment those who love you...'

'You mean my mother?' His eyes had narrowed and seemed to hold the flicker of a tiny blue flame.

'Of course ... and Breck.'

'What do you know of Breck?' He spoke curtly. 'I would warn you that he is very different from me.'

'I can see that for myself.' She gave a faintly scornful laugh. 'Warn me, indeed! What about? That he's no playboy but a man who works hard to keep Seven Lilacs in your family? The castle must be expensive to run in this day and age, when staff won't work for low

wages. There are many rooms, the lake and the woods, and you said yourself that he is gradually restoring the place to its old beauty.'

'Yes, out of pride. Look close at my brother, *fraulein*, the next time you are alone with him, and you will see how proud he is. In his library he has books relating to our history and the connections the von Lindens have with the old Austrian nobility. There are midnights when he pores over the old bound documents, which during the war were secreted with Trinkka's jewels in the Chapel of the Little Nun.'

'I think it's fascinating,' she said, a glow in her eyes. 'Aren't you interested in the history of your family?'

'Our distant connections with the Mayerling affair?' he drawled. 'And the fact that one of our ancestors was a Prussian general ... his portrait hangs in Breck's sanctum. The likeness is startling.'

Siran stared at Kurt, and forgotten for the moment was the fact that she stood so close to him that she could feel the pulsing strength in the fingers holding her wrist. All she was aware of was the implication in his words ... that in Breck ran the blood of arrogant men who had ruled the lives of other people, who had been involved in court scandals and cruel wars.

She let her mind and her senses absorb what he said ... and then she thought of Breck at the foot of the stairs, the light through the windows silvering his hair as he asked her, in a voice deep and demanding, to meet him beside the lake.

Her eyes met Kurt's, and at once they were as cool as ice in his craggy face, as distant and mocking as the peaks he preferred to people. He said these things to unnerve her! If she listened to him she would be a little fool. She must let her own instincts be her guide, and all at once she felt that blind instinct to run away from "him to the farthest corner of the castle.

There was in Breck—admittedly—a blend of iron and autocracy, but they weren't things to be afraid of. It was Kurt who was wild in his ways, restless and ruled by what was past.

'I see.' His lip took a sardonic twist. 'I am the one you disapprove of. I have no sense of duty, no down-to-earth ambitions, no ties strong enough to hold me from going my own way. I believe you think I have no affections.'

'You love your mother ... in your way. You respond to a pretty face.'

'Yours?' he mocked.

'No --' She flushed and felt that swift, primitive urge to fight him until she hurt him in some way. But how did you hurt the invulnerable? How did you make bleed a block of ice?

'You mean Maria?' His eyes smouldered blue again. 'She has been a friend of the family since a child. I taught her to ski and to skate. Breck and I have watched her grow from a leggy schoolgirl into the Bavarian beauty she now is. Are you jealous she is here? Afraid she will steal some of Breck's attention?'

'Oh—you!' Siran's hand twisted in his grip in an effort to reach his face. With no effort at all he controlled the impulse, and he laughed at her lack of strength when it came to fighting him.

'I bring out the temper in you, Siran. It suits you. You become a rival to Maria when your eyes flash and your cheeks burn. You need not worry about other women. Miss Winters. You have a wild sort of grace, like a young fern tree, or an evergreen at the turn of the year.'

'Stop it!' she gasped. 'It was enough before lunch ... what you did. I told you then that I didn't like to be touched by you. You make me shiver.'

'You think I am made of ice, Miss Winters?' He emphasized her name and his mouth mocked, taking on that smile that held no humour, only a little twist of irony. 'If I can only make you feel cold, then be sure that nothing ever happens to put you in my hands for a night. Remember your history books. The Prussians marched across Europe and they took whatever pleased them. It was pleasing a while ago to watch you dancing. Perhaps I could become mad for a ballet dancer.'

Braced for the pain, she wrenched free of him. 'You mock everything. I don't understand you, or like you very much. The things you say about Breck are the things you are yourself. You belong to your ice-goddess out there in the Himalayas!'

'Don't stop there,' he taunted. 'Go on and say what I see in your eyes ... I belong to the Glass Turret as well.'

'Y-you seem to think so yourself. Your mother has asked you not to climb there, yet you intend to ... what are you waiting for? The heavier snows and ice all the way. A chance to break your neck so you can prove you didn't break Helmut's? That will be easier, I suppose, than knuckling down to your studies again and becoming a person of usefulness and worth.'

'You think me worthless, eh?' He shrugged his shoulders. 'You may be right, but there is something in each of us which drives us to heaven or the devil:. We have within us hopes and longings which oppose each other, a pull in a certain direction which we follow blindly. It could be likened to love, or hate. Very often we fall in love against all our instincts, or we dislike someone for no basic good reason. We are human beings, Miss Winters. We are disciplined or stormy. Right or wrong. We have to work out our own destinies, despite all the talk about being controlled by the stars. We are, I believe, at the mercy of what is in our blood, and what happens to us when we are young. You were left an orphan, so you seek the strength

and protection of the father you hardly knew ... I venture to say that your Director of the ballet was a man much older than yourself.'

'Cassian was eternally young,' she retorted. 'He could come with all the drama and grace that couldn't be attained by younger men. He was a superb human being and I loved him, as a man and as a dancer. I—I'm not ashamed to say so—even to you.'

'Even to me?' Kurt raised an eyebrow, corn-light above his eyes and thick and tousled as his hair. 'You think I know nothing of love, and care even less? You really think I have ice in my veins and a frozen block of it for a heart? You believe I don't know how it can hurt to lose someone very much loved? I loved my father, Miss Winters. I was six, but old enough to sense the kind of man he was, and I have hated ever since the injustice in the world, the ambition and power that exists. I go to the mountains because they are natural in their beauty and their cruelty. I climb with men who are simple in their lives, who have the peace in their hearts of the Tibetan bells, or the shrines one finds on the hillsides of the Alps.'

Slowly he looked away from Siran and fixed his eyes upon the antique table scarred by a jackboot; there was a whiteness about his nostrils, showing clearly against the deep tan of his face. 'I make no apologies for the kind of man I may appear to be. I have never found my fellow-climbers to be anything but gallant, helpful, and enduring. Some of the medical students with whom I trained were merely ambitious. They wished only for self-promotion, the big car of the professional man, the gold plate on the door, the big fees of rich, bored women seeking a doctor to worship.'

He shrugged again the wide, strong shoulders that even yet carried the burden of sadness and bewilderment from his boyhood, He had seen more cruelty than kindness in those days and he couldn't forget ... not here, only in the mountains where the wind sang among the crags.

Siran looked at him and knew an impulse to say something sympathetic. He was too complex for her complete understanding, but all at once she knew that Kurt von Linden was drawn to the mountains to seek the person he really was, and when he found himself—her heart gave a curious little lurch as the truth struck home—when he came face to face with what he truly wanted, those monastery bells might call to him with more insistence than the voice of a woman ever could.

But before she could speak, to say at least that she had been wrong to think him heartless, he swung on his heel and strode the length of the ballroom, the mirrors reflecting his tallness one after the other. Then gone were his footfalls, still as snow was the room, and curiously empty.

He had so imposed his presence on the room that its worn beauty and its furnishings now gave her the feeling of being unreal. She glanced at herself in a mirror and her face looked ghostly ... and suddenly she ran from the ballroom, and that music, *La Captive*, was being played again. It followed her upstairs, an insistent melody with an evocative title.

Was she a captive at the castle ... made so by this unusual family with its charm and its tragedy?

She closed her door on the distant music and felt the quick beating of her heart. Not since knowing Cassian had she felt so disturbed, so aware of herself as a woman rather than a dancer. In her present mood of awareness she wondered if it would be wise of her to keep that rendezvous with Breck.

The lake at sunset was almost too lovely, and Kurt had stirred into life tiny fears and doubts. He had hinted that Breck liked his own way where women were concerned ... dared she meet him, to look again into his lake-grey eyes, to feel herself at the command of his smile?

In the Vienna Woods he had compelled her to give up a job that kept her in touch with the Opera House. There had been something about him even then which she had been unable to resist or deny. An attraction which had drawn her to his castle in the mountains, where sometimes in the autumn the lilacs bloomed again, a mad little rebellion against the dictates of nature, a purple cloak against the whiteness of the snow...

... a sign, said the people of the valley, that a wedding would soon take place at Seven Lilacs.

CHAPTER SIX

THE evening light had cast a spell over the lake, which reflected the dying of the sun. Birds called to each other across the water, and the reeds whispered ... a lonely sound.

The air was cold, filled with the scent of pine trees, and Siran wore her lambswool coat with the hood attached. The hood warmed her and also gave her the feeling of being half concealed as she approached the lake and saw the Baron standing there, waiting for her. He turned as he heard her footsteps in the snow and he held out a hand to her. The sunset was on his face and it was as if there were little flames in his eyes. She felt a heartleap at the sight of him, and then his hand was holding hers, pressing her slender fingers until she felt the bite of his crested ring.

'We touch hands again and smile, eh?'

But she couldn't smile. He made her feel too shy, he was so tall, so in command of himself, and her. Slowly he raised her hand to his lips and kissed her wrist. It was an imperial gesture, and yet at the same time so natural.

'I could not be sure if you would be here,' he said. 'I hoped, but girls have a habit of changing the mind and Mayholtzen is far from the gay distraction of Vienna.'

'I—I'm not a gay person, Herr Baron,' she protested.

'But you would not have come if I had not provided an occupation for you. You are not the type to enjoy being idle and ornamental, though in that hood you look charming. Charming but a trifle apprehensive, as if I might be a wolf.' He smiled and his teeth glimmered in the quickening dusk. 'Or are you shy of me? This is only the second time we have really talked together and you are not quite sure of the kind of man I am. But you like my mother, eh? You find her charming.'

'Oh yes.' His brief kiss had made her feel unbearably shy; he looked so attractive in his dark plush jacket with a scarf at his throat and the wind off the lake tugging at his hair.

'And what do you think of the castle? Do you find it romantic ... like a setting for a ballet? Which ballet, I wonder? *The Snow Maiden*?'

She smiled, for it was as if he knew her mind ... though he mustn't know her heart and how turbulently it beat when he put back the hood from her face and studied her in the reflected glow of the lake. The dusk light had grown mysterious, darkening the mountains and leaving for several still moments the castle in silhouette there beyond the Baron's head and shoulders.

'I thought in Vienna that you would suit this place we call Seven Lilacs. There is something symbolic and haunting about it, *ya*? My mountain kingdom.'

He said it with humour, and yet beneath his words rang a note of pride and possession. The things that belonged to him, the things he cared about, would always be kept safe by him, and treasured. So would it be when he took a wife; she would be protected by his sense of pride in what he loved ... and owned.

Siran wasn't shocked that unlike Kurt his possessions were important to him. He needed more than a roll of camping gear on his shoulders, and an axe to make ice- steps. How different they were, these two brothers with the same background, almost the same looks and build, and the same lovely mother! It was strange to Siran, who had no sister or brother, no family any more, that those akin could have personalities so unlike.

The wind blew cold off the lake and she gave a little shiver. The Baron suggested at once that they go to his study and talk there. 'I don't much like the cold myself.' His hands seemed to caress as he

replaced the warm hood about her face. 'The mountains rarely tempt me ... I find there are distractions enough here on the ground to keep me intrigued. When I go to the peaks I go by cable-car.'

'I'd love to do that,' she said eagerly. 'Could it be arranged?'

'Whenever you wish. There is a restaurant-inn at the summit and the scenery is quite spectacular, viewed from the comfort of the lounge. If Kurt joins the party he will probably ski down from there. Have you seen him in action yet?'

'No. I hear he's very accomplished at the sport.'

'There are few to equal him.' They crossed the lovely old courtyard with carved balconies looming over them, lit here and there by lanterns now it was dark. 'You seem not too friendly with my brother. Has he said anything to upset you ... I know he can be a devil when the mood takes him.'

'Oh—I just don't take any notice.' She tried to speak lightly and hoped she convinced him that there was nothing he need smooth out between herself and Kurt. It wouldn't break her heart if she and the storm-god couldn't be friends ... it Was enough of a thrill to be well thought of by Breck. He did like her. She could sense it, feel it in his touch as he guided her through an entrance into his own sanctum. There was a big desk, carved and important-looking, and leather chairs big enough to get lost in. There were timbered recesses filled-With books, and an antique carpet of a strange design glowing against the polished wood of the floor. There were wall-lamps angled to reveal good paintings, and the curtains were rather sumptuous, drawn against the night and the mountains.

'It's a nice room.' She looked about her. 'I like the carpet in particular. Is it oriental?'

'It's a Transylvanian carpet.' He leaned against the desk and took a finger-slim cigar from the engraved silver box that matched the ink-set. 'I am a man who likes unusual things ... please drop your coat and sit down. There in that chair with the wings.' He studied her, frankly, as he lit the cigar and a small plume of smoke issued with a subtle fragrance from his well-defined nostrils. 'I brought you a small gift from Bavaria ... in the hope that you would be here when I returned. Would you like to see it?'

He seemed to be faintly teasing her as he flicked his eyes over her white wool dress with a trim of ruby. She sat neatly in the large chair and felt like a small girl undergoing the inspection of someone very adult. He strolled to a corner table and lifted from it a box carved into the form of a chalet. He touched a tiny spring at the side and at once the music of *The Snow Maiden* tinkled out of the box. He brought it to Siran and placed it on the arm of her chair. 'I hope you like it, *madchen*. Anything else would perhaps have been too personal, and somehow the music reminded me of you.'

'How delightful!' She took the box into her hands and saw how intricate was the carving, with minute figures upon the veranda and tiny tubs of flowers; the eaves were speckled as if with snow, and a glow as of a fire could be seen through a window made of real glass. 'I love it, Herr Baron. How kind of you to think of me.'

She glanced up, and the lingering look he gave her made her cheeks grow warm.

'I have not ceased thinking about you since that evening in the Vienna Woods,' he said. 'It's my pleasure to give you the musical box. I am pleased you like it.'

'It's so beautifully detailed.' Her glance wavered from his so direct one. 'It looks expensive.'

'With money one can buy many things... happiness is not always among them, and it makes me happy to see you at Seven Lilacs.'

'You're kind to say so...'
She let her fingertips wander over the musical chalet and the music made her remember a night at Covent Garden when with Cassian she had watched the ballet performed by a famous ballerina. She had a rare and spirited magic, so that when she danced in her partner's arms she inspired in the audience a feeling of wanting to protect her against the bruises of life, the sensuality of the love that might melt her. Each touch of the male dancer had seemed a strange outrage.

When Siran met the Baron's grey eyes she saw in them a smile and a question. He knew her to be innocent, and his own masculinity might outrage her. Would she weep, shudder, attempt to flee from him if he should reveal his feelings? She just looked at him, and then his face drew near and she felt his lips for the first time, hard yet gentle, smoky from his cigar and very male.

'I wanted to kiss you that first evening in my car, but the time was too soon, the place too evocative. You might have taken me for the sort of man who fought duels long ago in the woods, and kept a hunting lodge for his weekend *amours*. Men in my position are still looked upon as being rather wicked where women are concerned. Siran,' he spoke her name in a deep voice, 'do you find me very wicked?'

A smile trembled on the lips he had kissed but a moment ago. 'I like your castle, Herr Baron. I like your kindness, and your gift. I am glad I came to Mayholtzen.'

'Well said!' His smile cleft a line in his tanned cheek. 'We shall drink to that, I think. I have a monastery wine which Kurt brought back from one of his trips to the Himalayas. I believe I must have been keeping it for a special occasion such as this one.'

He approached a cabinet of sombre dark wood, and when he opened it there was a gleam of fine glass, twisted stems, and bottles long and squat. The bottle he took from the interior had a long neck and a strange label, and when his thumb dislodged the cork there was a hiss as if he released a hidden spirit. He glanced up and shot her a smile, then deep red ran the wine in the bowls of matching glasses.

'What shall be our pledge?' He handed Siran a glass, and the monastery wine glimmered, and it was strange that Kurt should have provided the wine for this moment. 'No, perhaps no promises. All I shall say is that I am charmed by you ... a young companion and an old wine.'

The wine held a subtle flavour and strength, and it seemed to go to her head ... or was it Breck who did that? He had such a worldly, polished charm, so that she couldn't help but feel flattered by his attentions. It seemed a long time since a man had shown her that she stirred his imagination and his senses. It was nice, it melted her heart, to be cosseted by a warm fire in a deep chair, a man like Breck giving her this hour of comfort and kindness.

'Yes,' he leaned an elbow upon the carved mantel and gazed down at her, 'we must arrange an outing for you by cable-car. You must see everything that May-holtzen has to offer ... not only because we are grateful to you for saving Lorenz, but because you are the sort of girl to appreciate and enjoy the things that are new to you. You aren't spoiled by having too much. You see everything with fresh and wondering eyes. Your eyes, by the way, are the colour of a tawny wine. They could, I think, intoxicate a man.'

She glanced away from him in confusion, and it was then that she saw the portrait of his Prussian ancestor. It filled an entire alcove, but she had been so held by Breck that it came as a little shock to meet the eyes of the canvas and find them equally penetrating beneath heavy lids, to see features that so closely resembled those of the warm,

living man. The man in the portrait wore full dress uniform and the top of his helmet was tipped by steel. The colour of the steel matched the glint of his eyes ... Breck's eyes without the smile in them, but reminding her all the same of what Kurt had said.

He had warned her that Breck was dominated by family pride. His roots went deep in the soil of Seven Lilacs, and the springs of the past were in his blood.

She glanced from the portrait to the living man, and there was an expectant look about him, as if he awaited her comments about his likeness to the General.

'If you were dressed like that,' she said, 'I think I should be a little nervous of you.'

'Aren't you nervous of me at all, in modern dress?' Behind a drift of cigar smoke she caught the glint of amusement in his eyes, and suddenly she was unsure of him. Was he playing with her, intrigued by her response to his charm, and by the shyness which a year in the corps de ballet had not tarnished? She had been too wrapped up in the magic of the dance; too well guarded by Cassian to have fallen from grace ... though there had been girls she knew who had succumbed to the bribe of champagne and flattery.

'I suppose you think me a little naive,' she said. 'I imagine it shows that I have never been a guest of distinguished people before. My own people were quite humble, though in their way they had pride. My home was a cottage in sound and sight of the sea, and then later on I lived in lodgings in London, a shabby house divided into flats and hardly genteel. I'm bound to be a little overawed by your castle, Herr Baron. And by your title and your attention ... but I don't intend to be made a little fool of.'

'My dear child,' he quirked a blond eyebrow, 'I would not dream of taking you for a little fool. Did you think I invited you to Seven Lilacs in order to seduce you? Surely it would have been easier to do that in Vienna, where there are softly lit restaurants and theatres.'

'It wouldn't be easy anywhere for a girl to be seduced against her will, Baron.'

'Perhaps not.' His grey eyes held hers and she was made aware of the power he could exert, the command he had over those who liked him. 'In days gone by, my little ballerina, I should have had it in my power to make of you what I pleased ... a famous dancer, or my close companion. Both, perhaps. You once spoke of a man you much admired. I begin to wonder if you mistook veneration for love. Love is not an easily controlled emotion. It's more a passionate flame than a compassionate warmth. It can burn away the protective veils, as the foliage is burned away to uncover the sugar-cane, the wild sweetness at the heart of life. You are very young yet, Siran. Magic has touched you through the ballet, but not the full magic of love. The tawny wine of your eyes holds the promise of intoxication, not the fulfilment of it.'

He paused as the bells far up in the tower began their pealing, a sound that must carry far across the snowbound countryside, beckoning the person who might go astray, promising shelter at the castle.

'We must join the others for dinner.' Breck extended a hand and after a momentary pause she took it and was drawn to her feet, to find herself close to the dark plush of his jacket, the firm pride of his features, the silvery sweep of his hair. She had felt his attraction in Vienna ... here at the casde she felt it with increased force. She felt a compulsion to touch his face, to smooth away that deep line beside his mouth. Then he moved his head slightly and the line had been only a shadow after all.

'What is it?' he asked. 'Just then you looked at me as if I had become a stranger. I thought after this hour alone that we had become—friends.'

That deliberate pause between his words made her pulses quicken, and then in the small tense silence between them the study door opened and a voice sang out: 'Breck, we are waiting for you—oh, you are delayed by Miss Winters!'

Siran pulled her hand free of his and turned to see Maria Landl in the doorway. Maria slowly raised an eyebrow, then catching hold of her full skirt she whirled about and made across the hall to the dining-room. 'Breck is about to join us,' she said gaily. 'Miss Winters had something she wished to discuss with him.'

'Come, Miss Winters,' the Baron was laughing softly, close to her ear. 'We will start a scandal if we are caught alone too often.'

Kurt didn't join them for dinner; he had gone to dine with a friend, Eric Gerhardt, a guide and sportsman who lived at the other side of the valley.

'Trinka, you worry yourself to no avail.' Breck accepted a cup of *mokka*, the dark, after-dinner coffee with deep cream added to make it really delicious.

'But right now Kurt is making plans for that climb of his.' She looked anxious. 'How I wish he would return to his studies, or do anything but what he does with his life. Breck, can't you persuade him to go into business with you and Herr Landl?'

Brfetc set his jaw. 'He would be more of a hindrance than a help, and you know I'm right'. Kurt was not cut out for business ... it would be like caging a lion. Trinka, let him be. You have me, you have Lorenz, and you know that I care .about Seven Lilacs and the future. Accept

that Kurt has the *wanderlust*. There is nothing to be done about it... not now.'

'I sometimes think of him as a baby, like Lorenz. He was so fair, and not at all the independent person he became as he grew older. If we had a party—do you remember, Breck—he would come creeping downstairs to see me.'

Breck gave a laugh. 'I think I was sometimes jealous of him because he was younger than I and could still be treated like a baby. Now—now he's as unapproachable as his mountains.'

'He has changed since the last time I saw him.' Maria was curled up on a sofa, with an orchid-gold lamp binning beside her on a low table, filtering its soft light on to the thick silk of her dress and her dark hair. Her faintly slanting eyes dwelt on Breck, who lounged on the piano stool. Trinkka sat near the stove as if she felt a little cold. Siran sat in the shadows of the windowseat, watching, listening, taking sips at her, cream-topped coffee. These people were so striking, and it gave her pleasure to be the onlooker. She could hug to herself the secret of being kissed by Breck. When he looked at her with a cool smile, she had no need to wonder why. He wanted it that way. For them to be polite in the company of others rendered it all the more exciting when they were alone.

Maria sang for them, and her voice was curiously rich in so petite a person:

*'Still is the Nacht, Mein Schatz.
Still is the night, my love.'*

'Bravo!' The Baron looked pleased and admiring as he took the singer's hand and kissed it. Siran felt a swift stab of jealousy and told herself not to be foolish. Breck had known the lovely Maria for years; he was bound to be fond of her.

Suddenly he swung to face Siran. 'Maria has given us a song, now you will dance for us.'

'Oh no --' At once she was embarrassed. 'I'm not wearing the proper shoes --'

'That is easily remedied. Run upstairs and fetch them.'

'No, I --'

He strode across the room to her, took hold of her hands and pulled her to her feet. 'I won't be denied, *liebbling*. Not tonight when like a pasha I have three pretty women at my sole command. Run, run upstairs this instant.' He hurried her to the door and his mood was so gay that it was hard to resist him.

'Please—I'm shy,' she whispered.

'We are just another audience,' he said indulgently. 'You have danced often in front of a much larger one.'

'It's different on a stage in a group of other dancers.'

'Breck, don't insist if Miss Winters feels she cannot perform for us.' Maria spoke with tart sweetness. 'We will get out the Tarot cards and I shall tell everyone's fortune. It will be much more fun.'

'Yes,' said Trinka, and for a brief moment her eyes met Siran's in a look of understanding. 'Let Maria amuse us with the fortune cards. Do you remember the last time we had them out? Aunt Bertha was here from Vienna and oh, the things that wickedly amusing old lady predicted for us all!'

He smiled and gave in, but he insisted that Siran sit within the family circle. 'You are not getting out of this,' he said. 'Your fortune is going to be told as well.'

Maria looked deliberately at the girl who was almost her own age; who could also be expected to want the romantic love of an attractive man. 'There are secrets in every heart,' she said. 'Do you wish me to reveal your secrets, Miss Winters?'

'Are you that good with the Tarot cards, Miss Landl?'

Maria laughed softly. 'I think I shall be very good at reading the cards for you. When a girl leaves her own country to come abroad she is either running away from something, or searching for someone. You came not as a tourist, eh? I am told you were working in Vienna.'

'Yes, as a waitress.'

'How disagreeable for you, to have to wait on other people. I should not like that at all.'

'Well, you will never have to do it, will you, Miss Landl? In some respects the work was quite interesting. Some of the customers were very amusing.'

'Were any of them handsome? I fear I'm terribly spoiled, Miss Winters, and I do enjoy having handsome men around me. When Breck invited me to Seven Lilacs I couldn't resist coming. Was it the appeal of two good-looking bachelors that brought you to the castle?'

'Stop your teasing, Maria.' The Baroness had taken a rosewood box from a side cabinet and now she placed it on the sofa table beside the Bavarian girl. The box caught the lamplight and gleamed the colour of dark red roses, and when it was opened a velvet lining was disclosed and yet another box, card-size, of silver to match the silver key.

'Have you ever seen a pack of Tarot cards, Siran?' The Baroness sat down beside her on the twin sofa, while Breck poured wine into four

stemmed glasses and handed them around. He then sat down himself in a large winged chair, a relaxed air about him.

'No, but I've heard they're very interesting.' Siran cupped her wine glass like an acolyte at a mysterious ceremony. 'Weren't they used by the ancient Hebrews to predict fame, fortune, or calamity?'

'Yes,' murmured the Baron, 'so beware. You may be in for some intriguing revelations.'

Siran glanced at him and smiled. She was struck by the nobility of his head at rest against the dark blue wings of his chair. He looked so at home in his castle, so much the master, yet those firm lips had touched her own. As she looked at him they touched the rim of his wine glass, and there was something deliberate in the way he did it, as if he imparted to her his secret wish to feel again the shyness of her kiss.

A flush came into her cheeks and she looked away from him and watched the ceremony of the Tarot cards. Trinkka shuffled them first and handed them to Maria. With a little low laugh, almost a purr, the Bavarian girl began to lay them out one by one on the table. They were quite beautiful, with pictures upon them that had the look of being painted by the blade- fine brush of an oriental artist.

'Ah, here we have the Sun, *meine liebe*. Burning bright above a pair of children. It stands in conjunction with Justice—look, the sword and scales. And—how strange, the Pendulum! The man suspended over a chasm...'

The Baroness caught her breath sharply. 'I hate that card!'

'It means only duty,' said Breck. 'The cards look very dramatic, but each one holds a hidden meaning rather than an obvious conclusion. Each one of us is tied by the feet to his duty as opposed to his desires.'

The two can't always meet, and so we feel tormented and the card expresses this.'

'The Sun means joy,' smiled Maria. 'There is joy in store for one of your children.'

'One... ?' The Baroness gave a little shudder—Siran felt it, for she was sitting quite close to Trinka. 'That is enough hidden destiny for me, Maria. Play now with Siran/

'Very well.' Maria gathered the cards together and handed them to Siran. 'Please shuffle them and we will see what is in store for you, Miss Winters.'

Siran did as she was bid. 'I do wish you'd call me by my first name,' she said. 'You make me feel like one of those schoolmarms in a Victorian novel.'

Maria stroked a dark eyebrow and stared at Siran, as if she thought the English girl looked a schoolmarm. '*Danke schon.*' She took the shuffled cards and began to spread them oift. 'You have a most unusual name. I thought all English girls were called Grace, Alice, or Jane.'

'Only in Victorian novels,' Siran said, tartly sweet herself.

The Baron gave a little chuckle. 'You asked for that, *lieblich*,' he said to Maria. 'There is a hint of titian in Siran's hair, a sign of temper.'

'You like women to have a temper, Breck?' Maria looked at him with a flutter of her long lashes, a slight pout to her red mouth, the sheen of little pearls bobbing in her ears.

'Angels are for the wayside shrine,' he said teasingly. 'I have known you too long to be fooled .by that limpid look. I was at the lodge, remember, when your own grapevine was raided by thieves in the

night and every grape was plucked. Will I ever forget, *liebbling*, the storm you created? Your father bought you a riding horse and a string of pearls to pacify you.'

'I meant to make my own wine,' she pouted. 'It would have been delicious, the grapes were so big and so dark. I was going to tread them myself.'

'Poor *liebbling*,' he laughed. 'To be denied for once.'

'I hate you, Breck, when you laugh at me.' She tossed her head and gave her attention to the cards. But a tiny dent was showing in her cheek. A hint that his teasing was to be preferred to his indifference. Siran wondered in that moment if Maria was in love with Breck von Linden.

'These are interesting cards,' she murmured. '*L'Etoile*, the card of hope. Are you hoping for something nice to happen to you, Siran?'

'Certainly. It's human nature.'

'Ah, and Isis the Priestess! You are involved in amystery, my dear. This card is very significant and means that something strange is likely to happen to you.' A slightly malicious twinkle danced in Maria's dark eyes. 'I hope I am not making you nervous?'

'Not in the least.' Siran spoke gaily, but all the same she wondered why Seven Lilacs seemed a place of destiny, as if each step away from Cornwall had been leading her to the castle. Being of Celtic parentage she couldn't dismiss lightly the tiny signs and portents. The feeling she had of a secret waiting to be revealed. A feeling almost like that of being poised on her toes for a surprising cue.

'Continue with the card reading,' Breck ordered. 'It's amusing if nothing else.'

'Don't you believe in the cards, Herr Baron?' Siran turned to look at him and saw a smile quirk on his lips. He looked like Kurt then, sardonic and a trifle mocking.

'I would hate to believe that I am not my own master,' he replied. 'People aren't puppets on strings. They make their own decisions, their own disasters, their own destiny.'

'You seem very sure of that, Baron.'

'Yes, *fraulein*. It's for a man to be sure and a woman to be charming.'

His answer confused her, for it held the kind of arrogance she would have expected from his brother. Were they, after all, more alike in character than she had thought them?

The rest of the evening was passed amusingly, and when Trinkä played for them Siran pushed to the back of her mind the card of Isis with its prediction of a strange occurrence. She had already enough to occupy her mind, and when at last they all said, '*Gute Nacht*,' to each other the midnight bells were ringing.

'*Stille Nacht*,' Trinkä murmured, as she and Siran paused at a bend of the stairs to gaze from a window at the snow that was falling again. It lay from wall to wall of the courtyard, and gave the trees a tranced look.

'The lilacs won't bloom if the snow keeps falling, and it would have been so nice to have a wedding at the castle. It seems such ages since we had a real celebration here, with lots of food and wine, musicians and people dancing, the lights blazing out from the long windows.'

'You could have a party,' Siran smiled. 'Why not, if it would give you pleasure?'

'Kristy has been gone so short a time, and there must be a real reason for a party.'

'Won't it be Breck's birthday in a matter of weeks?' A little colour stole into Siran's cheeks as she spoke his name. 'You can't go on being sad because of what happened to Kristy ... perhaps it was meant to be. Perhaps she could never have been happy without her young man.'

'She was so impetuous, poor girl. Helmut was a student of art, you know, and he used to come to Mayholtzen for his vacations. Neither Breck nor Kurt approved of him very much. He was so unlike both of them, dreamy and full of flights of fancy, and there were arguments over Kristy's friendship with him here at the castle. Kurt wished her to like his friend Eric, but no one can force a girl to love against her will, and it was her student whom she loved. I wonder,' Trinka fingered her rings, 'I begin to wonder if Breck has brought Maria home for a more serious purpose than the winter sports to be enjoyed here. She doesn't get along too well with her stepmother—Herr Landl was made a widower when Maria was twelve years old, and he remarried about two years ago. Maria was accustomed to being the little mistress of the lodge, and as you can see she has been rather indulged. An exquisite young thing, of course, but fond of her own way. Breck, however, would soon remedy that if --'

The Baroness paused significantly, and Siran felt as if a little pit opened beneath her feet. Could it be true, that he had marital plans with regard to Maria ... and plans quite the opposite when it came to herself?

'We shall cause a scandal if we are caught alone too often,' he had said. But he had kissed Maria's hand openly. There had been nothing clandestine about his admiration for the other girl.

'Would it please you, Baroness, to have Maria for a daughter-in-law?' Siran asked. 'She is very lovely, and very entertaining --'

'And accustomed to our traditions,' Trinka said thoughtfully. 'I do believe that at last Breck has made a decision with regard to the future. He knows Maria very well, and they appear to have tastes in common. I must watch those two. I should like to be certain that Breck is much in love with the girl he chooses to marry. Marriage can be a joy, or merely a partnership, according to the amount of love each partner contributes. I was very much in love with my husband, and Breck has some of his ways. That air of sternness is deceptive.'

Siran knew it was, but she had to pretend to be disinterested. She was merely the young English guest who would work in the valley a while and then return to Vienna. For her this was an interlude ... the solo dance in the middle of the ballet.

Trinka looked at her and seemed to notice how her eyes dominated her face. 'You must be tired, my dear.' Trinka leaned forward and kissed her cheek, and then she gave it a light stroke. 'English girls have such nice skin So clear and smooth. Tell me, Siran, what do you intend to do with your life? Ah, I know you are a dancer, but you can't give all your devotion to it. When the curtain falls everyone goes home to someone ... who will you go home to?'

'Probably a cat or two.' Siran gave a laugh. 'A full-time dancing career can be very demanding, and unless a dancer marries a man who is connected with ballet, who understands the various demands and difficulties, it is best if she stays single.'

'But, *lieblich*,' Trinka looked shocked by Siran's reply, 'an attractive girl can't deny herself the nicest thing in life, the loving kindness, and the passion, of a nice man.'

'Perhaps later on I shall meet someone in ballet, but right now I can see no further than my ambitions.'

'You don't look the ambitious sort to me.' The Baroness looked at Siran from her head to her heels. 'You are five-foot-nothing of youth, dreams, and a slender shape. You need someone to take care of you.'

'I'm really very independent, so you mustn't worry about me, Baroness. I know what I want --'

'I wonder, my child.' They continued on their way upstairs and parted at the door of Siran's bedroom. 'Sleep tight and happy dreams, *liebling*.'

'Goodnight, Baroness, and thank you for all your kindness.'

The Baroness went on her way along the corridor, to her suite which included the nursery. She opened the door and disappeared inside, to ensure that all was well with her grandson.

Siran closed the door of her own room and lit the lamp beside her bed, which diffused a muted glow over the room, with its big goose feather bed, glass animals and castles, and beaver-skin rug. Siran walked to the shelf that held the little ornaments and she picked up one of the castles and fingered the glass turrets. It seemed strange to think of Kurt collecting these as a child. As a man he seemed so strong and defiant and above the trivialities of glass castles, and the need to make a home of his own for a woman of his own.

A shadow stirred on the white wall and with a tiny gasp of alarm Siran turned to see the white dog Bruno slithering out from beneath her bed. He gave a wideyawn, cocked an eye at her, and then ambled to the door. She followed him and opened the door. He was used to this room and often she came in to find him looking out of the window, or sprawled out in front of the stove that was always kept burning with small logs.

Tail aloft, he went on his way along the corridor, and Siran gave a sudden little laugh. Bruno was so like his master, so unperturbed

when he startled a girl, and so independent. It didn't do to stroke him very often; he didn't bite, but he did growl if she touched him.

She placed the little glass castle on the table beside her bed, where it caught the light of the lamp and glistened with that fairy-tale magic so dear to the hearts of the young and sensitive. Siran tried to imagine Kurt as a child as here in his room she prepared for bed. The invasion of Seven Lilacs by men in jackboots had left an indelible impression on his mind, for he and Breck had been spirited away from their mother for the remainder of the war, and when they had returned the castle had been scarred and marked by those men, stripped of its treasures, and their mother had greeted them with silver in her hair and suffering in her eyes. Breck had been older, more able to understand the reasons for their banishment, but Kurt had never forgotten, or forgiven. The experience had marked him as surely as a visible wound and left scar tissue which had hardened over as he grew to be a man. He was now a man who was afraid to give of his heart because as a boy he had seen jackboots march over his mother's hearth.

Siran discovered herself by the dressing-chest, staring into her own eyes reflected in the mirror. They were wide with their discovery, for no one since that time, not even Trinkka, had found a way to show him that love and pain were twin beings. To shut yourself off from love was to become one of those who hurt other people. He had hurt Helmut and Kristy, and he saw only one way of reparation.

She shivered and went to the stove, where she knelt down and warmed her hands, her blue robe in a silky pool about her slimness. She looked almost a child, the tiny flickers of flame gilding the soft pewter of her hair. She knew that the ghost of a boy haunted this room, that in the silence he had spoken to her, knowing her to be young herself and rather lost.

'I know what I want,' she said again. 'I want to dance.'

In an instant she remembered the musical box which Breck had given her; she had left it in his study, and she had a sudden longing to hear again the music of *The Show Maiden*. Oh impulse she left her room and ran swiftly downstairs in her robe, a ghost in blue on each different landing until she reached the hall and made quietly for the door of Breck's study. She turned the handle and opened the door, and at once she saw the lamp burning on his desk, and the tall figure over by the cabinet in which the Baron kept a collection of antiques.

'Breck!' She stood there, started and confused, and then he swung round and she was looking at his brother ... and in his hands he held one of the black and silver military pistols which were part of the Baron's collection.

At once the obvious conclusion leapt to her mind ... he was so unhappy that he was about to end things with a bullet.

'Kurt—you can't do it I' She dashed across to him and grabbed at the pistol. 'Think of Trinkka—it would break her heart!'

For a moment a tussle ensued, and then quite shockingly came the sound of his laughter above her head; she looked up swiftly and met his wickedly amused eyes.

'You came at me like Hildebrund trying to snatch the sword. My dear girl, I am not about to end it all with one of the General's pistols. It would be much easier, on me and the carpet, to leap off a mountain if I felt like it.'

'But --'

'Eric and I were arguing about these things—he maintained that duelling pistols have sights the same as officer's pistols, but as I pointed out to him, duellists hardly had time to take steady aim at each other. They were out to wing, not to kill.'

'Oh dear!' Siran had never felt so foolish ... but she had been thinking about him as a boy, and seeing him with the pistol had triggered off the wild thought that he was about to take his life. 'I must have seemed like a crazy woman, hurling myself at you like that. I do apologize.'

'Not at all. The pistol wasn't loaded anyway. It's past midnight, Siran. Were you sleepwalking?'

'No, I—I came down for something I'd forgotten.'

'And you heard me in here.'

She hesitated in her reply, reluctant to admit that she had come down to the study for the musical box his brother had given her. She could see it on the mantelpiece, where Breck had placed it when Maria had appeared to find them alone together. Oh, it wouldn't do at all, not if Maria was meant for Breck, for anyone at Seven Lilacs to get the idea that Siran meant anything to him.

Kurt was the last person who must know!

'It is very late ... the little thing I wanted can wait till the morning.' She went to move away from him and swiftly he stood in her way. He looked down at her intently, and made her at once aware that she was wearing only her robe over her nightdress.

'Please—let me go.'

'I'm not touching you ... you might scream and wake the castle,' he said sardonically. 'What was so important that it brought you down here at this late hour? You see, you give a little jump. You are nervous, yet a short while ago you thought only of wresting this pistol from me.'

'I do assure you it can wait until the morning.'

'Is it something you left in this room?'

'No --'

'You are not good at telling untruths. Your lashes flutter madly and your cheeks are red. Shall we play a game of hunt the treasure?'

'Don't be absurd—at this time of night? Someone will hear and --'

'And maybe find us alone like this, beneath the portrait of our fierce ancestor. What do you think of him, Miss Winters? He's very handsome, eh? Can't you see the likeness to my brother?'

'I'm going to bed.' She tried to step past him, but with an adroit movement he trapped her in the alcove, the General gazing down sternly upon the scene while his great-grandson smiled and enjoyed Siran's alarm.

'Why can't you leave me alone?' she asked. 'You don't torment Maria in this way.'

'Maria would merely laugh, but you become angry and alarmed, as if I threatened your innocence. What vanity, Miss Winters! Do you think I find you as attractive as my brother does?'

'I really do hate you,' she gasped. 'Never in my life have I met anyone so infuriating. You do it on purpose ... as if you don't want people to like you. If they liked you they might dent your suit of armour. You're armoured to the heart, Herr von Linden. It's only your pride that can be hurt.'

'Do you want me to like you?' he drawled, close to her, tall and rugged and broad-shouldered, the tie pulled open at his throat so that his dress shirt was a shock of white against his brown skin. He had the vital, untamed looks of a man some women would want to be liked by,

but Siran was crushing herself against the panelled wall, widening as much as possible the gap between her and Kurt.

'I—I prefer things the way they are, thank you.'

'I think I do as well.' He was gazing down at her, studying the bright disorder of her hair, the blue of her robe, the pale creaminess of her throat, the tawny temper of her eyes. 'I can see why my brother invited you here. There is more to you than the girl heroine who leaps to save a baby, and a man she doesn't even like. If this pistol had been loaded it might have gone off and hurt you. I should hate to be responsible for marking a thing so pretty.'

'Don't ... look at me like that. Do you think because I've been on the stage that I like to be flirted with? I didn't come to Seven Lilacs for that.'

'Why did you come, Miss Winters?'

'To see your mother ... and to work. Why must you assume that I'm running after your brother? And if I were, what business would it be of yours?'

'You could get hurt... I warned you. People are not -always what they seem, and you are not as sophisticated as I thought you would be when I heard you were coming to stay with us. If you had emerged from the station looking poised and sure of yourself I should not have bothered to warn you of anything.'

'Why should I need a warning?' She looked at him with wide and puzzled eyes. 'I'm not a child to take people at face value. I know they aren't books to be selected from a shelf and read in a few hours. What are you getting at?'

'What did you come down here looking for? This is Breck's study, so I presume you came looking for something he gave you.'

'How dare you ask me that! It's none of your business !'

'I'm curious, when a girl leaves her room after midnight and comes stealing downstairs for some trinket she has forgotten. It has to mean something to her. It has to be a token of affection.'

'And what are you, *mein herr*?' Her eyes were blazing, topaz, jewelled, in her slender face. 'Your brother's keeper?'

'No, not my brother's.' His voice went rough. 'No, you little fool I don't want to see you in the predicament Kristy found herself in. You're impulsive like she was, carried away by a bit of magic and poetry. You're vulnerable, and a long way from home.' He tossed the pistol aside, took hold of her, and gave her a shake. Then his hands suddenly crushed her shoulders and she was swept against the hardness of him, held so strongly that she couldn't beat at him, or break away from him. She saw the blue and angry sparkle of his eyes, and then when she thought he would kiss her, he lifted her as if she were a child, marched from the room with her, carried her all the way up the stairs, and dropped her to her feet in front of her door.

'Now go to bed,' he said sternly. 'You aren't a child to run around the castle in your night-clothes. You behave like one, *ja*. But you don't look like one.'

At the sweep of his eyes, gone a dark blue in the shadows of the corridor, Siran grabbed at the handle of her door and pushed it open. 'I knew it when we met.' The words came from her with a rush. 'I knew we could never be friends.'

'I knew it also, *liebchen*.' He gazed down deliberately into her eyes. 'We could never be friends. Goodnight, and no more wandering.'

He swung on his heel and marched off, treading silently like a jungle creature, his tawny head set arrogantly on that strong neck branching

into wide shoulders. Siran retreated into her room and closed the door tightly.

She was sure she had shut him out... until she saw the glint of lie little glass castle. It had been his and in those far off days he had believed in the magic of it and spun a tale, perhaps, of a princess locked in one of its turrets. She would have liked him as a boy, but try as she might she couldn't feel anything but antagonism for the man.

She climbed into bed and reached out to switch off the lamp, and in doing so she knocked over the glass castle. Her heart seemed to stop, then beat again. If it had fallen to the floor it would have broken ... tomorrow she would replace it on the shelf for safety.

Most things high on a shelf were safe, if a little neglected, and Kurt had more than intimated that she had better stay on her's, out of harm's way.

Out of his brother's way, he had meant!

CHAPTER SEVEN

SIRAN started her dancing lessons at the school. The girls were equipped with dark blue tunics and crepe- soled shoes for their gymnastics class, so these had to suffice for the present, until they became more proficient as ballet students. Siran had no illusions about producing a group of Markovas, but it was amusing and interesting taking this class of older pupils and putting them through a routine so well remembered.

Herr Brandt had arranged for several *barres* to be installed in the gymnasium and Siran found to her delight that the girls were supple and free in their movements owing to the amount of skiing they did, not to mention skating when the ice became thick enough, and riding toboggans down the snowy slopes.

They were a nice lot of girls, pleasant and sociable in the way of most Austrians, intent on hearing all about England and the ballet. They enjoyed watching Siran, clad in her sleeveless leotard, going through a series of steps and movements new to them as yet. They had to learn *ballon*, and she showed them how light and bouncy they must be on their feet. Then there was *batterie*, leaping steps in which the feet came together in little beats. There was the *fouette*, a whipping movement of the leg, and the full turn on one foot called the *pirouette*.

They watched fascinated, and unbeknown to Siran as she danced and explained the headmaster was watching as well from one of the alcoves, a little smile of enchantment quirking his moustache. This young woman might not teach the girls of this valley school to balance so gracefully on one leg, but she was an acquisition. Someone fresh and talented for his pupils to emulate. He nodded to himself and went on his way, humming a Viennese tune low in his throat, to take the older boys in maths.

The days passed, and the gymnasium girls acquired one morning a record-player and a pile of records, dumped on the doorstep by someone who came by in a yellow sports car. One of the girls saw him driving rapidly away, too modest to stay and be thanked.

'Well, who is this Santa Claus who owns a yellow sports car?' Siran wanted to know.

A couple of the girls spoke English and they interpreted for Siran, often producing gales of laughter as their English and her bit of German got mixed up.

'It's Herr Gerhardt,' the girl said. 'He comes to Mayholtzen for the climbing, and everyone knows that he was very much in love with the stepdaughter of the Baroness. She would never look at him, but he would have married her despite all the talk after the accident on the Glass Turret.'

Siran changed the subject, for she didn't wish to encourage gossip about the inmates of the castle ... fascinating though it might be. They started the record-player and she got the girls miming to the music of *Swan Lake*. She would thank Herr Gerhardt somehow for a present so useful and so unexpected. She had heard he was a man of independent means, but not everyone was so generous.

Her meeting with Eric Gerhardt came about as unexpectedly as his gift to the school. A cable-car trip had been arranged for the coming weekend, and rooms for an-overnight stay had been booked at the Hotel Blue Rose at the summit of the mountain ride.

It was the Baroness who told her that Kurt's friend would be joining them. 'He's a lonely man,' she said. 'It will be good for him to be in our company for the weekend.'

'Did Kurt persuade him?' Siran added cream to her coffee, for she and Trinkka were enjoying a feminine interlude before the two brothers

arrived home from their various activities. Maria always spent about two hours getting ready for the evening. Her long hair could be arranged in all sorts of styles, and she possessed a large and varied wardrobe. Siran, who owned but a few dresses, had grown used to being put in the shade by the other girl. Now she only smiled, for like the others she was entertained by Maria's dramatic appearances. One evening in dark red silk that made her look like an orchid. Another time in sapphire blue velvet. She lit up the castle like some fairy princess, and Siran was quite sure in her heart that the Baron Would eventually marry her. In the meantime he flirted with her, and took Siran for walks through the woods. Sometimes they met there, not by arrangement but by instinct, as if their thoughts had flown together during the day and they found each other in the woods when dusk was falling.

She looked forward to the weekend, when she would stand with him above the world, making polite conversation in front of the others, but speaking with their eyes.

It wasn't a sinful friendship. She was flattered that a man of such distinction should like her, but it would go no further than that. She would not prove to Kurt that she needed a keeper.

'Yes, Kurt thought it would be a good idea if his friend came on this expedition with us.' Trinkka smiled. "The pair of them never get tired of the mountains, and Eric has no family. He's a slim shy man, but charming in his quiet way.'

'He sounds the very opposite to your son.' Siran hid the quick amusement in her eyes by leaning forward to select a pastry bursting with cream and jam. Being one of those lucky people who didn't have to watch the calories she could enjoy these Austrian cakes that tasted so heavenly.

'Don't you find Kurt at all attractive?' Trinkka asked quizzically.

'I didn't mean that, exactly.' Siran licked peach jam from the corner of her lip. 'I mean he isn't exactly the retiring sort. He speaks his mind so boldly, and his personality is so definite. His friend was too shy to bring his present into the school, and he left it with a little note attached and drove off in his car. The note said that he hoped the music would help the girls with their ballet lessons. He thought the idea so excellent, for he himself liked to go to the Opera House when he was in Vienna. I thought it was so nice of him and I'm pleased I shall be meeting him soon.'

'You two will find much in common.' Trinkka ran her fingers over her rings, a habit she had when a thought disturbed her. 'As you say, my son Kurt has a very definite personality and those who don't really know him are inclined to find him a little too overwhelming. Would you believe me if I told you he was more lovable as a child than his brother Breck? Then he needed me. Then he would come to me with his small troubles and his scraped knees. Then he belonged to me ... now he belongs only to himself. A woman's sons grow up and must live their own lives, and I would hate to be a possessive mother, but Kurt withholds his heart from people. He has instead become an acolyte of the mountain gods ... if that doesn't sound too fanciful to the ears of a young English girl?'

'No'. Siran gave the Baroness a look of complete understanding. 'People in ballet are often like that. David Cassian was completely devoted to the dance and though there were women in his life they touched only the fringe of it, only the part that needed their laughter and their company occasionally. I loved him —I couldn't help myself—but I always knew that if he loved me in return it would be partly because of what made of me as a dancer, and that he would love me best when I danced for him. I think if you love someone you have to be prepared to be hurt by them. I think if love was all roses and no thorns it would be less exciting?'

'You would want it to be exciting?'

'Yes ... if I had not made up my mind to be an acolyte of the dance.'

The Baroness smiled. 'I think that at the weekend that cable-car will be carrying a group of lost souls to the mountains.'

'Even Maria?' A dent appeared beneath Siran's left cheekbone.

'The child is acting all the time. There is something she wants very much, but that other devilish son of mine is eluding her. He walks in the woods more often than he used to, and I have heard him humming a certain piece of ballet music.'

'Baroness --'

'Hush, *liebling*. I too have been young, and Breck is a handsome man. Who knows if Maria will get her wish, or any one of us? The threads of fate are twisted into strange patterns.'

As the Baroness spoke a wind stirred across the courtyard and a branch of the linden tree tapped against the window of the music-room. Siran's nerves tightened at the sound. 'I hope the weather keeps all right for the weekend,' she said. 'I'm told the cable-cars travel up and down in the snow, but not in a high wind.'

'No. A few years ago a cable snapped and some people were killed, but I think the weather will hold for us. It will be cold up there, so I hope you have a warm coat?'

'I have my lambswool.'

'Child, it is little more than a jacket! I would like to lend you a fur coat of mine, if you will accept it. We could go upstairs to my room to look at it now... would you like to?'

'I'd love to, if you're sure --'

'Come, let me show you.' Trinka was looking eager, as if not for a long time had she been able to share something of hers with someone like Siran. As they approached her suite, which was situated in a curving flank of the castle, the baby cried and Trinka ran in and fetched him from the nursery. He sat on her bed, playing with a scent bottle, while she swept open the doors of her wardrobe and disclosed a line of dresses and coats.

'Here at Mayholtzen it isn't worth putting one's furs in storage, and I am one of those spoiled women who likes to wear a fur coat even to collect fallen branches for the stoves. Viennese women are like cats for comfort—ah, here is the coat I mentioned. Snow-leopard. Very attractive, but when my son bought it for me I believe he was thinking of me when I was a much younger woman. You see, the style is too young for a middle-aged widow. There is a muff to go with it, and a hat.'

'But the Baron might not like me to wear a coat he bought for you.' Siran hesitantly stroked the soft pale fur.

'It was not Breck who bought me the coat.' Trinka's smile was quizzical again. 'I have two sons, remember.'

'Kurt? Oh, then I couldn't possibly wear it! He wouldn't like me to—he would think I was imposing on your generosity.'

'Then you must tell him smartly that it was my idea to let you wear the snow-leopard. Come, try it on. I have an idea it will suit you.'

'I'll try it on, but --'

'When you see yourself in it, *lieblich*, you won't be able to resist wearing it. And when Kurt sees you he won't dare to say a word.'

'I think he'd dare the devil.' Siran gave a nervous little laugh as she slipped her arms into the sleeves of the coat and let Trinka settle the collar and button it for her.

'There, take a look at yourself in the mirror.'

Siran gazed wide-eyed at the glamorous stranger she looked in the sleek, beautifully tailored coat, the collar framing her face and the colour of the fur a contrast to her red-brown hair. She gave a quick smile of delight, for every girl loves to look nice, and she did look unusually decorative in the snow-leopard coat.

'You are charming,' Trinka said warmly. 'Try the hat... you see how young is the style, with that fur bob on top, but it suits you. I knew it would, and you must wear the outfit for our trip to the mountains.'

'I'm tempted, Baroness.'

'But still a little afraid of Kurt, eh?'

Siran stroked the soft ball of a muff, softly scented with the perfume Trinka used, and there came irresistibly into her mind a picture of Kurt striding tall and sunburned into a smart Viennese shop to look at furs and to find himself captivated by the muff that went with this coat, and the hat with its gay bobble. But even as she smiled, there followed another image in her mind ... the flash of anger in his eyes to see her dressed for the cable-ride in the outfit he had chosen for his mother... remembered by him as young and gay as the city of Vienna, when there had been music in the air, and laughter without a sigh.

'He wouldn't be pleased, Baroness. He chose these things for you, a-and quite frankly I have a vision of him snatching the hat from my head and the muff from my hands.' Siran gave a breathless laugh. 'He might even toss me from the cable-car for my audacity.'

'Be audacious, *lieblich*, and take a chance.' Trinka broke into laughter as well, until there came a sudden yell from Lorenz and they both hastened to the bed to find he had got the stopper off the scent bottle and had drenched himself from head to toe. There was scent in his curls, over his jumper suit, and down his legs. He smelled like a flower garden, but he behaved like a young bear until they got him into a bath and washed off the smell which even at so young an age he resented as girlish. Siran knelt on the rubber mat beside the bath and played boats with him, and soon he was grinning all over his face and aiming soapy water all over her.

'Pussinka,' his grandmother appealed, 'do have some regard for the floor!'

'What about me?' Siran was reduced to helpless giggles as Lorenz blithely filled a boat with water and tipped the lot in her lap. She had put on a nursery apron, but it did little to save her from the water, and there she was, damp, tousled, and helplessly laughing as the door opened and the Baron came striding into the bathroom.

'Well, what have we here?' Suddenly the room seemed a couple of sizes too small as he stood there in a light grey suit, gazing down at the wet, nude, soapy child in the bath, the girl with a duck in one hand and a sponge in the other, and his mother who was trying vainly to keep back the flow of water with a mop.

'We are a helpless pair,' Trinka laughed. 'We attempt to give one child a bath and just look at us! Lorenz, you really are a little monster. He tipped scent all over himself, you see. We had to wash off the overpowering smell of it.'

'Well, my lad, you seem very much in control of the chaos.' Breck grinned down at the boy, who showed his small white teeth, gapped in the front, and promptly flung a boatful of water at his uncle.

'Oh, your suit!' Siran was at once dismayed, for he looked so smart and nice in his impeccable grey.

'The water will dry, and it's good that the child should feel so at home with us that he plays without inhibition.' Breck's smile held a dignified raffishness. 'He grows to look like Kristy, *meine liebe*.'

His mother nodded. 'When I see him like this, so happy and trustful, I wonder how we can ever repay Siran for the brave thing she did. I would suggest, Breck, that we offer her the castle as her second home. She may come here whenever she chooses, for she tells me she intends to make dancing her career.'

His glance found Siran and held her. He searched her eyes and she had to look away after a moment in case she betrayed to him her divided feelings. He drew her. He gave of his charm and his worldliness, and she could not face as yet what had to be. He was attracted to her, but they both knew that he was destined to marry the girl who would not want anything else but to be his wife. There was no other dream for Maria. When she heard music she sang to it, but she didn't feel the wings spreading themselves on her heels. She knew her heart, but Siran was so unsure of hers.

'Siran knows that our door is always open to her,' he said quietly. 'We can't hold on to her for ever, Trinkka. She has wings, this one. She is not clinging or submissive, and I believe she must dance or die ... not physically, perhaps, but in some enchanting part of herself.'

So he had read her eyes, too swiftly for her to conceal what they held. 'Gome, my lad.' She swung Lorenz out of the bath and into a big warm towel. He loved this part, being tickled all over and kissed in places he was not yet old enough to think undignified. Soon his happy giggles had burst like bubbles those few serious words, that clash of desires. Siran could not take Kristy's place at the castle, but for now it was enough to laugh with this delightful child of a tragic love; to kiss

his warm skin and feel the Baron's eyes gone from grey to the mercury of that desire he felt for her.

'I will go and find Maria,' he said abruptly. He left them, and Siran gave a gasp as Lorenz tugged her hair.

'Let me take him.' Trinkka lifted him into her arms. 'Little tyrant, you have given Siran a bath as well. My dear, you had better run along and change your dress, but it has been fun, eh? This hour with the child?'

'I've loved it, but before I go I'll help tidy up.'

Ten minutes later she was on her way to her room, looking, she knew, as if she had fallen in a puddle and been pulled out. She was near her door when someone stepped out from the shadows and a pair of arms swiftly encircled her. She was pulled back into the shadows and lips found hers, hard and demanding. Her hands bit into the strong shoulders, feeling the power beneath the smooth grey suiting. Alarm shifted to response, a wanting to be secure in these powerful arms, if only for now.

'Breck...'

'I had to wait for you like this ... I wanted to hold you, like a warm, damp infant. Siran ... I want you.'

'Breck ... please.' She pulled away from him. 'I couldn't stay here, or face your mother, if we allowed our feelings to get out of hand. It isn't love. It's attraction, and a bit of loneliness...'

'Your loneliness?' He held her shoulders with his hands and looked down at her. 'I suppose you could be grateful for my friendship ... if you want to call it that. You are a long way from home, and I don't insult your intelligence by treating you like a child.'

'There are ... barriers,' she said. 'We both know it, and I don't want to be just an affair you had with a ballet dancer.'

'What do you want, *Hebchen*?'

'Oh, Breck, it's too soon for me to know what I want.'

'You knew that day in Vienna that we felt an instant response to each other. I liked your face, you liked mine. That is the way it usually begins. You came to Seven Lilacs wishing to see me again, as much as I wished to see you. We can't shut our feelings on and off like a lamp in the dark.' He took her chin in his fingers and made her look into his eyes. 'When we are together, and when I hold you like this, I can feel how much you want to be close to me. Why deny it? When your hands touch my shoulders, when you catch your breath, when you search my face ... don't you think I'd be a fool if I thought these the prosaic responses of friendship alone?'

'What of Maria?' Siran, desperate for a defence, had to bring the other girl into it. 'She cares for you.'

'Yes, I know.'

'Then aren't you being rather cruel, and just a bit dishonest, in talking to me like this? Everyone has always known that you might marry her ... and she's lovely. She knows your world. She speaks your language. She has no ghost to haunt her.'

'And your ghost is this man you knew in England. He died during a ballet—which is very dramatic—and so you can't forget him.'

'No—he was part of my life for almost four years. I—I might turn to anyone to ease the pain of losing him. People do --'

'You are asking that we keep this,' his hands tightened on her shoulders, 'on a friendship level?'

'Please, Breck.'

'Despite the fact that it grows dangerous for me to be alone with you?' He gave her a sudden kiss on her brow, pressing his lips hard against her temple. 'Are you so modest that you don't know yourself? Yes, Maria is lovely. She has a warm, gay heart, and she speaks my language ... but it isn't the language of the senses!'

A tremor ran through Siran, a shock reaction from the sudden passion of his voice. In a second, an instant, she wanted to reach up and smooth from his face that line that grooved his cheek. She couldn't resist the impulse, but when her hand touched his face the deep line was gone again, like a shadow, and she looked at him with a certain bewilderment. She saw only an ardent gleam in the grey eyes, and because she had touched him he wanted to kiss her again.

'Breck, we must dress for dinner!'

'In a moment.' He was bending his head, and like a moth she was mesmerised by the flame in his eyes, when footfalls broke the silence. They came nearer, and she turned her head just in time to see Kurt. He had come from one of the upper rooms, a turret-room where he had a small observatory, and he was brushing at his sleeve, and looking directly at his brother and the girl in his brother's arms..

'*Guten abend.*' He gave them a faintly mocking bow as he passed by, and Siran felt as if she blushed all over as she met for a brief, electrical moment the mockery of his eyes. Feeling embarrassed and caught out, she broke free of Breck's embrace and made a dash for her room.

Once she had closed the door on the brothers she sank down on the thick woolly rug and clenched it with her fists. It had to happen some time, that Kurt would see her like that with Breck, and now he would think her a little fool who had lost her head over his handsome

brother. He would believe his own accusation, that she had come to Seven Lilacs with the intention of captivating the Baron.

But it wasn't true, and the rug suffered the bite of her, fingernails as she thought of that look in Kurt's eyes. A look half mocking, half contemptuous. Who was he to set himself up in judgement on others? He had no warm, human feelings, and regarded love as a weakness.

It had been secret and exciting meeting Breck in the snowy woods, but now all that was spoiled. Each time he looked at her, Kurt would know why. Each time they spoke, Kurt would be listening for the note of hidden meaning in their voices.

She felt as if she hated Kurt, and jumping to her feet she found her toilet things and went along to the bathroom to cool down under the shower. That evening in a mood of defiance she put on her second best dress of smoky-blue wool with a pair of cherry-red shoes. She had bought the shoes in London and they always gave her courage, and made her remember vividly the first time she had worn them. Cassian had been rehearsing on-stage, his black hair in damp disorder, a black sweater slashed open to his waist. She had stood in the shadows at the side of the stage and watched him enthralled, a slender stag of the forest, the lean angles of his face and the disciplined liveness of his body giving an illusion of youth that wasn't in his eyes. It was only now, looking back, that she understood that look of sadness in his eyes. It was as if he had some forewarning that he wouldn't dance for very much longer.

But he had that day been entranced by her red shoes. 'Come and eat with me,' he said, and they had walked along the Strand hand in hand, and every few minutes he had slanted a smile down at her. 'I like you in red shoes,' he had said. 'They're gay and young like you, Feigileh. Whatever happens never lose your youth, and always wear those shoes when life throws shadows, or a few stones in your path.'

There had been no shadows that day, eating whitebait with him at the fish-bar they both liked, spearing the little fish one at a time on a fork, and talking as they ate about what they loved most ... the art of ballet dancing.

She checked on the stairs and her hand gripped the newel-post as a feeling of insecurity swept over her. 'Every bird dwells with its own kind,' she thought, 'and I'm lonely for what I've lost.'

She gazed around her and suddenly the castle was an alien place. Its scent and its sounds were strange to her, and she longed in this moment for the smell of resin, the laughter and bickering of a group of dancers, the first notes of the orchestra before the curtain arose with a velvety swish.

'Oh—is it you?' She swung round eagerly as hands clasped her waist in a well-remembered grip, the sort made by a male dancer when he and his partner were about to launch into a *pas de deux*.

'Were you waiting for my brother?' The voice spoke above her head, deep and deliberate.

She found herself gazing at Kurt in wordless confusion. So wrapped in her thoughts had she been that when the lean hands touched her, sure and strong, she had been almost on the verge of melting to them, of yielding to the romance of the dance, and feeling that lift into the air that was almost like flying.

'I—I was day-dreaming,' she said, not choosing her words and leaving him room to think she had been dreaming about his brother.

'I have heard that it's part of the delirium of falling in love,' he drawled.

'Have you never fallen, *mein herr*?' She could feel her composure taken and broken in his fingers like a moth. She could feel how easy it

would be for him to break her in his hands, and with inward rebellion she stood there and let him clasp her waist, and she let him taunt her... as if, somehow, she had earned his punishment.

'I have fallen halfway down a mountain,' he replied. 'Is that how it feels, breathless, bruised, and shaken up?'

'Be mocking about it,' she said. 'But I hope when it happens to you it will be hard and painful... it nearly always is for people who profess not to believe in it.'

'So the mysterious emotion called love is going to hit me hard, eh?' His lip quirked and his left eyebrow followed suit. 'For someone young you seem quite an authority on the oldest dilemma that attacks men and women. Who taught you so young ... was it Cassian?'

'He wasn't my lover!' The urge to break away from him was swift as the words on her lips, but instantly her movement was checked by the tightening of his hands, holding her there beneath the brilliant blue gaze that mocked and would know all her secrets. Her red-brown head came to his shoulder, her eyes defied him, every inch of her denied him a fraction of friendship. He was too hard, too cynical. He bruised with tongue and touch.

'I never implied that your Director was also your lover.' He paused and made of the word a mocking caress. 'The making of love, and the feeling of love, are surely two separate things. Lots of men make love without feeling anything but desire. Cassian was wiser than that. He made you his without destroying your innocence. That was all I meant, little quick-to-catch- fire!'

Her cheeks took fire, and suddenly she was terribly conscious of his maleness and the desires that lay smouldering in his soul. The outer man was so cool and strong and contained, but whenever she was close to him she sensed the hidden flame, the ice-hot intensity that

burned deep in the man. There were things he never spoke of. Passions he kept to himself. Unlike Breck he would take ... he would never ask, or try to charm.

'Yes ... David Cassian was a wise person.' Her voice shook a little, and she could feel her eyes widening as they dwelt on Kurt's craggy, unconquered face. He was like a mountain that presented several sides to the world and dared the onlooker to try and tame him. His was the kind of danger that set an avalanche thundering down on anyone who tried to know him. The touch of his hands made her feel unsure ... with David she had always felt safe.

'Cassian had his own philosophy,' she said, and to speak of him was to find again a measure of confidence. ' "But pleasures are like poppies spread. You seize the flower, the bloom is dead."'

'Burns who wrote those lines was not a man to leave the flower unseized.'

'Do you read poetry, *mein herr*?'

'Most mountain climbers do. It relaxes and inspires. I have myself written pieces for the *Alpine Journal*.'

'Poetry?'

'Yes, among other things. Is it so amazing?'

'Incredible.'

'That I should notice the shape of a snowflake, or the snap of frost and the small silences? Do I seem so inhuman? Is my touch so terrible?'

As if to add point to his question he made her feel the grip of his hands, and he smiled in a sardonic way, reminding her that he had seen her in his brother's arms, a willing captive there, not a girl who

was tensed all through her being and couldn't wait to be released from the hands made powerful by rock-climbing.

She looked at him with uncertain eyes. Was he arrogant? Or was he a proud, haunted man who could only be himself when alone in the mountains?

'Have you fallen in love with my brother?' he asked bluntly.

'How dare you ask me that?' His directness was like a whiplash, leaving a sting behind. She had to sting him in return. 'It would be foolish of me to deny that I like Tfitn ... unlike you, *mein herr*, he doesn't regard me as a child who must be censured every so often. He's charming and friendly.'

'So I have noticed.'

'And never sarcastic.'

'I do beg your pardon. I forget that women prefer the roundabout way to the direct. They like to be misled, and then cry when they are lost.'

'Are you warning me about something?'

'If you are not a child then you must know what you are doing ... meeting my brother alone in the forest, allowing yourself to become the plaything of an hour.'

Again she felt stung by him. Plaything! He called her that... how dared he? Her hand swung of its own accord and there was the sound of a slap, followed by the gasp she gave as he gripped her, lifted her off her feet, and swung her to meet the threat in his eyes. A look that left her in no doubt of what it would be like to be his plaything.

'You brute!' She could think of nothing more original as he gripped her like a rag doll.

'You little fool!' He let her go and strode on down the stairs, where at the foot of them he turned and waited for her, his eyes shimmering blue in his audacious face. 'Come along,' he mocked. 'I promise not to touch you again.'

She hesitated, and then hating him to see how he unnerved her she sped past him in her red shoes, hastening into the twilight of the hall, where the lamps on their long chains were not yet lighted.

'Tomorrow night we shall be in the mountains.' Kurt lounged against the newel post, a glint of anticipation in his eyes. 'Do you look forward to it, Miss Winters? Or are you afraid of my world also?'

'Your world of snow castles and ice turrets, *mein herr*?' The way he had worded his question was not lost on her. He knew that he inspired fear and uncertainty in her. 'I expect to find them rather cold and awesome.'

'You may find them more fascinating than castles on the ground.' He strolled to a long window that overlooked the lake, and there a young moon sidled out from a cloud, lighting softly the scene and leaving the hall in denser shadow. Drawn by the moon, Siran walked to the other side of the window and saw how the moonlight wedded itself to the snow, veiling the frosty boughs of the trees in a shifting silver.

'Can your peaks match a moonlit lake for beauty?' she asked.

'Yes, but in a different way. A more overwhelming way. The scene before us is like a piece by Chaminade, but up there in the mountains it is the *Siegfried Idyll*' 'Perhaps I am too English to appreciate what appeals to you,' she said. 'I'm very fond of Chaminade.'

'Fond, eh?' His smile was a gleam of white in the dusk. 'The term can't be applied to Wagner. With his music it's a matter of love or hate. It always is with anything strong and complex. Tolstoi put it into words as only he could.'

Siran gazed at the moonlight on the snow, feeling again that flick of surprise that he should be so well read, so in touch with things that seemed on the surface to have no place in his life. She looked at his profile in the black and silver glimmer that came from the lake, and it reminded her of the formidable features stamped on old imperial coins; the power of the brow, the jut of the nose, the squareness of the chin were as if carved in bronze. Her palm had stung when she slapped him!

He turned his head and looked directly at her. Even in the dimness she felt the brilliance of his eyes. 'You are very English, and you might think the words extravagant.'

'I might, but I'm willing to learn.'

Relieve you are, when you are not handing out a lesson of your own,' he laughed quietly, and fingered the jaw she had slapped. 'Tolstoi understood passionate people and he applied his words to them. "When you "love," he said, "love unto madness. When you threaten, do it fiercely. When you smite, aim well and , truly. When you fight, fight to the finish.'

There was a significant pause, broken by a manservant who entered to light the lamps. As they came alight one after the other Siran felt herself held and dominated by Kurt's blue eyes. The words he had quoted applied to all his actions ... when he loved there would surely be no tenderness, only a passion to conquer, as he had conquered the Nanda Devi, the mountain goddess.

The others arrived from their various parts of the castle and after dinner they enjoyed some music and then made an early night of it. They were setting out soon after breakfast for their trip up the mountains and their goodnights to each other were tinged with a note of gaiety.

'We are like conspirators,' Maria laughed. 'One would think that up in the mountains we each hope to find our heart's desire. Or am I being a. superstitious Bavarian?'

She looked at the Baron, who returned her look with a lazy smile. 'You are too warm-hearted not to be romantic, Maria. Each trip to an unknown place seems to offer the prospect of an exciting encounter ... do you not think so, Siran?'

He pronounced her name with a foreign attractiveness, making it seem alluring. She smiled and was vividly aware of this moment in the hall, poised as they all were on the brink of parting for the night. Outside in the night the snow was softly falling, hiding the moon. Here the stove crackled and it was warm. The memory of good music lingered, and the lamplight shone softly on the blue brocaded skirts of Trinkka's old- world dress.

'It's always exciting to have something to anticipate,' she replied. 'Sometimes that is the best part.'

'Do you expect to be disappointed in the mountains?' Breck's eyes were faintly quizzical as they dwelt on her face, large-eyed, framed by her brown hair with its hint of red.

'She expects to be overwhelmed,' drawled Kurt. 'I have warned her that she will be ... at first.'

'Kurt is always warning me about something.' She gave a laugh and avoided his eyes. 'I've never travelled -- before in a cable-car, so I really can't wait for the

morning to come.'

'You will enjoy it.' The Baron spoke with assurance. 'But remember to wrap up warm. Unlike Kurt we are not hardened against the cold winds of the higher regions.'

'Your mother is kindly lending me a coat to wear.' Siran glanced a trifle nervously at Trinka. 'I hope it's all right with Kurt if I wear your snow-leopard, Baroness?'

Kurt slanted her a look but said nothing. Trinka laughed, as if she alone knew the secret of handling her unpredictable son. 'He will not see you freeze, *lieblich*, and it's such a shame for such a charming outfit to -- hang in my cupboard and not be worn. Kurt, please assure Siran that she may wear the coat.'

'Wear it with my blessing,' he drawled. 'I never had -- the knack of choosing the exact gift for a woman, or of --j paying the correct compliments, but now and again I mean well.'

He confused Siran when he spoke like that, and all she could do was to murmur her thanks. Maria gave -- her a faintly pitying look, as if it were a small tragedy that a girl should have to borrow a fur coat. Kurt smiled as he caught that look, a groove springing deep in his cheek, near his mouth.

'You will be taking your skis?' he said to Maria.

'But of course,' she replied, and Siran could hear --1 them talking together as they made their way to bed, leaving the Baron to lock up the castle ... mantled in a thick white blanket of snow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SIRAN was dressed and ready and waiting by the lake, which in the night had become frozen over, when she was joined by Maria. The two girls presented quite a contrast to each other. Beneath the smart fur coat that was draped around her slender shoulders Maria wore an elegant suede two-piece, velvety green, giving her the look of a young huntress of the forest. Her rakish hat shaded a dancing dark eye.

'The men are putting the baggage in the car,' she said. 'Eric will probably arrive in that yellow monster of his. You have not yet met him, eh?'

Siran shook her head, feeling strange and exotic in the pale furs that were so lovely and warm. Her hands were clasped in the muff, and the touch of frost in the air made her cheeks tingle.

Maria gave her a considering look. 'I thought you a fresh and fairly ordinary English girl when I first saw you,' she said. 'Now I begin to understand why men are so fascinated by the women of your country. You have a secretive quality, in your looks and your ways. You don't reveal yourself at a first glance. You really are very attractive, Siran, and I am sure now that you are my rival.'

'Your rival, Maria?' Siran knew what was implied, but she pretended to be innocent. 'Even in my borrowed plumes I'm not as pretty as you are.'

'Come, you know what I mean.' Maria gave a little laugh that wasn't quite sure of itself. 'See that lake, a great frozen mirror, reflecting all, revealing nothing, not even who is the fairest of us in the eyes of the Baron.'

Maria looked into Siran's eyes, as if she wanted to know her thoughts. 'You aren't so innocent,' a sharper note came into her voice. 'You

know as I do, as everyone does, that the time has come when Breck must marry. I wonder which of us he will choose? There he : is only one he can marry ... only one he can reject. Are I you afraid that it might be you?'

'It would be crazy of me to be afraid of something so A out of the question. I didn't come to Seven Lilacs as a prospective candidate for marriage. I came to visit the Baroness, and to work at the school until I can dance again in ballet. You know, as everyone does, that the Baron cares for you.'

'He cared more before you came to the castle. Now he talks to you, and his eyes follow you. I know he likes you ... but you are crazy if you think he will marry you! The men of the von Linden family marry women of position. Both Breck and Kurt. You are to both of them just an amusement.'

'I'm well aware of that.' Sirhan felt a stab of pain and was sharply reminded of what Kurt had called her ... the plaything of an hour! 'It's silly of you to be jealous, isn't it, when you know that both brothers are merely amused by a ballet dancer. It's an old tradition. Novels and plays have been written about it.'

'But you are poor,' Maria exclaimed. 'It would be to your advantage to entice Breck to marry you. You would never have to work again. I believe it is hard work, dancing in the corps de ballet.'

'I find it enjoyable, and naturally I hope to dance my way out of the chorus.'

.'But every girl wishes to love and to marry. You can't pretend to me—even if you pretend to Breck—that you are dedicated heart and soul to your dancing. That would be like being a nun ... almost.'

Siran smiled at the extravagance of the remark ... and yet was it so far-fetched? Nearly all great dancers led lives curiously sheltered

from the world outside the theatre. If they loved at all, then it was a curiously impersonal sort of love, their passion given to the dance itself. To the magic and romance of it, things that women sought in a relationship with a man without always finding them.

'We wear lovely costumes in ballet and dance to exciting music,' she said. 'There is little of the cloister in our lives.'

'You are fond of nice clothes?' Maria's eyes flicked the snow-leopard coat and hat and dwelt on the plump little muff that concealed the tension of Siran's hands. 'The Baroness must be fond of you if she permits you to wear something of hers, and then of course you saved the life of Kristy's baby. The Baroness adored her. Breck kept saying that she was being spoiled, but Trinkka had suffered so much in the war that she wanted Kristy never to know a sad moment. It was ironical that the girl should come to such a tragic end ... quite fateful that you should be there, *nickt!*'

'Life has an odd way of introducing us to people,' Siran agreed. 'I'm glad to have met the von Linden family, but I do intend to return to my own world.'

'I wonder if fate intends you to return?' Having said this Maria turned with a gay smile as Kurt approached to tell them the car was ready and they were keeping the expedition waiting.

Siran was aware of Kurt's side-glance as the three of them walked to the forecourt, where the Mercedes awaited them, its boot stacked with weekend luggage and its bodywork gleaming in the morning sunlight. A small thrill of half fear ran up and down her spine. She wanted him to say something about the coat, and wondered if she wanted him to be flattering.

'A real leopard once wore that coat,' he drawled.

'Are you trying to put me off?' She glanced up at him and the sunlight was full on his face and his thatch of lion-coloured hair. 'I find the coat so lovely and warm that I'm not going to take it off to please you.'

He smiled enigmatically. 'And now I hand both of you over to my brother,' he said. 'I shall be driving to the cable-station with Eric ... by the way, Siran, I should like you to meet my friend.'

Eric Gerhardt was standing beside his sports car of a vintage like that of old and cherished wine. Somehow in his suit of velour beneath a camel overcoat, with his fine-boned face and fair receding hair, he had the same air of old-fashioned distinction. He bowed over her hand and though his look was a searching one it was entirely courteous.

'I've wanted to thank you for giving my ballet class a ■ record-player and all those classical records. It was so kind of you, Herr Gerhardt.'

'I was charmed by the innovation of having a ballet teacher in the valley. I wished to make a donation that would be useful.'

'It's more than useful, it's a pleasure, and I thank you.'

'Come, we must be off!' The Baron beckoned imperiously and Siran smiled at Eric and went to take her place in the big car. Maria had settled herself in the front seat, and Trinka sat at the back with Lorenz on her lap. The child's big blue eyes were roving from one adult to another and when Siran slid into the car beside Trinka he let out a crow of recognition.

'Hullo, mischief.' She stroked his cheek with her muff and right away he wanted to play with it.

'I will keep him amused.' Trinka's eyes were content and unclouded this morning, and it was touching the way she looked at Breck as he joined them in the car and closed the door. Then she glanced out of

the rear -window and her smile wavered as the vintage sports car flashed past them with its two occupants, turning out of the gateway like a leopard on the run.

'Kurt is driving,' she said tensely. 'Oh, I do hope he will be careful!'

'Has Kurt ever known the meaning of the word?' Breck started the car and they swept out on to the road in the snowy wake of the sports car. 'Relax, my dear. You will wear yourself to a shadow worrying about him.'

'It's as if a devil drives him, Breck. He hides his feelings behind a cynical smile, but I know how much it hurt him to have to come home that terrible night with such shocking news. He has never been quite the same and seems these days to live so recklessly.'

'You think of him still as a blue-eyed innocent like Lorenz.' Breck gave a chuckle. 'My dear, his baby curls have long vanished, to be replaced by the tawny pelt of a young lion. Ask Maria ... or Siran. They will tell you what a barbarian he can be when he gets a girl alone in a corner!'

Trinka looked quickly at Siran and there was a bright curiosity in her blue eyes. Siran quickly changed the subject, for it seemed unfair to discuss Kurt behind his back. It made her feel like defending him, and it would be absurd for her to leap to the defence of a man who was her avowed opponent.

They were admiring the passing scenery, so like a greetings card with the frosted fir trees set against the slopes and the chalets wearing caps of snow, when all at once the Baron braked sharply^ on a turn in the road. There in front of them was the yellow sports car, stalled at the roadside, ice shattered under its wheels, and Kurt in his belted sheepskin coat smoking a cheroot while Eric peered at the engine.

Breck drove around them and halted. He rolled down the window beside him and spoke explicitly in the Austrian tongue. Kurt took the cheroot from his mouth with a deliberate air. 'I can hardly be blamed for ice on the road,' he said in English.

'It wasn't Kurt's fault.' Eric raised his head from the engine. 'If he had not been quick to swing the wheel then we would have gone right off the road and plunged down the embankment. Anyway, something has cracked and my car is out for the count.'

'Well, I can't give both of you a lift, there isn't the room. You might just squeeze in, Eric.' Breck gazed at his brother with cool grey eyes. 'It's several more miles to the cable-station. Will you ski the rest of the way?'

Kurt inclined his head and went out of sight behind the Mercedes. Siran heard the click of the boot and a quick glance out of the rear window showed her a glimpse of his tawny head and broad shoulders as he bent over the boot and took from it the bag that held his skis and sticks.

Eric, with a lazy smile, climbed into the back of the Mercedes beside Siran. 'Good luck, old man!' he called out before closing the door.

Kurt stood alone out there and quirked a tawny eyebrow. 'Shall we make it a race?' he asked.

'No, Kurt!' Trinkka rapped on the window. 'Please take care.'

He shrugged and smiled, and for a brief instant he looked at Siran through the car window. In that instant he looked almost sorry for himself, then his face hardened and he moved out of sight.

'Will your car be all right?' Siran looked at Eric.

'Yes, I will telephone from the cable-station for a mechanic to pick it up. Poor old girl, she breaks down often these days, but I hate to give her up for a modern miss?'

The engine of the Mercedes purred into action again, and Siran told herself that it was mere coincidence that she happened to be gazing out of the window when a supple figure swooped down the snowbound slopes of the embankment and dived out of sight in strong, accomplished leaps and bounds. Only the dark ski-trails remained. Kurt went on alone to where they would take the cable-car to the top of the mountains.

The cable-car trip was for Siran an unforgettable experience. Her senses leapt at the beauty of the alps ... here was destiny, a glimpse of heaven itself. The cable-car swooped over the valleys and the peaks. They hung suspended in the air, the high winds singing in the cables, and the Baron stood beside Siran and pointed out the wild gorges beneath them that had no bottom; the glaciers that seemed to pierce the sky itself.

They swung in the car above a frozen cascade, misty and colour-shot as the sun fired the great sprays of ice. Such views were breathtaking, almost fearful, and Kurt stood a few paces away, cool and assured in their presence, no stranger to their wonder, and their danger.

He began to whistle softly to himself, and with a catch of her breath Siran recognized the music as the *Siegfried Idyll*, reminding her of what he had said, that she might at first be overwhelmed by his castles of snow and turrets of ice, and then find them fascinating.

The cable-car hung deliberately among the wild white glaciers, and then it began to descend, swooping down like some strange toy on a string. It landed them among the peaks, and the men collected the luggage and in a gay group, the cold air stinging their faces, they made for the inn that stood among the crags; a welcome sight with its

red peaked roof, double verandas, and alpine shrubs planted against the pine-log walls.

Inside a huge open fireplace burned resinous pine logs, and plum brandy was poured by the innkeeper to warm them after their journey, and warm milk with fingers of buttery bread was soon provided for the baby.

Siran stood clasping her brandy glass in both hands, as enchanted as a child herself by the old-fashioned charm of the inn. The beams overhead were carved and painted, and quaint brass lamps hung suspended in triangles of wrought-brass. There were inglenooks, and ticking of a grandfather clock, great tufted rugs, and old polished furniture.

It was the kind of tucked away place where long ago Austrian princes and officers might have dined, plotting their rebellions and their love affairs.

She breathed the tangy smoke of the logs in the great stone fireplace and saw the flames reflected in the copper bowls of winter flowers.

The clock chimed, and a girl in a dirndl said smilingly that a goose was roasting for their dinner, and she would show them to their rooms. They trooped upstairs, the deep voices of the men mingling together and making the atmosphere seem vital, and somehow conspiratorial, as it must have been in those old feudal days. The tramp of their feet, and Maria's excited laughter, made echoes along the rambling passages. Siran's room was tucked away under a snowcapped gable of its own, warmed by a porcelain stove; white, gold-flowered porcelain that matched the cover of the goose-feather puff that lay over the bed with its figured bedposts. There was a little saint in a wall niche, a chest of drawers and a washstand. It was a room that reminded Siran of Cornwall, but when she stood at the window she saw the changing colours of the mountains as dusk began

to fall, a merging of violet and purple, a slow deepening in the hollows, a burning flush where the sun was going down. Often Siran had watched as the sun sank away into Cornish waters, but this evening she was far away from the sea and high above the world, among the crags and glaciers of the alps.

Her Angers gripped the wooden frame of the window and for a moment she felt a thrill of fear. It made her go cold and she went to the stove to warm herself. It was a relief when fingers tapped upon her door and Trinkka came in to find out if she was comfortable and quite happy.

'You look a little pale.' Trinkka touched her cheek and looked concerned. 'The altitude sometimes affects the newcomer ... I am going to close the shutters of your window. If you keep looking at the closeness of the peaks you will have the feeling that you are going to fall. In the morning you will have grown used to that feeling ... there, with the shutters closed and the lamp lit you are secure again.'

'You're very understanding, Baroness.'

'You must call me Trinkka. It makes me feel younger, and we are good friends by now. Real friends, *liebchen*, who can talk together. Tell me, you are glad you came to Mayholtzen? You have no regrets?'

'No regrets at all... Trinkka.'

'No One has hurt you?'

'No...'

'I ask because I have two sons who in different ways are attractive to women. Breck is worldly and has great charm. Kurt is complex and women are attracted to a mystery. But I think,' Trinkka paused and stared at the little saint in his niche, 'that you like Breck more than

you like Kurt. It is probably he who will cause you to leave Seven Lilacs sooner than I would wish.'

A few minutes later she left Siran alone in her room. In a thoughtful mood Siran washed and dressed for dinner. She wore a tan-gold mohair sweater that blended with her tweed skirt, and clasped around her throat the twisted gold chain the two aunts had given her when she was sixteen. It was something of home to cling to. A memory of the sea climbing the shingle almost to the door of the cottage. It was strange, but always her security had been tenuous. The little aunts had died, too dear to each other for one to be able to live without the other. Then David had followed them, and the ballet company had dispersed.

, Now her stay at Seven Lilacs was curiously threatened ... tonight in the alps she sensed strongly that something was going to happen that would again disrupt her life.

Grown afraid of her thoughts, she turned the lamp down low and closed the door of her room behind her. She found her way downstairs to the lounge, where the log fire glowed, a huge cavern of warmth.

'It looks as if we are the first down.' Eric emerged from the shadows at the end of the room, where the curtains were half drawn across the windows. Beyond them glimmered the last of the sunset, outlining his lean figure. A brief, grave smile dented the edges of his mouth. 'Come and enjoy the alps, Miss Winters. Ah, you hesitate! You are rather afraid of their nearness, eh?'

'I've never been this close to the abode of the storm- gods,' she smiled, and joined him by the window, and felt again that heart-turning as her gaze dwelt upon the giant peaks this slender man had climbed many times. Even in the dusk they seemed to shine with an icy radiance.

'They are beautiful, but in a cold, rather austere way. I wonder how you can love them?'

'A man's love for the mountains is a mystic thing, *fraulein*, and perhaps a little hard for a woman to understand. She sees only the dangers and the discomforts ... am I right?'

Siran nodded. 'Aren't you ever afraid that one day your luck will not hold out ... that you might slip on that sheer ice, or be swept away by an avalanche?'

'The danger and unpredictability are all part of the game, Miss Winters. Climbing one of the aloof, gold-peaked mountains of the Himalayas is like taking on the challenge of a lovely woman of uncertain moods. Who knows if she will smile or frown? Who can say whether she will open her arms in welcome, or show her claws? Yes, for the climber there is often great peril, but there is also the excitement at times of being master of what no other man has ever conquered.'

'It sounds a little arrogant,' she ventured.

His smile was whimsical. 'I saw you looking rather seriously at Kurt when he took off on his skis alone. You think him arrogant, don't you?'

'What woman could think otherwise?' She gave a rueful laugh. 'We are poles apart, Kurt von Linden and I. We think each other's profession a useless thing ... why, he could have been a doctor. Could still be one if only he would apply himself to his studies and shake lose the wanderbug which has such a grip on him; Herr Gerhardt, can't you persuade him to return to his medical studies? You are his best friend, and it would please the Baroness so much if Kurt gave up gambling with his life.'

'One person can't tell another what he should do with his life, *fraulein*. The decision has to be personal and spontaneous. If pressure is applied then tension can be the only result.'

'But he has such dexterous hands, and the concentration that could make of him a first-class surgeon. It seems such a waste.' She gave a small cold shiver, as if a breath of coldness touched the nape of her neck. 'He has made up his mind to repeat the climb that killed Kristy's sweetheart ... what if something happens to him?'

'Yes, *fraulein*, what if something does happen? Will you be sad?'

Her eyes widened, shocked that he should speak with such coolness. Kurt was his friend. They had shared many dangers together. 'Do you blame him ... for what happened to Kristy?'

There was an acute little silence, broken only by the crackling of the pine logs with their tang of the forest. 'The calamity cycle of three cannot be held back if it isto take place,' he said quietly. 'No, I don't hold Kurt responsible for the accident. Knowing mountains, I know how swiftly death can come. For each of us there are moments of destiny ... the sad part is when we are alone and aware that the glow of happiness has been switched off, leaving a darkness. It wasn't that Kristy ever cared for me. She cared for the young man who died ... but, you see, I was fond of her. I would have been a father to her child, if she had turned to me after the tragedy. But she ran away, and when Breck found her she refused to return to Seven Lilacs. Kurt went away himself in the hope that she would come home. He knew how she felt about him. How she went on feeling up until the time she...'

He couldn't say it in words, using his hands to express his sense of loss.

'Where did he go?'

'Kurt?'

'Yes... did he go far?'

'He went to Kenya, where there are fanged mountains growing out of the red earth. He explored the Himalayan valleys, filled with wild sheep and exotic birds. Went high into the hills of Tibet, the strange Shangri-la of silver bells, and monks. He returned when Breck sent a cable to say that Kristy had died. He seemed older, less the sportsman and more a man of some deep purpose. Soon we knew that purpose. Not I, or his mother, or anyone who loves him, can stop him from doing what he must. I think in Tibet he learned something profound about himself. He doesn't speak of it, but I believe he has found at last what he has been searching for.'

'Tibet,' she murmured. 'Land of silver bells, chiming in the peaked pagodas of the monasteries.'

Slowly her hand clenched against her heart and she stared into the fawn-coloured eyes of his closest friend. 'You believe he will return there?'

'I believe there is a chance of it. Kurt learned as a child the hardship of losing his father and being torn from his mother. That lesson has stayed with him. At the various sports arenas, such as St. Moritz, I have seen him enjoy the company of women, but there has always been an aloofness about him that made those friend- ' ships no more than the reward of the gladiator. In days gone by, *fraulein*, the champions took their pick of the prettiest women ... for a day or a night.'

She smiled, for he looked so serious, as if he thought her too youthful to be told the facts of a man's life. 'I can well believe that Kurt von Linden takes the kisses of women without giving his heart. In his hard, tanned, cool way he must be quite spectacular in the sports arena. His face, is moulded like those faces on old statues or coins. A man of bronze all through.'

'You speak like a girl who has made up her mind not to like him. He must find that very challenging.'

'He enjoys making me argue with him.'

Eric was laughing as the rest of their party entered the lounge, and Breck asked at once to be told the joke. 'That would be unfair to Miss Winters,' said Eric. 'She was confiding in me.'

'Beware, my friend, or you will become yet another victim of our ballerina.'

Siran flashed a look at Kurt, which he returned with a suave lift of his brow. Unlike the other two men in their formal dinner jackets he wore a check shirt and cavalry-twill slacks, and he looked much more at home in the rusty glow of the log fire than his brother. How alike their features were, and yet how unlike in their emotions they were. She had thought Breck the deep one, but it was Kurt who had a shading of melancholy around his mouth. She saw it plainly, etched by the firelight, but when he caught her gaze upon him, he turned his head away and seemed to concentrate on the painted tankards that stood along the shelf above the fireplace.

The girl came in and lit the lamps, and she said to Kurt, '*Mein herr* would like a beer?'

'*Danke schdn.*' He gave her the Austrian click of the heels, and she smiled gaily and with a swirl of her dirndl she took the orders for wine or beer. Dinner would be served in the adjoining room in about ten minutes.

'I'm famished,' said Maria. 'It must be the altitude and so much fresh air. Yes, I'll have a beer, all brown and foamy.'

Gaiety took hold of them again and their roast goose dinner at the long wooden table was richly enjoyable. Baked chestnuts were

dished up with the goose, and there was a mound of creamed potatoes, a great dish of savoury cabbage, and a piping hot gravy.

It was like a supper of the gods, enjoyed in a smoky Valhalla far above the rest of the world. The von Linden men with their bold faces, and Eric with his lean hawk's face, added strongly to the illusion. And the waitress when she served them wore an embroidered cap with a starched crest at the back like a dove's tail. She kept casting her eye in Kurt's direction, and Siran thought of the gladiators and the girls who were only too eager to reward them with kisses. Had Kurt kissed so many in the past that he no longer noticed if a girl was pretty? He seemed unaware of the girl in the crested cap, and when she served him with mixed fruit *strudel* he thanked her with an absent politeness that brought a pout to her lips.

'Lots' of cream for me,' said Maria, and it may have been sheer accident, or because she sat next to Kurt, that the jug tilted and she received a stream of cream -- in her lap. She leapt to her feet with a cry and shook the cream from her embroidered skirt. 'You little fool! Look, you have made a mess of my frock! Just look at what you have done!'

'Be calm, Maria.' Trinka rose and took her by the arm. 'Come along upstairs and change the dress. You have another to wear, and it was an accident.'

'It would be,' Maria snapped. 'She was so busy looking at the men.'

'Come, my dear.' Trinka was urging her from the room when the innkeeper came bustling in. He was red-faced with apology. The girl was his niece and new to the work. Would they be good enough to excuse her, and allow him to pay for the damage to the dress?

'I don't care for damaged goods,' Maria said pettishly. 'The dress is now a rag... if your niece can clean it, she can have it.'

Maria flounced off, and Breck gave a lazy laugh. 'The *fraulein* means it,' he said to the innkeeper. He glanced at the culprit. 'You might as well have the dress. I daresay it can be cleaned and primped up like new again.'

'I would rather not, Herr Baron.' The girl began to gather up the empty plates, and now Kurt looked at her, and Siran saw a smile quirk on his lip. He liked spirit and an unbowed head ... and Siran suspected that he also liked to see his brother opposed now and then, especially when Breck took it for granted that his word was law.

Maria returned for coffee beside the log fire wearing the green suit that made her look a young huntress. Temper had left little flames in her cheeks, and Breck suggested that she sit by his knee on a leather stool and forget the incident at the supper table. She meekly obeyed him, giving him a look that spoke more eloquently than words.

She had created a scene ... would Breck forgive her? He was so dignified himself in his dark suit and frilled white shirt. So much a man in command of himself. Too experienced ever to let his temper show more than a fine steely edge. A musician came in to entertain them, and a boy danced wearing black shiny boots hung with bells. The innkeeper brought in a cake baked in the form of a ring, and they each had a small piece with a glass of wine. They told stories and roasted nuts, and it was like Christmas, with the snow thick and white all around the inn, and a frosty moon sailing among the mountain peaks.

'I wonder where each of us will be when this night comes round again, this time next year?' Siran spoke the words as they ran through her mind, then with a rather shy smile she glanced from one face to another.

'You would really like to know tonight what lies in store for each of us?' Eric peeled a hot chestnut with flinching fingers, and shot Siran a thoughtful smile. 'I prefer to let the future come as a surprise.'

'There must be those among us who have some idea what the future will bring.'

Maria glanced up at Breck as he spoke, her eyes like dark gems in her lovely oval face, searching his face hopefully for some sign that he referred, to *their* future. He gazed straight over her dark head, ignoring her as if she were a pet animal at his knee. Siran felt the brush of his eyes, but with her own eyes she saw every vestige of colour leave Maria's face.

'He is cruel!' The thought flashed unbidden, and left tiny wounds. She should have seen it before, that he was a man too used to having women at his knee to ever feel a deep, compassionate passion for any one of them. He liked them. He enjoyed their beauty, or their wit, *or* their warmth. He would never regard them as anything more than sleek, silky pets.

Even as his eyes speared Siran, his hands fondled lightly the shoulder of Maria. At once the colour stole back into her cheeks. She was Bavarian. She understood him, and would bear whatever he did to her.

Siran gave a start when someone bent over her and a voice said firmly that she was going to see the alps by moonlight. Hands drew her to her feet. 'You must not be afraid of them,' said Kurt. 'Come with me.'

'But I don't want to,' she protested.

'But I do,' he said, and she was swept tyrannously from the warm fireside and bundled into the snow-leopard coat that hung with the other coats in the foyer. Kurt belted his shaggy coat of sheepskin, and ordered her to put on her boots.

'You are a bully,' she said. 'Don't you ever say "please" to a girl?'

'Please will you put on your boots, ballerina, and come for a walk with me.'

'Mocking devil!'

She balanced perfectly on one foot as she slid the other into a scarlet knee-boot lined for warmth. She met his eyes and for a shattering moment she saw a naked flame in them. The tawny hair was tousled on his forehead, and he swept it back with a hand that concealed his eyes. She stamped her foot down in the other boot. 'Why can't we all go and look at the moonlit alps?' she asked.

'The others have seen them before, and I am one of those who never tire of them. I loved them from a small boy ... when I love a thing, I love it from here until eternity.'

Then as if he regretted telling her a thing so secret, he took a grip on her elbow and reluctantly she went with him, leaving behind the lights of the inn for the pale radiance of the snowlands surrounding the mountains. The air was crisp and cold and tangy, but after they had been walking briskly for about half an hour, everything silent but for the snow crunching beneath their boots, Siran began to feel a sense of exhilaration.

With a throaty little laugh she bent suddenly and scooped up a handful of snow. She pressed it into a ball and flung it at Kurt. He retaliated, and there beneath the shadow of the alps they pelted one another with snowballs, her breathless laughter mingling with his in the superb silence ... a silence they shattered as if it were a thing of fine crystal.

Her hair romped free in the wind and her eyes were glowing like beryls. Since the start of the day until now it had been mystery and magic, and she was grateful to the tough, diffident kindness of Kurt

for giving her this hour in the high, clear air of the alps. She stood and gazed at them and no longer did she feel as if a giant hand were going to pluck her up and drop her down a fathomless chasm.

She felt Kurt studying her and when she looked at him his eyes were lambent as a night-stalking cat's. 'Are you glad you came?' he asked.

'For the weekend, or for the snowfight?' She half smiled, a small fear of him still alive and active, for they were very alone, here in the mountains *au clair de la lune*. The stars were far off, like pointed flowers. Tiny things, like moth wings brushed her cheek, and she realised that it had started to snow. All around lay the chain-pattern their feet had made in the snow already fallen. She could hear the wind singing among the crags, and the snowflakes clung to his tousled hair and his thick rough eyebrows.

He was elemental, like the peaks. His voice held a muted thunder, his glance was ice and flame. Sometimes she had the strangest feeling that she knew him better than anyone she had ever known. She could say whatever came into her mind. She could hit him, hurt him, and even hate him. She had no need to be always polite with Kurt. It mattered not a jot that her hair was untidy, her lipstick smudged by the snowball that had landed on her face.

He was like his mountains because he was so utterly without falseness.

'Let's go back!' She began to run, following the trail made by their feet. She heard behind her the lash and rustle of his boots through the snow ... a sound of pursuit that made her want to beg him not to catch her. She had known that it would be dangerous to be alone like this, the chamois pursued by the hunter, but she had not known the exact nature of the danger. She hadn't dreamed that if his arms should reach out and catch her ... but they mustn't... they mustn't!

In a panic she sped off the trail, seeking the shadow beneath a lip of the mountain in an effort to escape him. She heard him call her name, and as it echoed up the walls of rock, frosted over by snow and ice, she heard another sound. An ominous rumble. A slithering clatter. A rushing noise, growing louder by the second, so that when she looked up in sudden fear she was already prepared for the curtain of loosened snow that was tumbling down on her.

'Siran!'

She was covered by Kurt a split second before they were both buried beneath a mound of snow. It kept on falling, rushing down the mountainside, a cascade that took several minutes to subside.

There wasn't a sound ... everything fell silent as the snow settled.

CHAPTER NINE

THE stretches of snow were infinitely serene ... then suddenly an arm broke through the surface, cleaved a breathing space, through which a moment later a head and a pair of shoulders emerged. Kurt pulled himself to his feet, and with the snow clinging like hoar-frost to his hair and eyebrows he hauled Siran out through the opening and brushed the icy snow from her face.

'Are you all right?' he demanded. He chafed her hands in his and after several shuddering seconds she was able to assure him that she was still alive.

'I—I think I can stand up ... oh, my foot!' She collapsed against him, wincing with the pain. 'It's the one I hurt before ... it feels twisted.'

'Let me see.' He knelt in the snow and pulled off her boot. She stifled a cry as his fingers played over her ankle. 'Yes, it must have happened when you fell beneath the snow. Does it feel very painful?'

He gazed up at her, and she blinked away the glitter» of tears in her eyes. The snowfall had frightened her, and more of it was blowing in the wind, accompanied by stinging little pellets of ice. The moon vanished behind a cloud and Kurt was a dark shape, looming tall to his feet.

'If you try to walk on that ankle you will make it worse. I shall have to carry you...'

'Alt-that way?' she gasped. They must be at least a mile from the inn, and every second the snow was whirling faster, thickening in the gloom and obscuring the chain of footprints that led back to the warmth and safety of the inn.

Netted in the driving snowflakes, she felt the warm, determined crush of his hands as he lifted her. '*C'est la guerre,*' he murmured, with the old return of mockery. 'You may trust my muscles if nothing else.'

'A blizzard seems to be coming on,' she said. 'We ... we could get lost!'

'We could indeed.' And he began to stride through the snow in his hefty boots, holding her in the hard hollow of his shoulder to shield her from the wind. It whipped the snow right at them, big half-blinding flakes and stinging little stones of ice. So sudden was the change in the weather; so treacherous after the display of calm. It was as if they were-being punished for breaking the crystal silence with their laughter.

Had they really-laughed, but a few minutes ago? Now Kurt was fighting the wind, battling to reach the inn before the snowstorm became even worse.

She wondered what his thoughts were, and she strove to see his face and could see only the forceful thrust of his chin above her head.

'I hope I'm not too heavy for you?' she cried above the tumult of the wind. 'It must be hard work, ploughing through the storm with a girl in your arms.'

'Out in Katmandu I once carried a guide down a mountainside. He had broken his knee in a fall, and that journey was real hard work. You are very slight. The requisite of a ballet dancer, *ja ?*'

'*Ja.* And you are built for conflict, aren't you?'

She heard him laugh above her head, and right away the storm-gods heard and increased the fury of the snow and hail. It grew really terrifying, because by now they should have come in sight of the inn, whose hurricane lamps would have been lit to guide them home.

Instead they seemed hopelessly lost... they might have been in the region of Katmandu, or any other wild and lonely place.

Suddenly Kurt halted and seemed to be peering ahead with some intensity. He shook his head, like a lion shaking its mane, as if the fast, whirling flakes were getting in his eyes.

'I think I see something ... yes, it looks like the roof and outline of a chalet.'

'But the inn...'

'If it's in the vicinity the people at the chalet will be able to tell us.'

He began to make for the place, and Siran felt a strange mingling of relief and apprehension. Not a single light pierced the net of snow, and the nearer they grew to the place, the more apparent it became that they had stumbled upon a small alpine hut tucked beneath the rocky mountains. The log walls and sloping roof were thick with snow, and the windows were utterly obscured. It looked abandoned to the storm, and Siran felt the painful tightening of Kurt's arms around her.

'Now I know where we are,' he exclaimed. 'We have veered off the path back to the inn and are about a mile and a half off course. This place, *fraulein*, is a chamois hunter's hut.'

'Oh no!' It seemed too much a stroke of fate. 'Can't you find the way to the inn?'

'Not in a blizzard,' he said drily. 'It looks as if we shall have to spend the night alone together. The hunters will have left food and rugs, and kerosene for the stove. It will be better than stumbling about in the snow. There are deep drifts into which we could fall, and if I became tired and collapsed ... think of all the things more terrible than spending a night alone with me.'

'Everyone at the inn will be so worried.'

'I have been lost in the mountains before now,' he drawled, 'but I do take your point. It won't enhance you in the eyes of my brother to be stranded with me for a night. It is my brother you are thinking of?'

'Not entirely ... there is your mother. She is bound to be concerned, but you don't take into account the anxiety of those who love you ... you regard love as a nuisance. You want to please only yourself...'

'It isn't a pleasure right now to stand here with the snow falling down my neck. Now hold on to me while I open this door.' There came the sound of a bolt being driven back hard, and the hard-packed snow rained down from the roof as he forced the door to yield to his touch. A darkness yawned, redolent of the smell of skins and oil and damp wood.

'There's a box of matches in my left-hand pocket. Can you reach them and strike a light for us?'

She pushed her hand into his pocket while the snow and hail drove past them through the open door. He stepped forward into the pitchy darkness and closed the door behind them, and Siran was aware at once of being carried into a primitive place by a man who had lived primitively all over the world.

Her fingers closed upon several objects in his pocket and they must have pressed the tiny knob of his watch, for suddenly in the dark the tiny, sweet bells of his repeater began to chime.

'I know small girls like playing about in big pockets,' he said, 'but I'll allow you to do that later. Right now we need those matches.'

'I—I'm not playing about,' she protested. 'The odds and ends you men carry in your pockets... ah, at last!' She struck a match and the tiny flame wavered in her hand and revealed the hut as a rough,

one-roomed shelter. She struck four or five matches before they found the lamp and coaxed a smoky light out of it. The wind beat at the log walls and rattled the door, and Kurt stood there holding her and searching the place with his eyes.

'I'd like to be put down,' she said. 'I shall be all right now.'

He looked down at her in the smoky lamplight and there were blue devils in his eyes. 'So we are snowbound in a chamois hunter's hut.' His gaze travelled over her, taking in her damp hair that shone like pewter, and the snowflakes melting on the fur of the snow-leopard coat. 'This place is not unlike the houses out in Tibet ... I stayed in one where I was offered every hospitality. Tashi, the guide I told you about, wished to share with me his best possessions. One of them was a yak, the other his almond-eyed young sister.'

'And which did you accept?' Siran looked him in the eyes and hoped he couldn't feel her trembling. It was partly the cold, the reaction from hurting her ankle, and of finding herself so alone with Kurt von Linden.

He laughed, making that deep purring sound in his throat. 'The yak came in very useful for toting my baggage up the mountain slopes to Kali Gandaki, a fascinating gorge I wished to visit.'

'Will you return to Tibet?' she asked.

'Yes ... all being well I shall go back to see again the friends I made there. The old lama who was so wise, and Tashi, who had tears in his eyes when I left. Can you imagine anyone being sad to see me leave?'

'Please, Kurt ...'

'Come, you think me as hard as rock.'

'Rough as rock, but not always hard.'

'Really?' His eyes glinted in his brown face. 'Don't go soft, on me, *liebchen*, not while we spend this night together in the hut of the chamois hunter. Though I once accepted a yak in place of a sweetheart, I am not immune to the pleasure of looking at a pretty face and holding in my arms a slim shape.'

'Kurt...'

'You speak my name as if it hurts you.'

'I—Fm cold ... can't we light a fire?'

At once he became practical and lowered her to her feet. 'How does the ankle feel now?'

She tried it and winced. 'Not too bad.'

'Siran,' he soft-thundered her name. 'You are looking rather as if you felt the earth shaking under your feet. Am I such terrible company, *du bleicher Geselle?*'

'I'm pale because I'm cold.'

'Hand me the matches and I promise you a fire in ten minutes. *Danke.*'

He set to piling the driest wood into the fireplace and after sprinkling it with a little kerosene he applied a match. There was a spring of flame among the sticks; outside in the night the clamorous wind and inside the sound of Brahms' *Wiegenlied* as Kurt whistled softly to himself. Siran sorted about inside a cupboard above the oil stove, gave a little shiver as a spider dodged her hand, and found some cans of soup and beans.

'Well, we can have emergency soup and comfort,' she said. 'Have you one of those boy-scout knives with the gadgets that take corks put of

bottles and stones out of horses' hooves? These cans have got to be pierced, and then we can heat it and serve it in these enamel mugs.'

He came to her side with a look that was far from boy-scoutish, and with his knife dug from one of the capacious pockets of his jacket he pierced the cans and stood them on the oil stove. 'Stand clear while I light this,' he said. There was a small explosion and a little tongue of flame that seemed to lick at his hand.

'Kurt... be careful!'

He turned and gave her a quizzical look, which changed when he saw how wide and alarmed her eyes were. 'You are thinking of that night at the hotel?'

'Yes.' She gave a shudder. 'Fire is so awful when it gets out of control.'

'Like an avalanche, thundering down from out of nowhere and leaving havoc in its wake ... but don't let us make ourselves unhappy. The hut is fairly warm and secure, and I spy a can of coffee and a small saucepan. No two people, *liebchen*, could wish for more when stranded in a blizzard.'

'But we have no water, *mein herr*.'

'We are surrounded by snow.' His smile held a return of devilry. 'I shall pack the saucepan with it and when boiled it will be quite all right for drinking. See if there is also a can of dried milk while I go and brave the cold.'

He; took the mugs with him so he could clean them in the snow, and left to herself Siran braved the long- legged resident of the cupboard and searched for dried milk. To her delight she found some, and also a jar of jam and a china jar filled with flour. She sifted it through her fingers and found it lumpy but otherwise all right. Now if she could

find a frying pan ... the spider scurried to another corner, but by this time Siran was feeling more sorry for him than scared. She was invading his home and though he looked a bit of a monster he couldn't do her any harm.

Her groping fingers closed on a long handle and with a sense of excitement she withdrew the object and had a vision of hot, sizzling pancakes smothered in jam. A vision that could come true, for the pan had been used as a container for a tin of butter, packets of chocolate and sardines in oil.

'So this was the loot you were guarding, Daddy-longlegs.' She carried the small hoard to the table, and then realized that Kurt had been gone from the hut for over ten minutes.

There was a stillness within the hut, a wildness without that tightened her nerves. She could hear the wind battering the walls, seeking a way in, and she remembered with a lurch of her heart what Kurt had said about deep snowdrifts. A person couldn't see them by daylight, and at night they lay in wait for unwary feet.

'Kurt!' She hobbled to the door and grabbed at the latch. The snow and wind drove in at her, clawing at her with cold greedy fingers. Her hair was blown into a wild disorder ... she couldn't see a thing beyond the dense cloud of snow.

The night had a demented quality, and Kurt's name was lost in the clamour as again she cried his name.

'Kurt... where are you? Oh, please, don't be hurt or lost...'

She clung to the door, striving not to be swept over by the wind. It was raw, driving the snow all in one direction. The log-built hut seemed as if it would crumble like a house of matches, the bunks creaked, and a wicker chair fell on its side.

Did she hear voices in the wind? Those of people who had been lost for ever in the mountains. Tears stung her eyes as she felt the slow icy grip of the anguish that must have been Kurt's when before his eyes he had seen his young sister's sweetheart swept to his death ... the rope that joined them cutting into him and dragging him to the very edge of doom.

Half out of his mind he had searched and called ... the lightning so fierce that it had struck the ice-axe from his hand. In the end there had been nothing left to do but leave the crevasse that yielded nothing but strange little sounds ... inhuman sounds offering no hope.

Siran, feeling as if a fine-edged cord tightened around her, was drawn beyond the hut into the storm. She fell and the pain of her ankle made her cry out. She stood up and struggled a few steps more, the breath snatched out of her mouth. She was smothered in snow like a small ghost, and though she realized the folly of what she was doing, she couldn't turn back to the safety of the hut. She could feel the pull of something more acute than self-preservation.

'Kurt... where are you? Kurt... I'll die if you don't come!'

Her weakened ankle twisted once more, and with anguish beyond the physical she screamed his name as she fell. Now there would be nothing, only the cold snow driving over her until she didn't wake again. Now there would be no more dancing. It had ended, the curtain was coming down, and no more would she see the man who dare not love because his love seemed only to hurt those he cared for.

So soft the snow, cold feathers of the softest down.

'Siran!' Hands gripped, pain flared, bringing her fully awake to the wild night once more.

'Kurt?'

'Yes, little fool!' She was lifted and carried swiftly through the torn night to the log hut. The door shook as it was kicked shut, and confused by the light it was several seconds before the face above hers came fully into focus. A mask of savagery, that etched deeply the cleft beside his mouth.

'What were you thinking of?' His voice was as savage as his look. 'You could have been lost, do you realize it? Anything could have happened.'

'I—I thought you were lost ... you were gone so long.'

'I was packing a handkerchief with snow to make a cold compress for your ankle, and the snow has to be packed tightly in the saucepan or it will melt down to a few mouthfuls.' He swept the disordered hair back from her eyes, and he seemed to sink his flamey blue gaze right into hers. 'Why did you follow me? Were you afraid to be left alone ... or were you worried about me?'

A bit of both, I suppose.'

'I heard you scream.'

'M-my ankle twisted again.'

'That ankle seems to have a weakness.' He carried her to the lower bunk and laid her down on it. 'Wait there and don't move,' he ordered.

He went outside and returned almost at once with the saucepan of snow, the mugs, and the compress he had made. He drew off her boot and told her to roll down her stocking and apply the compress to her swollen ankle. 'It will take out some of the ache. Rest, *liebchen*. I will see to the meal.'

'I—I was going to make pancakes.' she said huskily. 'I found some dried milk and flour.'

'If you fancy pancakes, then you shall have them.' He shot her a grin that warmed the recent anger from his face. He was rakish with his windblown hair, and the snow drops in the craggy lines of his weather-beaten face. He bent over her and unbuttoned the snow-leopard coat and drew it off her shoulders, so close that she could feel his warm breath against her cheek.

'Your eyes seem to plead with me,' he said. 'Do you wish I could be a gentle man, who would press your head to my shoulder and invite you to weep? Tears would not melt me, or help you. You have had a fright and the best remedy is a hot drink. Attend to your ankle, I will see to the meal.'

Deliberately he turned away from her and shrugged out of the sheepskin coat, the damp wool a mass of shaggy curls, and arranged both coats over a chair near the fire. The hot logs spat and sizzled as snow blew down the chimney, and the kerosene stove smoked and made the air blue. While Siran nursed her ankle, Kurt set the saucepan on the stove and made one more trip outside to wash the frying pan in the snow. He returned hurriedly and fast closed the door.

'It will be a bitterly cold night,' he said. 'We must thank the saints for putting this place in our way. What would you like? Bean tortillas, or hot jam pancakes?'

'Hot and jammy, please.'

'Life is funny,' he mused. "Who would have thought that you and I would be thrown together for a night by a caprice of nature, to feast on jam pancakes and coffee made with snow? You will have quite a story to tell your grandchildren in the distant future.'

'My offspring will be a row of battered dance shoes,' she joked.

He paused in the act of pouring the coffee, having set aside the soup for later on. His gaze flicked the ankle that had been hurt in' Vienna, and now in a snowstorm. 'You seem the type of girl who would like a family ... you like young Lorenz, eh? You can't intend to have only love affairs to compensate?'

She flushed slightly under his scrutiny. 'I think you assume that I want an affair with your brother.'

'Is the assumption so far from the mark?' He brought her a steaming mug filled with coffee, so longed for that she could almost forgive him for his arrogant remark.

'Thank you,' she said, 'for the coffee.'

'You would find it impossible to shut affection out of your life,' he added, lounging against the bunk-post to drink his coffee.

'You don't find it difficult, do you? You can have affairs without your heart being remotely touched, whereas I would have to be lonely or madly in love.'

'Most women have to be madly in love before they give themselves.'

'Men are less sensitive, *mein herr?*'

'They have less to lose, *fraulein*. Take my brother. I admire his business acumen, and the care he takes of Trinkka, but always he has been a man much liked by womeli, and he has always been forgiven for being— how shall I put it?—in the tradition of the well-born landowner. He has an eye for a pretty face, but after tonight he may feel less inclined to make a play for you.'

She stared at Kurt and slowly her face went white. 'What do you mean ... after tonight?'

'Come, do I have to spell it out?'

'You mean people will think that you and I ... oh no!'

'I am sorry, *liebchen*.' His smile was infinitely mocking. 'I realize I am not the von Linden you would prefer to be stranded with, but others will assume that I am. You see, I know the mountains too well to ever get really lost in them. I am too acquainted with high altitude weather not to sense when a storm is brewing.'

'You arranged for me to be stranded with you?'

'It was the only way I knew of to save you from being foolish and having something to always regret. My brother made up his mind long ago to marry the daughter of his wealthy business partner, and I should hate to see you seduced by him.'

'Do you intend to do the seducing yourself?' She gave him a look of infinite scorn. 'I realize that with a twisted ankle and a snow-storm blowing I couldn't hope to run away from you.'

'Be quiet,' he ordered. 'I intend to give you jam pancakes, not my hateful kisses. You know, *liebchen*, one day you will remember me with gratitude.'

'For abducting me?'

'Yes, for doing that.' He strolled to the table and whistled the Lullaby as he beat dried milk and flour together with the water left from their coffee. He put a chunk of butter in the pan and soon the room was filled with the warm sizzling sound of pancakes.

Siran watched him, so big and exasperating, so deft with those rock-hardened hands. 'Now I shall have a questionable reputation,' she gasped. 'I shall join the list of your gladiatorial conquests, and I imagine it's a mile long.'

'Let us say half a mile. I haven't yet won a gold medal for feats in love sports.' He nonchalantly tossed a pancake. 'It may give me pleasure to know in the years ahead that I helped to give a famous ballerina to the world. I may one day come to London to see you dance. I shall order *edelweiss* and when you receive the flowers on stage you will know who sent them.'

'Won't you come backstage to see me?'

'No, I shall let you remember me as the man with whom you liked to fight. If we met again we might be polite strangers only.'

'That would be bleak.' She smiled, and then looked away from him. Her smile wouldn't stay brave and bright. Suddenly she felt more like weeping, for it was bleak already to think of never seeing Kurt again. He was arrogant, infuriating, impossible, but he was also kind in a way no one else had ever been. He had dared censure rather than see her fall a victim to his brother's charm ... and all at once she couldn't bear him to think she cared for Breck. All she had felt was friendship, and a little flattery.

'It's ridiculous,' she said. 'You didn't have to kidnap me to keep me from losing my head over your brother. I never intended to. Don't you see, you've created an emotional situation out of very little. You saw me as a foolish young dancer intent on losing her head. It was kind of you to want to save my honour ... but I'm in far more danger of losing it with you.'

'I said I wouldn't touch you!'

'You touch me each time you look at me.'

Did she speak the words aloud, or only in her thoughts? He didn't move, or show any sign of having heard them. He seemed turned to rock, his chin more obdurate than ever, his brows contracted to screen his eyes.

'Eat your pancakes while they're hot,' he said.

'Don't treat me like a child,' she cried. 'Don't look at me the way you do and treat me as if I'm a naive schoolgirl.'

'I dare not treat you as a woman, for you and I could be lovers of only a night. There can be no tomorrow for us. No chapel bells or golden rings... not now, or ever. Do you hear me?'

'Loud and clearly, Kurt. As if from the Glass Turret itself, the echo of self-denial, the punishment you mete out to yourself for taking Kristy's young man on that climb. For now and always we love apart, you and I. You in Tibet, and me in London.'

'Don't talk of loving me,' he said harshly. 'I couldn't see you become my brother's mistress, but I can't ask you to become my wife.'

'What if I ask you to become my husband?'

'I shall never marry, *liebe*, but one day I hope you will find another man like David Cassian.'

'I think I have found him. He would be crazily gallant enough to kidnap a girl to save her from a bold Baron. There is every chance, my crazy Kurt, that when morning comes and we return to the inn your brother will demand that you make an honest woman of me.' She smiled slowly and reached out to touch that deep line beside his mouth. 'I think I shall blackmail you, *mein herr*. I shall let everyone believe that you made fierce love to me in the chamois hunter's hut.'

'Your eyes would give you away,' he mocked. 'They are too candid, too innocent, and I don't intend to harm that innocence.'

'I don't think you could ever do anything to harm me, Kurt, but if you send me away you will make me very unhappy. My dear man,' she traced with a fingertip the hard line of his jaw, 'you can't punish

yourself for ever. Whatever happens to any of us is pure destiny ... I thought when Cassian died that never again would I feel that lift of excitement, that warm thrill to living, but not even with him did I feel the intense expectation that came to me each morning at the castle.'

She looked wistfully into Kurt's eyes and found them guarded against her. 'Cassian taught me how to dance ... you, *mein liebe* Kurt, taught me how to love.'

'Don't say it, he groaned. 'Don't believe in it, then like all dreams it will gradually fade away.'

'Do you really believe that?' she asked.

'I have to believe it.'

'I don't want my love for you to ever fade away, Kurt. If we have to part, I shall still go on loving you, tormented by it.' The tears she had held back slowly filled her eyes. 'I know I must do whatever you decide, but just let me say this. You could have been a fine doctor, and I would have given up my dream of being a really good dancer for you. Won't you at least continue with your medical studies? You could do so much good, and compensate in that way for what happened to Helmut, and to Kristy.'

'You are turning my life upside down!' Suddenly his hands gripped her shoulders and his eyes blazed down into hers. 'Why did you have to come to Seven Lilacs? All my plans were made, then out of that station tripped a girl with hair like a misty autumn and eyes that looked at me and the mountains as if we were equally dangerous. I wanted to put you on the train back to Vienna as much as I wanted to tuck you in the sleigh furs and drive you for miles through the chaste white snow. Siran, why did we have to meet too late?'

'You are being obstinate,' she flung back at him. 'You have the chance to make something of your life, but you prefer to sacrifice it all to

those mountain gods who can be so cruel. It was they who killed Helmut, not you!

'I thought him weak, shiftless, not good enough for Trinkka's golden girl. I challenged him to that climb. If I had cut the rope as Kristy said I could not have been more responsible.'

'Will it make up for anything if you sacrifice your own future? I don't think so, Kurt. I think a debt should be repaid with hard work, duty, love.'

'We can love, but not always can we choose those we love.'

'We can try, Kurt. We both know there can be no real happiness if we part from each other. The very thought of it makes my heart go cold.'

'Come to the fire.' He lifted her and carried her to the warmth, and there he looked down into her eyes. 'You have brave eyes, Siran, and this is the first time I have seen tears in them. Tears for me?'

'For both of us.' Her fingers ruffled the hair at his temples. 'You are going silvery just here, Kurt. Think how distinguished you would be, the famous Kurt von Linden, whose hands were made to save lives.'

'Stop seducing me,' he ordered.

'There is only one way to stop me from saying I love you, need you, will help you with all the heart and strength I have. No, Kurt,' she laughed softly, 'there are two ways. You can kiss me, or kill me.'

'*Liebchen, liebchen.*' His lips came down with a ravishing hardness on her soft mouth. 'I would die for you ...'

'I would prefer you to live for me, *mein herr.*' Her arms stole close and loving about his neck. She could feel close to her the vigorous

beat of his heart ... the strong heart that would go on aching unless he climbed the Glass Turret and said goodbye to his ghosts.

'When do you plan to climb?' she whispered.

'Within a week.'

'Will you come back to me, Kurt?'

'I must, my *liebchen*.' That wicked little smile stole back into the vivid blue of his eyes. 'To make an honest woman of you.'

She smiled as they clung close in the firelight of the chamois hunter's hut ... the wind outside had died away, and everything around them was chaste and bridal. The moon shone through the clouds, and beautiful were the wild white glaciers.