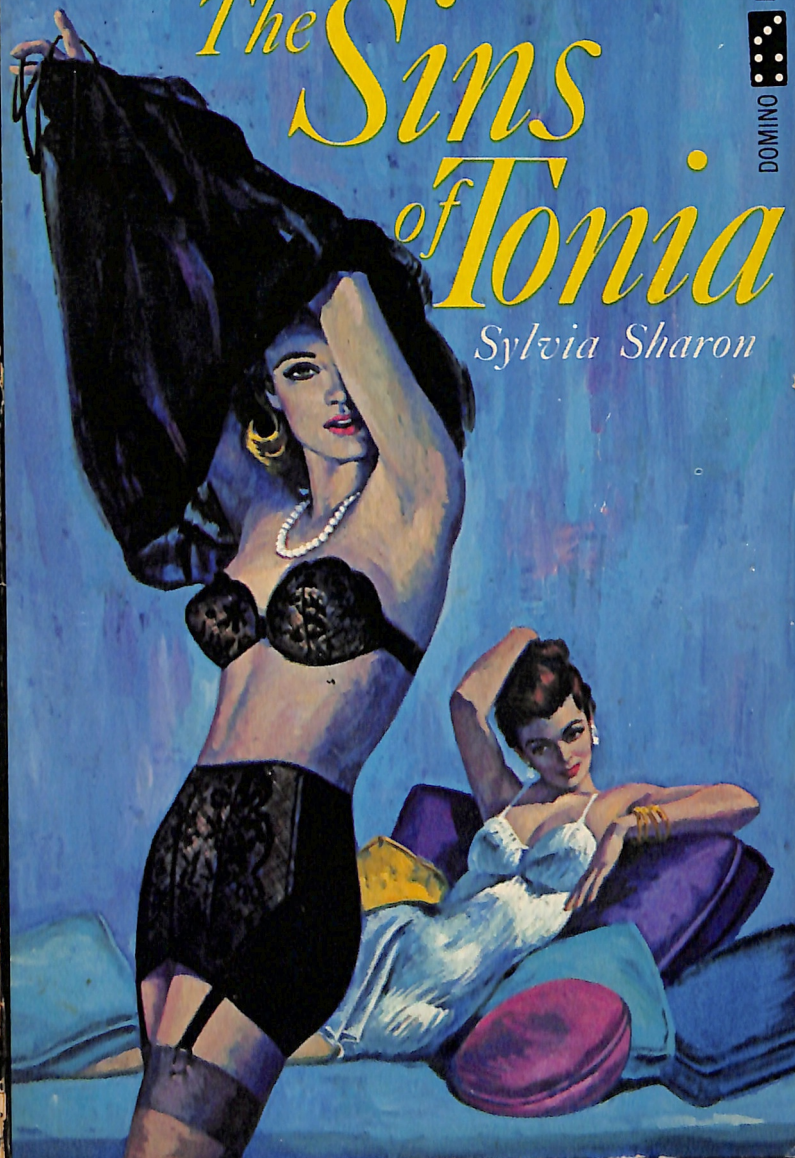


Her strange desires found fulfillment
in the embraces of others like herself

The Sins of Tonia

Sylvia Sharon

50¢
DOMINO BOOKS 72-729



THE FRENCH WAY . . .

Tonia's life had been unhappy; and her education—though excellent in scholastic matters—had been a miserable failure when it came to sex . . .

But that was before she went to Paris, and found a personal tutor in the intimate arts she ached to know:

Arlette!

Arlette . . . who was experienced in all phases of love, but preferred her own special brand—the brand Tonia was so eager to accept . . .

"I myself set you the example," Arlette whispered. "I will undress too, so that we shall both be ready for sleep when we have had our last lesson."

Tonia's gaze lingered on Arlette's small, ripe breasts. "Oh, yes," she murmured.

"Yes . . ."



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

*The Sins
of Tonia*

SYLVIA SHARON

A DOMINO BOOK • NEW YORK



A DOMINO BOOK • 1964

THE SINS OF TONIA

Copyright 1964 by Lancer Books, Inc.

All rights reserved

Printed in the U.S.A.

Published by

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 26 WEST 47TH STREET • NEW YORK 36, N.Y.

Chapter One

TONI SCOTT couldn't help crimsoning when Arlette Valory's limpid brown eyes met hers. When her father had told her that he was arranging to hire a tutor for her so that she could quickly acquire a speaking and reading knowledge of French within the next three months in order to enroll at the Sorbonne next semester, Tonia had naturally surmised it would be a man.

She had been in Paris just ten days, and it had been like a resurrection for her. Not only to visit this gay, carefree, charming City of Light, this city of Notre Dame and François Villon and of Mistinguette and Chevalier and Edith Piaf, with its marvellous and mercurial contrasts of the serious and the lighthearted, this incomparable city of Cézanne and Renoir, of Sartre and Victor Hugo and Dumas, but to be with her father again after nearly a year.

It had been depressingly lonely without him. Because she was as honest as she was sensitive, Tonia admitted that perhaps the combination of Paris and reunion with her father had lifted the guilty shadow of despondency and insecurity which had touched her life when her imperious mother had denounced her as an immoral, shameless creature and sent her away to that exclusive girls' finishing school in New Hampshire. She wouldn't ever forget the things her mother had said to her . . . bitter, sarcastic, withering things that lashed her like a whip. And they hadn't been true. How could they be true, when Marcia had reviled her for having carried on like a slut, for having given herself to Count Raoul? She'd protested against the horrifying injustice of the accusation. She'd wept. She'd even thought of suicide, except that the morbid fear of death—when she was still so very young—terrified her even more than her mother's furious invectives.

Of course those dreadful things of which her own mother had accused her weren't true. Because she'd never let any man make love to her. She'd never really known

any men, and at college she'd been far too busy with her studies and her reading and trying to write poetry to think of dates.

Perhaps that was why she'd been just a little hesitant when her father had told her that he was putting a tutor in charge of her. The intensive reading she'd done during most of her teenaged years had made her certain that Frenchmen, for all their charm—Count Raoul had been French, and a real man, and he'd borne out her theory only too awfully!—had only one thing on their minds: sex. So when Daddy'd told her last night that her tutor would visit her the next afternoon at the little studio apartment Daddy'd found for her near his hotel, she'd had all sorts of misgivings. Being alone with a strange man—would the tutor be young, middle-aged, or old?—and he being French, and everyone knew how open the French were about sex . . .

But now all her fears had been swept away the moment after she'd got up to answer the knock at her door. Her little apartment was on the third floor of a modest building on the Rue de Madelon, just two blocks from Daddy's hotel. Daddy had been so thoughtful to find it for her, and it was so reasonable, too. Later on, when she was able to earn her own living, she could easily afford the small rent.

It was just a darling little place, with that large circular living room, and a huge window that let her look out on the far-off spires of the Eiffel Tower; a small kitchen where she could do her own cooking—that is, if she could resist the lure of those many delightful little restaurants in the vicinity—; and a spacious, old-fashioned bathroom, with a huge porcelain tub in which you could soak luxuriously, just like back in the States. It was just perfect, and ever so atmospheric!

Of course it was already furnished, so that you had no choice about what was in it. But everything was really very nice. Of course, there was just one drawback, really. There wasn't any bed, just a huge studio couch, wonderfully wide and inviting-looking, for naps or sleep at night. But if a male tutor were alone with you, and you were on this couch, surely the first thing he'd think of would be making love to you. It was like having the bed right in the middle of the only room, and if that wasn't an open invitation to a Frenchman—

She knew it would have been exactly that to that hypocritical, nasty Count Raoul . . . and it had been his fault, she knew, that Marcia had accused her of being a slut. If only she could have convinced her mother that he had been the two who'd tried to make love to her . . . even to trying to force her—

So, her mind in a whirl over the speed with which everything had happened, she'd gone to open the door to that knock. And she'd had considerable misgivings. Yet instead of the man she'd expected Daddy had meant when he'd said he was sending over her tutor, she'd found herself staring blankly at a young woman of about 26, with very chic, closely cropped tawny-hued hair, large limpid brown eyes, a broad-winged Grecian nose, and a small, incisively firm mouth.

"Oh—I—who did you want to see?" she stammered.

"Mademoiselle Tonia Scott. Are you she?"

"W-why y-yes . . ." Tonia had wonderingly replied.

"Then you are the young lady to whom I am to give French lessons, or so at least that very delightful M'sieu Carl Scott informed me this morning. You *are* his daughter, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Yes . . . yes, I am. But I thought—"

"May I come in, *chérie?*" the young woman asked, with a warm smile.

"Oh—yes . . . yes . . . excuse me . . . I guess I haven't got my wits about me," Tonia stammered as she opened the door wider and stepped back to admit this unexpected visitor.

The chic tawny-haired Parisian entered, her eyes swiftly taking in the comfortable if old-fashioned setting. "But it's charming, *chérie,*" she pronounced, going to the windows to stare out at the view. Happily for Tonia's love of the esthetic and attractive, the building just across from hers wasn't quite so high. She had already noticed the Parisian irregularity of rooftops, and this time she had reason to be grateful for this seemingly haphazard style of residential construction; during the day she had an untrammelled view of the green of the park with the Eiffel Tower rising like an overblown exclamation mark at the very end of the horizon beyond. And at night, the twinkling lights explained why Paris was known the world over as the City of Light.

Then the young woman turned to contemplate Tonia,

who again, under the scrutiny of those large, expressive brown eyes, felt her cheeks burning.

A whimsical smile curved that small firm mouth. "But you thought a tutor must necessarily be a man, *n'est-ce pas*, Mademoiselle Scott?"

"W-well, y-yes, I did," Tonia shyly confessed.

"My name is Arlette Valory, and you shall call me Arlette. Even if I am to be your tutor—that is, if you wish me to be, *ca va sans dire*—I should feel terribly ancient if you were to call me Miss Valory, or, as we say in French, *Mademoiselle*. And since I am not married, you would not very well call me Madame. So it is Arlette, *hein, ma jolie petite?*"

Toni nodded, feeling very awkward before this sophisticated young woman of the world. "B-but I didn't mean . . . that is, I don't w-want you to think I didn't want you to teach me—"

"Let's sit down, *petite*, and get acquainted first, then," proposed Arlette with an engaging smile calculated to put Tonia at her ease.

They sat down on the couch, side by side, and again, for some inexplicable reason, Tonia felt her cheeks grow hot as, once again, the eloquent gaze of the Parisian beauty considered her.

"Now first I shall tell you how it comes that I have been sent to teach you French, instead of the man you seemed to be so obviously expecting," Arlette had a pleasant, husky laugh.

But this only embarrassed Tonia the more. "B-but I wasn't expecting any man . . . that is . . . n-not the way you make it sound," she faltered nervously, and by this time the crimson had suffused not only her cheeks but also her forehead and even the lobes of her dainty ears.

Arlette threw back her head to laugh heartily; then, contrite in a swiftly mercurial impulse, took both Tonia's long slim white hands in hers and murmured, "I am sorry, *ma petite*. While I think I speak good English, there are times I am not so careful as I might be. So we will be good for each other, *hein?* You will correct my mistakes in *Anglais*—English—and I shall correct yours in French—*Francais*. *Ca marche?* And that you see, is Parisian slang for 'Is that all right?'"

"*Ça marche,*" Tonia managed. And Arlette's smile now

was so gentle and understanding that she couldn't help smiling too, and the tension was dissolved. Arlette at last released her hands and said matter-of-factly, "*Bon!* Now this is what happened. Your so very handsome father, at a party a few weeks ago, met a Madame Lastagnet. She, as it chanced, is a dear friend of the American consul in Paris. Your father had expressed to that amiable person his desire to find a proper teacher so that you might learn our language quickly and be ready to enter the Sorbonne next February. *Eh bien donc*, Madame Lastagnet was kind enough to think of me."

"I . . . I see."

"No, not quite yet, *ma belle* Tonia—I will call you that, will I not? But you will see when I tell you that I earn my living as instructress of languages in a little school. It is not so big or well-known as Berlitz, *tu sais*, but many American businessmen know of us. And Madame is also a particular friend of mine. That was why she was good enough to think of me when the American consul introduced her to your father and he in turn told her all about you. And after she had recommended me, your father went to visit the school where I am employed and chatted with me, and he has made all the arrangements. Now, do you feel I am less of an intruder than when you opened the door so very cautiously, *petite?*"

Once again Tonia couldn't suppress her blushes as she nodded.

"*Voilà donc!* Good, that is settled. And now, *petite*, you must tell me something of your schooling in the United States. For one thing, have you read anything at all in French, do you know any of the familiar words we use every day?"

"Only a very few, Mademoiselle—"

"Arlette, Arlette, *ma chérie*, remember?" The chic Parisian shook a reproving finger at the exquisite young brunette.

"Ar . . . Arlette. Only a few words, really. I . . . I had Latin in high school, though."

"Well, surely, that is an excellent foundation. The Romance languages come from that mother tongue, you know. Now, I have brought with me a dictionary and a beginner's grammar book for you to study. Your father tells me you enjoy reading poetry."

"Oh, y-yes, I do . . . v-very much!"

"*Magnifique!*" Arlette purred. "There are so many wonderful French poets you can read and enjoy once you have acquired our grammar and a good basic vocabulary. For example, Rimbaud and Baudelaire and Verlaine. And our great Victor Hugo, *naturellement*. And there is Rostand, of course, who wrote *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *L'Aiglon*. Do you know those in English, perhaps?"

"Oh yes! I loved *Cyrano!*" Tonia exclaimed eagerly.

Although it was early November in Paris, today had been almost incredibly like spring. The relatively warm sun had permitted Arlette to go out in just a light top-coat, which she had removed as she entered Tonia's apartment. She wore a stylish gray tweed skirt and suit-coat, with the severe, plain neckline of a blue silk blouse beneath. She was perhaps half an inch taller than Tonia, svelte and lithe. And her long shapely legs, with their sinuous high-set calves, were sheathed in marvellously becoming gunmetal gray nylon stockings.

Her skirt came just to her knees. As she sat turned to face Tonia on the couch, it had slightly rucked up, and their knees now brushed together imperceptibly. A shiver ran through Tonia's body, implemented by the hypnotic effect Arlette's very expressive brown eyes were beginning to have on her.

"And of course, *ma chérie*," Arlette went on in a gently confiding tone, "there are women poets too. Have you, *par exemple*, read the divine verses of Sappho? I am sure there are English editions available in your country. But we French are proud of the sensitive translation of the Greek verses into French by our own Jeanine de Viernois. Later I shall bring you her book, you will find it enchanting! But now, let us begin our lessons, shall we? First, the alphabet and its pronunciation. Now watch my lips as I form the letters, *ma petite*."

Tonia obeyed. It was small and firm, that mouth, but there was a moist softness to it, a fleshiness to the lower lip she had not noticed at first. The corners, too, were mobile and vividly expressive. But most of all, it was Arlette's eyes that fascinated her as she watched the svelte Parisian form the sounds. These were eyes that studied her, that spoke to her, that hinted—but of what, she did not know. And so hypnotized did she become from their continual gaze that she did not notice that Arlette's slim knees continued to brush hers, and, at times, with

an even more insistent pressure than could be attributed to mere accident of proximity.

"Now you repeat them after me, as you have heard and understood them, *petite*," Arlette counseled.

Tonia falteringly began. Arlette gently corrected here and there, then took Tonia's hands in hers. "But that is admirable, *ma belle*, for a commencement. Truly, I do not flatter you. It is undoubtedly your earlier study of Latin that has prepared you for the appreciation of our beautiful language . . . the language of diplomacy, and of *l'amour, chérie* . . . of love . . . *amour*, you see, is our word for love. Yes, *vraiment*, you have the feeling for our language. And if you work hard and indulge your teacher who is not at all the man who you had imagined would be sent to you, I confidently predict you will enter the Sorbonne next term and speak as fluent French as I myself! Now, then, shall we look at this grammar book, *petite*?"

Tonia sighed as Arlette at last rose and walked to the table on which she had laid the two books she had brought with her. It was as if a spell had been broken. The magic of Arlette's presence, of her touch, of her eyes, of her seductive, eloquent mouth, had made the unhappy brunette suddenly feel that she had not just a teacher, but a sympathetic friend.

She did not notice that Arlette, turning back to return to the couch, had keenly and appraisingly glanced at her as she retrieved the books. Nor could she divine that Arlette intended to be her teacher in matters other than those concerning the study of language.

For Arlette Valory was an intrepid Lesbian, and if she had been recommended highly by the refined and beautiful Hortense Lastagnet, the divorced wife of a minor French government official, it was primarily because she was the ardent lover of the woman who had proposed her as *protégée*. They had been lovers, indeed, for three years, but Hortense had decided to remarry. She was giving Arlette her freedom. And to prove there had been only amity and understanding between them, she had of her own accord sought to find a young girl to take her own place in Arlette's affections. Carl Scott's chat with her at the party had been fortuitously timed. That was why she had recommended Arlette to him as the perfect teacher for his daughter.

And now that Arlette had met and talked with the sensitive young American brunette, now that she had held Tonia's soft slim hands and observed the voluptuous beauty of her new pupil's body, she felt she must express her deepest, most appreciative thanks to dear thoughtful Hortense. So many other women would have been jealous at the mere notion of their paramour's going on to another lover—even though Hortense had decided to enjoy the companionship of a man once again. But Hortense had such a sweet, generous nature. She understood so very well that it suited Arlette to be the initiatress. And with a shy, delightfully ingenuous creature like this raven-haired American girl, it would be a simple thing to make of her a wonderfully gentle and submissively eager *esclave d'amour* . . . a love-slave. Together they would read the poems of Sappho. And Arlette felt sure the transition from poetic to physical love would come naturally and unsuspectingly.

The way this delicious *petite* blushed had been a tell-tale sign for Arlette. The trembling of those long white fingers when she had grasped them in her own, that was a still better sign.

With an inaudible sigh of anticipation for what she foresaw of their ultimate relationship, Arlette Valory opened the grammar book and began Tonia Scott's first lesson in French . . . a lesson that was to have a profound impact on the sensitive brunette's impressionable psyche.

Chapter Two

ARLETTE VALORY had doubly erred in her analyses of Hortense and, so far as the future was concerned, lovely gentle Tonia.

She had credited Hortense Lastagnet with an unheard-of generosity in releasing her from their intensely passionate union, a union that had lasted three years and, in a sense, had been partly responsible for the estrangement of Hortense's husband Andre. That mild-mannered man had found solace in the arms of a pretty *soubrette* from the *Comedie Française*, and, a year later, divorced Hortense so that he could marry this charming girl whose only amorous thoughts were for him. Hortense, by contrast, had been deviously complex, or at least for a circumspect government official.

To begin with, she was an actress and unable to forget it for the less glamorous role of spouse. She had taken school parts at the Lycee, done Molière and Corneille at college, and run off with a stock company that toured the provinces from Lyons to Marseilles. Here, instead of the profound dramas and comedies of the masters, Hortense had played minor roles in sparkling comedies by Pagnol and Achard. Her greatest triumph had been the role of Laurette in Achard's witty "Domino"—a triumph she had thereafter not been able to equal or surpass. However, that one brief moment of glory had got her a husband. Andre Lastagnet had seen her on the stage at Lyons, fallen in love with the mahogany-haired willowy beauty, and paid such serious court to her and with such persistence that she had finally accepted him—though she would have been quite content to become merely his mistress.

The fact was, Hortense had more love for the theatre than talent for it. Fortunately, she had had common sense enough to realize her shortcomings—though this did not entirely quash her ambitions. She grudgingly admitted to herself that she could never really hope to

aspire to a permanent and featured billing with the *Comedie Francaise*.

For a few years, the privilege of living in Paris contented Hortense, and so did her husband's fidelity, unimaginative though it was in the bedchamber. Then she became restless. She had reached her thirties, always a dangerous period for a woman of temperament, and she had neither great wealth, social position, nor a coterie of lovers. She turned to hobbies instead of bearing children—Andre yearned for a son and heir, but Hortense's doctor had long before told her that her chemistry was apparently such that she could not conceive. At first she dabbled at painting; then she took up yoga, then the existentialist philosophy. And finally, when she was 33, she determined to take up the study of languages. She still cherished a secret hope that she might return to the theatre.

One of her friends recommended the *Ecole des Langues Communes*; here she would find instructresses who were efficient and did not charge too high a fee for their lessons. She visited the little school on the top floor of an old building on a side street in the Montmartre quarter, met the aristocratic if gently impoverished directress, Madame Francoise, and selected Italian as her choice of foreign tongue to master. Arlette Valory was assigned to her.

Arlette had always preferred her own sex to the male, even as early as grammar school. She had a quick, retentive mind, a stubborn independence which resented man's role as lord and master of the universe; and since she had found at an early age what erotic delights could be procured from her own body, either by her own manipulations or those of acquiescent girl friends, she saw no need to investigate the supposedly rapturous joys conferred by the male.

Thus she had remained a virgin, and a confirmed devotee of the cult of Sappho. She too, like Tonia, often read poetry—but it was invariably poetry which praised that inscrutable and tenderly mysterious cult, never the supremacy of man as lover.

When she met Hortense Lastagnet, she was 23 and Hortense was exactly a decade older. She sensed the dissatisfaction and restlessness of her mature and decidedly desirable pupil. And when Hortense, during their

moments of relaxation during a lengthy lesson in the cantos of Dante or the flowery prose of Manzoni, would distractedly talk aloud of wishing she might find a lover who would adore her and make burning love to her in a manner quite beyond the powers of her staid balding spouse Andre, the ardent Arlette determined that she would substitute herself for that hoped-for suitor.

She persuaded Hortense to go for an outing with her on the Seine. A rainstorm burst upon them in their little rowboat, drenching them to the skin. Arlette docked the boat at a small deserted boathouse, and she and Hortense huddled inside till the storm was ended. Her pupil's lush body was diaphanously revealed, thanks to the torrential rain which had soaked Hortense's pretty pink silk dress. It was child's play to caress those hard-tipped high-perching round breasts, to brush that full Cupid's bow of a mouth with darting butterfly kisses, and soon the storm outside was forgotten as, locked in each other's arms, Hortense and Arlette exchanged those sweet and maddening caresses which Bilitis so doted on in centuries long past.

A new world of passion opened up for Hortense La-stagnet. She did not seek a man to usurp Andre's rightful place in her bed. Instead, Arlette occupied that privileged status when Andre was out of town inspecting the wheat-fields of Tours-la-Chataine or the condition of barns in Bedoc-du-Ville.

Arlette it was, too, who gave new impetus to Hortense's previously suppressed desire to return to the stage. She sensed that if her mature lover was fired by the creative stimulus of imaginary roles on stage, she would be all the more *fougeuse* in bed. She therefore proceeded to tutor Hortense not only in Italian, but also to read with her modern comedies and romances, and finally to introduce her to a certain Carole Surchamp, who was the directress of a small suburban theatrical company. In addition, the directress was herself an indomitable Lesbian. Arlette ran no risk in bringing Hortense's propensities for the stage to the attention of a woman who might nominally be considered a rival: she had already ascertained that Carole Surchamp had a *grande passion* not easily supplanted, for it happened to be a forty-year-old widow whose enormous wealth supported the entire company. And by helping Hortense return to the stage,

Arlette reaped a fruitful harvest of Hortense's amorous gratitude—just as she had known she would.

Andre Lastagnet had discovered his wife's physical infidelity by accident one afternoon when he returned home much earlier than had been expected. Though he cast an indulgent eye on this devious pilfering from his own connubial joys—a male lover in Hortense's arms would, of course, have thrown him from indulgence into rage—he would not tolerate her aspirations for resuming her theatrical career. He left her for the complaisant and charming soubrette, who wanted a husband much more than she did a career.

It was at about this point that Hortense met Carl Scott at a party for theatrical people. He had come to Paris to work with the director of the *Comedie Francaise* in adapting into French a highly successful Broadway comedy whose producer he had been. He had brought with him his only child, Tonia, to free her from the loveless, hateful atmosphere which Marcia, from whom he was separated, had created as an unjust punishment.

Hortense promptly fell in love with Carl Scott, and it was her hope to marry him, as soon as his divorce would become final. However, her sudden infatuation was somewhat prompted by her newly intensified ambition to rise to theatrical heights, and she knew he could help her realize that dream. Regrettably for her, though she did not yet know it, he found her much too transparent, and her love was destined to be one-sided. What he did not know, in turn, was that fate had something else in store for him.

So, believing herself on the threshold of becoming the next wife of this handsome, mature and wealthy American theatrical producer, Hortense Lastagnet acted in the "heroic manner" in the very best tradition of the theatre. She summoned Arlette Valory for a final amorous tryst, and, weeping affectionately in Arlette's consoling arms, told her, "I give you your freedom, *ma pigeonne*. These forbidden hours we have stolen from the jealous gods must end, alas. I am to wed again, *ma mie*, and so I must renounce our tender love. But console yourself, my sweet Arlette. I shall give you someone whom you can teach how to love and thus be consoled in losing me. I do this out of my devotion to you, Arlette beloved. She is a young American girl, very shy, very sensitive, very lonely. You

will dominate her completely, as you never could with me."

Arlette had believed this. Now, having seen Tonia Scott, she had still more faith in Hortense's tongue-in-cheek deception, and, also, in her own secret estimates of Tonia's utter innocence.

And so she had been doubly wrong. Wrong in judging Hortense as nobly generous and unselfishly self-sacrificing. Wrong in believing that raven-haired, shy, hesitant Tonia was completely innocent. Yes, innocent of man, undeniably innocent, despite Marcia Scott's furiously jealous accusations. But not at all innocent of the sweet and cloying and hidden ecstasies which woman and woman can, together, attain. . . .

Chapter Three

WHERE HAD it all started? Perhaps the psychiatrists, who learnedly discourse on subconscious impulses, childhood repressions and traumas, and the conditioning of infants, can tell us. Or at least, they do so in pompously dogmatic manner, but even they cannot always be sure. We ourselves, amateur psychiatrists on many an occasion, may at times be as accurate.

Yet with Tonia Scott, the incipient sensitivity and shyness which she had built up around herself over the years, much as a mason puts brick upon brick to form a gradually rising and infrangible wall, must surely have stemmed from her loneliness as a child. Instead of playmates, she had the world of books wherein to choose excitingly satisfying companions. And instead of parents, she had such substitutes as a governess and private schools. Even her kindergarten days were spent in an expensive private institution, the monthly fee for which would assuredly have fed a family of six for half a year. Her grammar and high school education were similarly channeled through selective and highly exclusive private schools, whose tuition was naturally still costlier.

For her father, Carl Scott, was a theatrical producer, and his enterprises kept him away from home much of the year. Not only in his office in Manhattan, where he met with stage directors and would-be members of his forthcoming casts, but also to Europe and even to the Orient. At thirty, he had scored his first Broadway success by backing an unknown playwright in a delightful social comedy which had caught on. He had celebrated the triumph by getting married to Marcia Dalis, a beautiful though pampered and inordinately selfish debutante whose poise and figure had enchanted him and whose snobbery and willfulness he had mistaken for sophistication. Before he learned his mistake, Tonia was on the way and his probity and integrity as a man would not allow him to cast Marcia aside, though there would have been many adoring and far less demanding females im-

mediately ready to replace her either as wife or titular mistress.

And he was wise enough to realize, too, that keeping one's domestic arrangements in chaste order augments a reputation. The Broadway columnists would have avidly pounced on the slightest intimation that Carl Scott's marriage was going on the rocks, or that he had been clandestinely seen in the company of this or that delectable young actress. For those who meet with material success are at once the object of envy and of spiteful jealousy on the part of those less gifted mortals who idly dream of attaining the pinnacle and yet possess neither stamina nor ability for such achievement. The psychiatrists often term this a form of paranoia; we are wont to call it just plain sour grapes.

And besides, the estrangement between Carl and Marcia Scott was basically spiritual rather than physical. When he had married Marcia Dalis, she had been 19, and of the pure fulminating beauty of an Athena. Gray-eyed, her warmly lustered brown hair styled in imposing pompadour, with patrician features highlighted by an imperious, full mouth and firm chin, and by high set cheekbones that lent a touch of the exotic to her countenance, Marcia represented the epitome of feminine beauty for this discerning and creative man, then in his thirtieth year. Her tallness—she was five feet eight—gave a majestic proportion and grace to her body. Long full thighs, sculptural hips, a willowy, deeply indented back, slim shoulders, long graceful arms and beautifully delicate fingers, and the high-perched thrusting pear-breasts of a young naiad—small wonder Carl Scott had fallen and fallen hard. She might have been a statue wrought of divine marble by Praxiteles, come to life as Galatea for her adoring Pygmalion. But for one fact—the breath of life had made her marble-like white body human, female, alluring and challenging to the most feverish importunities of the male: her mind rejected his ardors with a cold precision that was annihilating to a proud man's self-respect and dominant masculinity.

For Marcia had been only too well reared by her socially ambitious mother in all those shibboleths and traditions by which the female ensnares the unsuspecting male: he must pay the price for having won her; she is too good for him, and if she deigns to yield herself on

occasion, the compensation must be great indeed. In the woman of less advantages and education than Marcia had, these tactics lead to prostitution; in Marcia, they led to a calculatingly ambitious marriage and to doling out her favors in return for what she wished out of life. Yet not quite so crassly as that statement sounds, for otherwise Carl Scott would have seen through her long before he married her.

To begin with, she was a superb actress though she had never trodden upon a stage. She convinced him that to have a child at once before they learned whether they were ideally mated would be a tragedy for that child—and he applauded her compassion. She bound him to her by her bodily allure, though she gave him the illusion of an inherent chastity and shyness which held her back from giving anything of herself—and he congratulated himself on having won the chastest of wives, who could accord her favors only to him.

The truth was that Marcia was entirely self-centered and narcissistic. Far from being chaste, she was unduly passionate—but her truest satisfaction came not from the act of love but from the aggrandizement of ego which knowing herself to be desired by many different men brought her. Thus, although Carl Scott showered her with material luxuries (a summer home in Connecticut, furs and jewels) which his first Broadway hit more than underwrote, she had already been physically unfaithful to him by the end of their first year of marriage. And she had taken a second lover the next year, whose impetuosity had led to the miscalculated conception of Tonia—which Marcia remedied by a sudden fervent declaration of love to her husband, so that he never had the least suspicion that the child was not his.

Indeed, he never learned that one guilty secret. But he did learn, quite by accidental eavesdropping one afternoon when he came home earlier than expected, that his wife loathed and detested the child within her womb, because it would halt her social activities, distort her flawless body, rob her of her independence and give her the feeling that she was a brood mare instead of an imperishably young "free spirit." She had come home from the gynecologist, and, maudlin with self-pity and a few too many martinis, had delivered a hysterical monologue to her mirror, embodying all these hostile thoughts. Carl

Scott, having gone toward her bedroom when he heard her weeping, had overheard in a shocked horror. For the first time her naked psyche had been unveiled to him: whereas her statuesque physical nudity had enslaved and enthralled him, this revelation had begun the estrangement between them.

And it had also, more than likely, begun the loneliness, the shyness and the haunting isolation for the child within Marcia's womb . . .

And yet the magnificent perfection of his wife's voluptuous body, with its creamy white skin so glossy-sheened that he could espy the delicate tracery of blue veins at the knee-hollows and at the crook of her long sculptured arms, the saucy tilt of her breasts and the dark flints of her nipples when his lips and fingers brushed them, the elysian engulfment of her loins and the rapier-fierce darting of her tongue in their cohesive kisses, still excited and shackled him, as did his own decency. Carl Scott was not one to play the role of misunderstood husband; he had seen too many such stereotypes on the stage of his own produced plays. Nor was he one to seek out a casual light of love, even for an evening's hire. Besides, he hoped against hope that as the years progressed and Marcia's first flamboyant egoism waned with maturity and recognition of the time for taking stock of herself, they might be drawn together in spirit as they continued to be in flesh.

In quick succession, he produced five Broadway hits, and then was summoned to London to adapt one of the Elizabethan comedies into a musical. This too was a dazzling success, and Carl Scott's wealth and fame grew, as did his separation from Marcia's bed. Not that she disparaged success—why argue with the goose that laid the golden eggs when you could have the gander on the side? But by this time, the tenth year of their marriage, she was on an art and culture kick which took the overt form of becoming a patroness of unknown art galleries and unknown painters. She collected expensive bric-a-brac and artifacts and antique furniture; and, discreetly, she collected more swains to pay worshipful court to her beauty, both from afar and tightly locked in carnal embrace.

Tonia was eight then, in the private grammar school. When she came home for the summer, it was to know her mother only as a glamorously gowned, bejeweled

goddess who shrank from the child's attempts to hug and kiss her with tart reprimands like "Be careful, Tonia, you'll crush my gown" and "Look out, Tonia, you'll smear my make-up and I've taken hours with it!" and whose usual rejoinder to the little girl's timid request to play with or read to her was "Go tell Miss Fortescue to do that. I really haven't time, Tonia."

Miss Grace Fortescue became Tonia's governess when her charge was five and remained as such till the girl was fifteen. Bony and taciturn, filled with that sense of grudging veneration for money and luxury which the genteel poor of this earth invariably muster for their alleged betters, she was a confirmed and loveless spinster. But while Marcia's lovelessness was diametrically opposed to her narcissistic sensuality, Grace Fortescue feared and detested physical love. She looked upon it as wicked and as a debasement of a human being's nobler mission on this earth.

And because of this belief, she considered it her own particular mission in life to convey to Tonia's impressionable mind the utter futility and degradation of physical and even romantic love. She sniffed openly when she discovered her charge, at twelve, reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Sonnets from the Portuguese," and she informed the wide-eyed child that the poetess had committed the unforgivable sin of flouting her own loving father and leaving a happy home to run away with a Bohemian good-for-nothing. Tonia, better read than her governess, knew this was hardly accurate, but a constant repetition of such denunciations of the free thinkers and creative geniuses whose works she admired could not be without effect on her sensitive mind, left to herself as she was so much of the time.

For even at private school, she had been inculcated by both her mother and Miss Fortescue with the doctrine that she was by birth and name and wealth better than any of her classmates and she must conduct herself accordingly with *noblesse oblige*. By this pretentious phrase, her mother and governess simply meant "Don't make friends and don't mix with the commoners." And since by this time, Tonia's world of books had become virtually her entire life, she did not resist this exhortation.

Carl Scott's star grew brighter as Tonia grew into her teens. He went to Sydney, Australia, to produce a stun-

ning ballet of John Antil's fascinating score, "Corroborree," that exciting music which does for the Australian aborigine what Stravinsky's "Sacre de Printemps" does for the prehistoric savage in depicting the awesome primeval rituals which pay homage to the mystic elements. He stayed on to direct and produce a new play about the Australian convict ships of the late 18th century and the pioneers they brought to that timeless land. Marcia, meanwhile, was busy with collecting paintings by a gifted Spanish impressionist who was a better lover than he was an original artist.

And when Tonia became eighteen, her father returned to New York to prepare for a new musical in which he had high hopes. He spent more time in their Riverside Drive apartment than he had in the past decade, and he virtually rediscovered his daughter. She had grown into marvellously budding young womanhood; he, who had worked tirelessly with his casting directors to select primarily the actor or actress with a "luminous quality for the role"—his favorite phrase—, was struck by the wistful sensitivity and delicate grace of his daughter.

For Tonia was Diana to her mother's haughty Athena: of medium height, her body was lithe and delicately sweet, as if unawakened, as indeed she was. She could already boast wide-spaced, round firm breasts with dainty buds, slim waist that flared into demurely rounded hips and long slender thighs. And in the pristine oval of her expressive face, in the haunting and haunted wistfulness of her great clear blue eyes, with questioning, soft brows above to limn them and thick curly lashes to hide their unanswered queries; with her dainty aquiline nose and its sensuously thin wings, in the tremulous full sweetness of a mouth that had never known kisses and yet unknowingly yearned for and was made for them, in the oval cast of her creamy cheeks, in the high pure beauty of her forehead, there was the nocturnal mysticism of a true Diana, goddess of the moon, not readily granted unto all acolytes, but only to the knowing and the gentle.

If her mother's skin had the alabaster-rich gloss of fresh cream, Tonia's was the smooth fluidity of milk. And yet her skin seemed richer, whiter by far, because of the lustrous midnight-black hue of her luxuriant hair, which she wore in a long pageboy with curls turned under, caressingly stroking her shoulder-blades and fram-

ing the sweet oval wistfulness of her face, burnishing the gracefully slim column of her neck with the vivid luster of ebony.

Carl Scott, a few months away from his fiftieth birthday, felt suddenly older when he realized how Tonia had grown from the gangling, soft-voiced, hesitant child he had seen on such infrequent occasions. And when he took her to dinner at one of New York's finest restaurants—Marcia was attending the opening of a new gallery to which she was a principal financial contributor—he was spellbound at the expressive way Tonia had of talking, of her literary references to apply to the most mundane situations and incidents. And he saw, too, how unnatural it was; hers was the stilted though beautifully poetic approach to life, because life had not yet really touched her.

"Tonia, I've not been much of a father to you, I'm afraid," he confessed with a wry smile. "But I'm beginning to see that you've too much book-learning and not not a tenth enough awareness of what other people are like. Do you really like being at private school?"

"Yes . . . yes, I suppose so, Daddy," Tonia replied pensively. "I can read a lot, and I do write poetry and essays. The teachers are very nice to me."

"But, my dear girl, that's not living at all. Have you any friends, any really close friends you share your innermost thoughts with?"

"Oh, no!" Tonia breathed, as if she were almost shocked by such a suggestion.

"That's exactly what I mean, my dear. Yes, it's all my fault. I've been so busy with my own world of the theatre that I didn't have the time or sense to see what your mother was making of you . . . a cloistered, sheltered and much to precious blue-stocking. And I don't think that governess you had for ten years—"

"Miss Fortescue."

"Yes, Miss Fortescue—I don't think she did you any good."

"She . . . she was kind to me, though, Daddy."

"Oh, if you mean by that she didn't beat you, I dare say. But she beat down your spirit and your mind. At your mother's orders, I've no doubt. Tonia, I'll be in town for the rest of the year. And it would please me very much if, instead of going on to a private college, or to that fancy Swiss school your mother's been talking to

me about, you enrolled in a coeducational college, where you can meet boys as well as girls of your own age. Yes, I said boys—I'm sure Miss Fortescue would disapprove, and your mother seems to have wanted to keep you away from them—why, I don't know. You've very lonely, and some day you'll want to marry and lead your own life—"

"Oh, no, Daddy!" Again the shocked look came into Tonia's wide soft blue eyes.

"Good God, darling, why say no to a normal, wholesome future like that?"

"B-because I . . . I'm not sure. I . . . I don't know, really, wh-what love is. It . . . it's not like in the stories—"

"That's for sure. Nor even like in the plays I put on to amuse people."

"And yet," she said softly, her eyes far away, "if it only could be like the great romances. I mean, like the love Cyrano had for his Roxane, or Romeo and Juliet. But . . . but I don't know about any such things, except what I've read and thought about, Daddy. And . . . and I don't know how I'd get along with . . . well, boys, if I went to a college like that."

"For that very reason, you owe it to yourself to mingle, honey. Your mother and that grim battleaxe of a Miss Fortescue gave you the notion you were something special, not to mix with the *hoi polloi*. That's exactly what I want you to try to overcome. Will you do it for my sake, sweetheart?"

"All . . . all right, Daddy, if you really want me to."

"That's my good girl. And you'll see, Tonia, you'll like it. Just don't tell yourself in advance you won't. Relax, try to take pleasure from the simple things of life. A walk, swimming, a good meal like the one we've just enjoyed. Books are fine—I make my money by turning books into stage productions for people to watch and, I hope, to enjoy. But don't forget that out of the books come flesh-and-blood people, dear. Unless the audiences believe in the characters I put on that stage, the plays fall flat because they're unreal. You're real, Tonia, and it's time you proved that you weren't just out of a stack of books . . . yes, you're a beautiful young woman with your whole life ahead of you."

She nodded dreamily.

"I know you're interested in literature and history,

darling. So we'll get you into a good college with outstanding freshman courses in those subjects. And this is one time I'm going to override your mother."

And Carl Scott had been as good as his word. Tonia was duly enrolled in the fall semester at Columbia. And all might have been well. She had shyly begun to respond to the good-natured, friendly companionship of her classmates, boys as well as girls. There had even been a bespectacled sophomore named Mark Jorgenson, who shared her passion for Rossetti and Browning and who would walk her to the campus sweet shop for a soda, while enthusiastically discussing their respective literary merits. Perhaps Tonia might even have gone out on steady dates with Mark . . . if it had not been that Marcia was in a new phase of her restless quest for yet another suitor who would revere her and venerate her narcissistic cult of herself . . . if it had not been that Carl Scott was called back to Paris to arrange for a French adaptation of his latest Broadway comedy hit.

And finally, if it had not been for one Count Raoul de Monricard, of a distinguished French family, a painter of sorts, impoverished but aristocratic . . . and at heart, a gigolo.

Chapter Four

TONIA HAD just completed her first year at Columbia, and was slowly beginning to adjust to the daily contact with young people of her own age and of both sexes, when Count Raoul de Monricard arrived upon the scene.

She was then 19 to her mother's 40 (though Marcia resolutely refused to admit to that age and remained a convenient 38 so that she might retain the illusion of staying in the tempting thirties, which she believed to be a woman's supreme period of attractiveness), and the Count was 31. These chronologies alone were enough to presage difficulties ahead—but even the most astute astrologer could not have read in the stars what was to befall the delicately nurtured, sheltered and only now gradually acceding psyche of lovely Tonia Scott.

Her husband's sudden departure for Paris left Marcia with another of the many voids in her married life, voids which she sought to fill by means of finding a processional of candidates to her cult. That cult, whose preservation and expansion had by now become the dedicatory purpose of her shallow, vapid life, was solely to flatter and adulate her, so she could bask in the knowledge that she was an object of adoration to all who came within her scope.

Two weeks after Carl Scott had flown to Paris, Marcia met her newest acolyte. Dan Jacoby, who ran the little art gallery off 41st Street to which she contributed money, suggestions and patronage—as well as struggling artists—phoned her one afternoon before Tonia returned from her classes.

"Dear lady," he purred unctuously—long ago he had realized the practical wisdom of catering to Marcia as if he, too, thought her a goddess, which was not too broad a stretch of fantasy, considering that she was actually his "angel"—I know how happy you are to come upon an unknown and deserving talent. People of your artistic gifts and appreciative sense are so regrettably rare. But at the same time, dear lady, I hesitate to impose upon your

bountiful heart, lest you think me venal." Having discovered that Marcia's snobbery was best reached by pretension and pedantry—perhaps this was a subconscious envy of Tonia's scholastic erudition and a desire to emulate it—Dan Jacoby, Brooklyn-born and secretly a devotee of the burlesque house and waitresses of easy virtue, saw to it that whenever he spoke to Marcia Scott, it was in the most flowery rhetoric.

"Now, now, Mr. Jacoby, you know I'd never think that of you," Marcia cooed. She was reclining on the majestic double bed in her lavishly furnished room, and her superb figure, which showed few traces of the advancing years, was accentuated by the cling of a blue satin housecoat and matching pajamas. She was smoking a cigarette in an ivory holder, and as she cradled the phone with one slim jeweled hand, her other hand was stroking her satin-covered thigh to brush off imaginary ashes. Her bare toes, newly polished, wriggled sensually as she arched like a cat, shifting herself up higher on the two thick pillows behind her head.

"Very well, then I must tell you about this man, dear lady. I met him only the other day through Mrs. Delgado." Dan Jacoby was as shrewd as he was unctuous. Gloria Delgado, nearing 50 and the wealthy widow of a banker, was Marcia Scott's avowed rival and enemy.

"Oh?" the rising inflection of her tone made Dan Jacoby grin; he had, precisely as he had calculated, roused her interest in Raoul de Monricard, and he could not have accomplished this in any speedier way.

"Yes, dear lady. She visited my humble gallery Tuesday, you see. It appears he came to New York on a visitor's permit to see his cousin, who is also an art dealer known to Mrs. Delgado. She happened to see one or two of his paintings, and remarked to me quite by accident what a feeling for the abstract he had."

"What does that overpainted relic know about abstracts?" sneered Marcia as she dug her bare heels viciously into the rumpled sheets, symbolically crushing Gloria Delgado's fat pearl-necklace-ornamented neck beneath them.

"You and I know, dear lady, that she is a veritable tyro beside yourself," Jacoby fawned, "but, alas, a poor art dealer must accept checks and commissions from anyone who is solvent."

"You needn't remind me, Mr. Jacoby, if you please, how wealthy that detestable woman is. And she lets everyone know it. I just despise ostentation."

"Oh, so do I, dear lady, so do I," Jacoby hastened to repair the psychic rift between himself and his best customer, for his practised ear was sensitively attuned to Marcia Scott's every shifting mood. "But I gather she was smitten with his talent. She said something about discerning the quality of a young Miro in one of his landscapes. And that he's most personable. She met him there at the gallery, you see."

Marcia's mental ears pricked up at the "personable." She was bored again, bored to tears. Now that Carl was gone—and he would be in Paris perhaps the rest of the year—she needed a new addition to her sycophantic coterie. Most of these at the moment were society women, anyway, and a few rather prissy men who didn't in the least appeal to her.

Her former lovers no longer made up this coterie; when she discarded them, for the most part, they found new patronesses. One or two of them had been championed by Gloria Delgado—but since she and the banker's widow were not even on speaking terms, that didn't matter, since she never saw them again. Moreover, her very last lover, some eight months back, a Brazilian profligate in his late thirties who, with the financial security of his father's rich coffee plantation behind him, painted in cubist style as a hobby to get him into the circles and the beds of attractive society women, had proved himself an utter renegade by going into that very enemy camp. Carlo had been a wonderful lover. How he could cheapen that handsome, virile body of his by coupling with that fat painted harridan—ugh! Yes, it was high time she found another intimate companion. Personable, hm . . . and Gloria Delgado had discovered him, had she? Nothing would give her greater satisfaction than to take this newest genius away from that disgusting creature.

And she could. She could take any man away from any woman, she had only to make up her mind to do it. Marcia glanced down at her body, and with her right hand unbuttoned her housecoat, then the tops of her pajamas. As Dan Jacoby's syrupy words continued to praise her artistic taste and judgment, her narrowed eyes

inspected her own charms with an impersonally critical awareness. In this at least she was mercilessly honest, for she prided herself on her firm breasts and thighs, on the sleek flat belly, the flatteringly unwrinkled, soft texture of her creamy skin. Her daily beauty routine and exercises consumed several hours as she strove to keep the ravages of age from marring what she could now admire . . . yes, her breasts still retained their resilience . . . two thrusting, wide-spaced pears, with large brownish-coral aureoles in whose amorous centers crinkly, ripe-tipped nipples surged with each breath, as if beseeching kisses. She wondered how Carlo Villegas liked those flaccid gourds of Gloria Delgado's! She had no doubt, as she now preened herself, that he was making unhappy comparisons that were hardly flattering to her rival.

"Tell me, Mr. Jacoby," she crooned, as her soft hand idly tested the resilient thrust of one enchantingly creamy-nude breast which the gape of housecoat and pajama tops carelessly exposed, "have you seen his work at all?"

"I regret to say I haven't, dear lady. But of course, when Mrs. Delgado spoke of him and Miro—even granting she knows nothing at all of real craftsmanship and genius, as you do so admirably, dear lady—I said to myself, perhaps this is a new talent my benevolent and appreciative patroness would care to investigate."

Dan Jacoby's talents were supremely profitable so far as Marcia Scott was concerned. For whenever, by his introduction, this or that painter or sculptor attracted the brown-haired matron, it invariably meant a series of advertised one-man exhibitions to which the public flocked and from which he made sales—often, of course, mainly from his other offerings once the viewers found that the talent of the newcomer was hardly on a par with the publicity which had lured them to his salon.

And of course Marcia herself was always certain to buy several of the new artist's creations, and at a handsome price, which she herself most usually set so that his pocketable commission was gratifying. He had this very sequence of events in mind when he phoned Marcia to acquaint her with the talents of Count Raoul de Monricard. He foresaw that his lavish patroness would find the painter's good looks a quite compelling factor in deciding to sponsor him.

And finally—and what Marcia Scott did not know and

never was to learn, since she was not the only person endowed with the sagacity of playing both ends against the middle—Count Raoul's cousin, Gordon Emmings, who ran a rival art gallery on the other end of town, was also a very good friend of Dan Jacoby and had collaborated with him on many occasions. Indeed, both of them would have reaped a rich harvest had they ever thought of opening a fashionable bordello—except that they would undoubtedly have taken the line of least resistance and stocked it with handsome men instead of pretty girls, to attract the clientele in whom they specialized and from whom they prospered: jaded, adventure-seeking, wealthy “art-loving” matrons like Gloria Delgado and Marcia Scott.

Chapter Five

AT TWO O'CLOCK, the afternoon following Jacoby's call, Marcia Scott got out of a cab, paid the driver with a regal gesture and an exquisite smile, and stood for a moment—a long moment—before the Jacoby Gallery. She continued to smile as she covertly observed the appreciative glances of male passersby. In her expensive Borgana coat, her long beautiful legs impeccably sheathed in smoke-hued nylons which called attention to their owner's elegantly creamy skin and the still quite appetizing contours of her calves, she wanted this *apéritif* of admiration from strangers to confirm her own presentiment that she was on the threshold of meeting a handsome unknown, a gifted genius, a creative master, who would lose his heart and soul to her and take his humble, deferential place in that cult whose high priestess and goddess she perennially doted on being.

As she entered the gallery, Dan Jacoby, plumb, balding, with spectacles, thick eyebrows and the fleshy mouth of a libertine, came forward to bow and to kiss the gloved hand she condescendingly extended to him. "Dear lady, so good of you to grace my humble studio," he breathed in just the properly awed stage whisper.

"Is this artist whose work you wished me to see here, Mr. Jacoby?"

"Oh, yes. I told him to take a cab so he would be here in advance of your arrival, dear lady. There he is, with his back to you . . . over there, studying the Toulouse-Lautrec."

Marcia Scott's eyes contemplated the sleek, black-haired, tall, lithe figure of a fastidiously groomed man, with black homburg, and swordcane tucked under one arm, who, nursing his Van Dyke-bearded chin with the other hand in a pose of rapturous contemplation, was pondering over the very excellent copy of *La Goulue*. He was taller than she was, and that pleased her, too. She felt a tingle of anticipatory excitement.

"Er . . . ahum . . . Count, if you please—" Jacoby

coughed discreetly, to draw his visitor from his contemplation of a *femme fatale* on canvas to a modern counterpart in the vibrant flesh and affluent checkbook, the latter being an attribute of which the famed *La Goulue* could not boast even in her heyday.

"Oh, I am so sorry, M'sieu Jacoby—" He turned smartly, and then his narrowly set blue eyes widened in an awe-stricken look. Marcia smiled demurely—and felt the tingle intensify. She could hardly guess that Raoul de Monricard's attitude of smitten reverence before the earthly apparition of a goddess had been painstakingly rehearsed. It enchanted her; there was a quality of youthful awe, like that of a faun not yet out of puberty who comes upon a nymph at her orisons in the forest; withal, there was the sophistication of a mature male, neither too young nor too old, but evidently a man of *savoir-faire*, whose appreciation of Marcia Scott's quite apparent charms could only be the tribute a connoisseur knows how to pay to a masterpiece.

And his next words confirmed her secret assurance that here was undeniably the newest acolyte to apply for membership in her cult: "But surely, M'sieu Jacoby, you had not told me I was to meet the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. It was quite wrong of you, M'sieu. You ought to have prepared me. Because now, seeing her without warning, I am mute before her loveliness."

For the first time in several years, the creamy cheeks of patrician Marcia Scott flamed with a maidenly blush, so unabashedly ardent was this initial declaration. And with that little speech, Count Raoul had won himself a place in her heart, in her household, her checkbook . . . and, it need hardly be added, in her bedchamber.

It was true that Raoul de Monricard was both of the nobility of France and a painter. At this moment of first meeting, Marcia was hardly of a mood to question his credentials in the former field of endeavor. He was, to be sure, a count, albeit an impoverished one.

Raoul's grandfather and his father before him were tradesmen also; his father, to be mercilessly exact, was a competent and prosperous butcher. Since his shop was located on the Rue de Monricard, he whimsically dispensed with the family title in favor of the name of the street on which he had made his fortune. And when he died, that fortune was left to Raoul in a sizable bundle of

francs which the dissolute young man proceeded to squander on wine, women and song till there came the sorry day of reckoning. Now he had to earn a living to keep body and soul together. Now, as his body was superbly virile and handsome in the sight of the fair sex, he managed to make a passable living as a guide for tourists—preferably the wealthier ones who stayed at the best hotels, and, among those, invariably the widows or restless matrons who found him irresistible.

As to his being a painter, he had attended art classes and achieved a mediocre craftsmanship. He might perhaps have made a fair copier, but never an original creator. But because he found that the women who gushed over his good looks and suave bearing yearned for cultural as well as sexual inspiration, he had developed the glib vocabulary of the pseudo-artist who sells himself rather than his works.

He prospered reasonably well, but he found that most of his patronesses were American. What could be more logical, then, than to seek out the source of the supply itself—America. Vaguely, he recalled that his mother had had a cousin who had married a New York art dealer. He found in some old letters the married name of this cousin, Claire Emmings. She had divorced Gordon Emmings for one reason or another, but that hardly mattered. By corresponding with Claire's ex-husband, he was able to impress the dealer with the possibilities of sponsoring a talented painter who would also be an attraction for the wealthy dowagers who visited his salon. And thus Count Raoul de Monricard came to New York.

For Marcia Scott, he was to be the first lover with a beard. It gave him a satyr-like aspect; trim, neat, pointed, black and balanced with the wavy line of a moustache that adorned his ripely sensual upper lip, it seemed to symbolize for hedonistic Marcia the very mark of Pan . . .

Raoul had had ample practise in Paris with gullible and wealthy matrons, so he did not hurry his campaign to win ascendancy over this beautiful new prospect who would make him her *protégé*. Quite the opposite: he behaved with the utmost circumspection and almost a diffidence towards her, altogether in a manner which let her know that though he thought her desirable and beautiful beyond mere words, his sense of probity in knowing

that she was married kept him from paying her the slightest court.

Once again, he could have chosen no better method of exacerbating her suppressed sensuality. Marcia Scott gave a *soirée* for him three weeks after she had met him. It was held in the exotically furnished apartment whose decor almost everywhere flaunted Marcia's numerous extra-marital journeyings to Cythera . . . In the living room, for example, one saw the watercolors of the Spaniard who had been her lover nearly a decade ago during her husband's absence in Australia; in the dining room, one beheld the Epstein-like statuettes of a handsome Greek who had held her favors for six months; while in the library, the Brazilian painter Carlo's portrait of her in evening gown graced the east wall. The bedroom, singularly, was the least decorated room of the huge apartment, but only because it was Marcia's practise to furnish it with *objets d'art* created by her *pro tem* lover. Since at the moment she had no lover, the works of Raoul's predecessor had been moved out of that room which stood for patronage and passion.

At last, well after midnight, the last guests excused themselves and departed. Only Dan Jacoby and Raoul remained.

"It's been a glorious evening, dear lady," the art dealer effusively declared. Glancing at two of Raoul's cubistic canvases which had been placed on easels in the library for the guests to exclaim over, he slyly eyed the suave bearded Frenchman and then hinted, "Would you deem me too presumptuous, dear lady, if I said that in my considered judgment Count de Monricard is ready for his first American exhibition?"

Marcia was regal in her green satin evening gown. Her richly warm brown hair was coiffured in a fashionable upsweep. Round her creamy throat she wore a jade necklace which Carl Scott had given her to mark their first anniversary—not as a token of remembered fidelity, but because she was precisely aware of how the dark green accentuated the rich creaminess of her bare throat.

Pursing her lips reflectively, she thought a moment, while Raoul stood attentively, watching her more appraisingly than she realized. "It's possible. But it might be well to discuss it at another time, Dan dear."

"Oh, Madame flatters my poor talents far too much," Raoul broke in deferentially.

"I'm not yet sure of the extent of your talents, Count," Marcia murmured suggestively—and the handsome Frenchman did not fail to catch the nuance of her throaty voice, nor the speculative and almost insolent glance of her gray eyes.

"Why don't I run along and leave the Count to convince you, dear lady?" the art dealer blandly and shamelessly proposed; and by way of furthering his suggestion, retrieved his overcoat from the hall closet and came to kiss Marcia's hand.

"No, really, it's much too late, and Madame must be dying of fatigue," Raoul tactfully interposed. "Let me go along with you, M'sieu Jacoby. Besides, I know my limitations only too well . . . you are both too kind, but I have much to learn before I should consider myself of a calibre as a painter to merit an exhibition. And, the fact is, those two paintings of mine, '*Le Noir Vient de l'ouest*' and '*Le Soleil Est Mort*,' are the only two I have done recently—they are, *hélas*, not good enough."

"Quite possibly they may be, my dear Count." Marcia Scott eyed him again, and this time her eyes rested longer than the previous time on his handsome satyr-like face. She was, if the truth be known, wondering how that crisp, distinguished beard would feel between the hillocks of her breasts, and the fantasy made her thighs prickle with alternately hot and cold waves of sensation. "I think we really ought to discuss it, after all—that is, if you care to?"

"But Madame is too kind—if Madame is sure she is not fatigued, it would be wonderful to prolong this memorable evening," Raoul said gallantly. And also not without a certain sincerity, for in that low-cut green satin gown, his prospective patroness was assuredly more appetizing than many of the women who had engaged his services in Paris . . . services that included not only showing them the sights which tourists rarely see, but also those of a far more intimate and personalized nature.

"I'm fatigued only when those whom I think have talent show no confidence in themselves," was Marcia's tart reply. And it may be said to have commenced her own daughter's true initiation into the world of carnality and

temptation as perhaps no other incident in all her maternal career. For it was a brazen challenge, a virtual slap in the face which even an effete fortune-hunter could not ignore. And to his credit, let it be said of Count Raoul de Monricard that for all his other faults, he was hardly effete.

Chapter Six

A FEW MOMENTS LATER, the door closed behind Dan Jacoby, who had made the appropriate farewells and left with a certainty of belief that by his diplomatic departure he had made not only his fortune but also Raoul's. For he had no doubt whatsoever that his wealthy, beautiful and insatiably narcissistic client was at the point of an affair.

As for Raoul himself, he had even less doubt as to the outcome; the carefully plotted campaign to win her backing had unfolded to this final duel between them . . . a duel whose victory would depend on his capability as a lover, not his unctuousness of manner nor his debatable skill with brush and canvas. He knew himself to be amply qualified; and the fact that she was eminently desirable made it all the easier for him to fight and win that duel with conviction rather than pretense.

She stared at him almost hungrily as the silence and tension mounted in that ornate room where they were now the only two occupants. But she stood regally, head held high, like an indomitable queen who wills adoration rather than seeks it from a commoner as would an ordinary female. The softly radiant glow from the chandelier's inverted pyramid of lights in the center of the ceiling bathed the supple grace of her bare shoulders, investing the creamy naked skin with a mouth-wateringly provocative luster that promised warmth and succulence to the touch of lips and fingers. The off-the-shoulder gown was cut to the commencement of that bewitching cleft between her surging breasts, a lingering and perfumed pathway to paradise.

He faced her, a faint little smile on his sensual lips, in an attitude of attendance on her wishes; and this continued diffidence infuriated her. She would have been ready to rebuff him had he tried the callow approach or the clumsy, bluff seizure of her person; she could have annihilated his self-esteem with an icy, thwarting word. But his cunningly devised aloofness opposed the burning

stimulus of passion to her imperious needs of being desired and flattered and amorously deified, where fumbling or brusque tactics would have chilled her; since she, as cult-goddess, wished always to be the one who permitted, tolerated and condescended the surrender of her favors.

"Shall we talk about the exhibition then, Madame?" he murmured coolly.

Marcia bit her lips, and her bosom swelled voluptuously. Was he made of ice or archaic Continental manners, this despicably attractive beast?

She shrugged indifferently. "If you like, Count. May I have a cigarette?"

"Surely, Madame." He hastened to her, his silver case proffered in one hand, the other readying a lighter.

Her slim autocratic fingers dipped into the case, bore the cigarette to her lips; he flicked the lighter to the tip, and she inhaled till it glowed cherry-red. Her eyes covertly devoured this emotionless, blandly handsome face which had become for her, by now, almost obsessive . . . the narrowly set blue eyes, the sensual mouth's profligacy emphasized by the thin line of moustache at its summit, the oblique cheekbones, the faun-like ears so closely set to the skull . . . the crisp barb of that little black beard, mark of the *roué* and sensualist.

She inclined her head in sign of thanks, then turned slowly towards the richly upholstered couch.

He pocketed case and lighter, watching her intently. And then, with shrewdly ingenious sense of timing, he flung at her, in a voice he purposely made casual and airy, "Of course, if I only had the right, I should prefer to discuss a subject far more exciting than an exhibition of my mediocre daubs."

Marcia stopped, and slowly turned her head to give him a long, heavy-lidded look. "Oh?" her voice was as casual as his. "And if you were granted that right, what subject would it be, Count?"

His athletically slim shoulders, gracefully emphasized in a custom-tailored dinner jacket, expressed his Gallic origin in a shrug that was meant to convey gay abandon and generous resignation of the unattainable—which, of course, was Marcia herself. "But as your guest, Madame, I have only the right not to irritate you. I should not even have spoken just now."

"Dan Jacoby thinks you have a great future as a painter. I usually respect his artistic judgment. And I dislike false modesty in an artist, so please don't refer to them as mediocre daubs."

"As you like, Madame Scott," he bowed slightly. "But I have a right to my opinion, and I retain it when I say again that in your presence I find anything else inferior. And now, with your permission, may I thank you most sincerely for a *toute charmante soiree*—it is growing late, and Madame is tired."

"Will you *stop* treating me as if I were a child!" Marcia flashed, her nerves frayed to breaking point. His constant bland denials of her were like the Chinese water torture . . . drop by drop plashing against the bowstring-taut network of her nervous system. And besides, she had been continent too long; even her last embrace in Carl's arms had been—what was it, ages ago?

"How, then, would you prefer to be treated, *chère* Madame Scott?" he murmured as he came slowly towards her. She shuddered violently, her eyes dilating with an agonized anticipation. How would he first touch, kiss—her flesh longed for assuagement. The pulse-hollow in her creamy patrician throat had begun to throb a threnody to Eros; the fluid shivering of her thighs told her she had too long delayed the voluptuous voyage to Cythera.

"Don't you know, Count?" she huskily sneered, her head still high.

And he nodded sagely as he took both her hands in his, and, staring deeply into her eyes, murmured: "*Oui, je le sais bien . . . comme une déesse magnifique mais aussi comme une femme qui veut l'amour prodigale.*" (Yes, I know very well . . . like a magnificent goddess, but also like a woman who has great need of love.)

Then his lips set down lightly, evanescently, on one soft bare shoulder, at its dimpled juncture with the elegantly sculptured arm, and Marcia moaned faintly, nostrils flickering, eyes closing. His lips were warm and moist and vibrant . . . and oh how thrilling. And he had called her a goddess—she had recognized that one French word, sketchy as her knowledge of the language was—she was completely won by that. Her power was still resplendent, for he had just reaffirmed it. Knowing it, goddess-like, she could now grudgingly descend from the pedestal to

the mortal earth, there to be wooed in the manner of the earthlings . . .

The scratch of his sharp trim little beard against her naked skin became the sensual catalyst that made the transition from goddess to harlot devastatingly swift. Marcia caught her breath, her fingers twisting in his grasp, her head fell back slowly as the swirling of her senses wrenched away the imperious aloofness of her poise. And, feeling her tremble against him, feeling the rippling of her bare skin against his questing lips, Raoul de Monricard knew the formidable adversary was weakening . . . that the duel was won . . .

Now his left arm slipped round her supple, still youthful waist, and while his lips continued their lingering, tantalizing pilgrimage along the warm creamy skin displayed in the generous décolletage of her green satin evening gown, his right hand stealthily crept to the zipper under her left armpit . . . a shirring sound and the glossy material loosened. Marcia uttered a choking groan, and almost feverishly, cupping her amorous assailant's cheeks, gave him her mouth with a greedy violence.

Yet craftily, caught up though his voluptuary's senses were becoming in the turbulence of this desirable, mature woman's ardor, Raoul continued his deliberate campaign, to make absolutely certain of his victory. Having drawn down the zipper of the gown to her hip, his hand brushed away the opened shard of the gown, to which fitted slip and brassiere were sewn, and the sumptuous creamy nakedness of her stunning torso burst into blinding view. But he did not see the goddess now; he beheld only the shuddering, enticing flesh of the woman incarnate.

Now it was his turn to suck in his breath at the youthful thrust of those two high-set, widely spaced pears, and his emboldened hand cupped one brownish-coral love-center, while his tongue furtively and delicately pressed between her warm lips. Her hands shifted instantly to the back of his neck as she returned that lascivious caress with her own feverishly nimble tongue, slithering it to the roof of his mouth, against his teeth, then frictioning against his own questing membrane, till a galvanic surge of desire imbued them both.

Her captive breast rose and fell violently under his

imprisoning hand. It was her left breast he had attained now, and she knew his palm could sense the quickened pounding of her excited heart. Yet even in this moment of mounting carnal passion, she could think to herself triumphantly, even if he's had to take that bitch of a Gloria to bed, he knows by now that I've got a much younger, tastier body for him.

Then at last he broke off the kiss, and, lowering his head to her bosom, concentrated on it while both his hands swiftly husked the green satin sheath to the floor, leaving her clad in the erotically stirring dishabille of peach-colored satin panties and garter-belt, whose narrow taut white tabs drew snugly at the tops of smoke-hued nylon hose, and in spike-heeled green leather pumps. His hands roamed gently, without haste, over her naked arching back, thence to her waist which he cupped and squeezed to draw her against him, as he went on mouthing and delicately biting at first one hardening bud, then its exquisitely responsive twin; and Marcia Scott, inchoate little moans and hoarse gasps exuding from her moist parted lips, convulsively dug her long tinted fingernails into his neck, almost to the blood, as she felt the maddening prickling of that satyr's beard . . . excruciatingly tormenting, yet inflammatory to the most hidden recesses of her burning sensuality.

"Yes . . . yes . . ." she groaned, wanting him to take her then and there.

But just as he had commanded the campaign, just as he had called the turn for all these devious maneuvers which had led to this final and supreme flesh-duel between them almost as inimical antagonists, so now too he would not be altered from the deliberate strategy of wooing her precisely as he chose.

His hands now grasped her buttocks, revelling in their mobile resilience through the tight satin sheath of her panties, sensing her amorous readiness as he felt their tightening and spasming under his knowing palpations.

Then he knelt, as worshipfully as an acolyte to a high priestess—or to a goddess—and again Marcia Scott's narcissistic ego was aggrandized by this spontaneous carnal tribute. Her hands slipped to the top of his curly head, her jeweled fingers twisting in his tousled black curls, and then she moaned, eyes closed, face taut with the intimation of a dynamic, pent-up yearning and frantic need as

his lips began their maddeningly savoring adoration of first her belly, thence to the dark-patched triangle faintly visible through the peach satin, his fingers roaming her upper thighs, then titillatingly moving to the tender fronts and insides, till wave on wave of seething Tantalus besieged her.

"Oh . . . my God—Raoul—ahh—God!" she gurgled, dying of desire.

His lips now paid their veneration to the creamy nudity of her long perfect thighs, there where the stocking-tops ended and a scant inch of tempting flesh was accorded between them and the pantie hems.

And then his fingers deftly inserted into the waistband of her final veil and as expertly bared her save for garter-belt and hose to his devouring eyes and lips and tongue. She felt the tickling, stinging rasp of that tiny beard against the warm sleek deep-dimpled basin of her middle . . . and she swayed, no longer goddess but falling woman about to topple from the pedestal. He rose swiftly, as she flung her arms round his neck, her mouth crushing to his, and his left arm gusseted her between her shaking thighs as his right arm clenched her waist. With an inarticulate sob that was both command and avowal of surrender, Marcia kicked up her legs and clung her willowy thighs round his hips, as he carried her towards her ornate bedroom and that huge royal bed . . .

He laid her down upon it, and in a moment was naked beside her, kneeling before her, his fingers gently caressing her upraised stockinged knees to press them widely apart, and then his lips again saluted the divinity of her body, and a hoarse "Oh . . . Raoul . . . oh God . . . now . . . ahh . . . ohh . . . now, please, hurry!" rose in Marcia Scott's delirium of amorous agony . . .

So intent had he been on plying his exquisitely romantic wooing of her, and now so engulfed in the wonderfully coalescing playground of her body, which housed him thrillingly and ferociously to pay him back for her sweet torment, that he quite forgot that he had not closed the bedroom door.

Chapter Seven

TONIA HAD not attended the *soirée* in honor of Count Raoul de Monricard, because Mark Jorgenson had shyly invited her to see Christopher Fry's poetic play, "The Lady's Not for Burning," with dinner preceding the theatre. After the play, which made a profound impression on Tonia, the blushing, bespectacled sophomore began to talk to her about modern poetry as it compared with the works of the Elizabethans. Tonia, her mind unusually stimulated by the beauty of Fry's lines and the excitement of actually being on a date with a young man—whom she found unusually sympathetic and a kindred spirit in his enjoyment of poetry and the arts—forgot the lateness of the hour, and both youngsters found themselves in an Automat drinking coffee and eating pie and arguing eloquently over the merits of this or that poet.

Hence it was well past one in the morning when Mark hailed a cab and rode with Tonia back to her Riverside Drive apartment, saw her to the door, and thanked her shyly, again blushing as vividly as any virginal girl (for he was a virginal male), for a wonderful evening.

As she rode up in the elevator, her cheeks were glowing too, and she was smiling with a happiness she hadn't known . . . well, ever before. Mark was so very nice. So considerate and gentle—not like the brusque, thoughtless, disrespectful athletic types on campus. He had almost something of Daddy's warm gentleness.

She had accepted his invitation partly to have an excuse not to attend Mother's *soirée*. She really couldn't bear having to be on display and be polite to all those obnoxious, simpering people. Since the end of Miss Fortescue's regime—the prim, strict governess had inherited a little money from a more fortunate sister and had decided to go out to the West Coast to retire—she and Mother had practically been strangers. Her mother took little interest in her love for literature and poetry; and as for herself, though she appreciated painting and

the allied arts, she couldn't stand the hypocritical jargon Mother's friends used about things she privately thought were hideously untalented.

She let herself into the apartment. Thank goodness it was so spacious, because with ten rooms you had all the privacy you wanted and she didn't have to find herself talking to Mother all the time. She had her own chastely furnished bedroom, whose only real decor was the bookcase in which all her favorites were neatly stacked and dusted.

Thank goodness everyone was gone. It was nearly two o'clock, but at least it had been Friday and there'd be no classes to worry about. It had been a lovely evening . . . she hadn't ever remembered enjoying herself so very much . . . no, not enjoying herself, enjoying the play and the lovely dinner and that nice Mark Jorgenson's stimulating conversation about poetry and authors. He hadn't been fresh either . . . most boys at school would have tried to kiss or neck. He was different. She really didn't know if she would ever marry. But it was too early to think about such things. And she had read about so many ruthless men who took what they wanted and then discarded their women. She didn't want to be hurt. And she was still too young to have to be hurt. Maybe she'd never marry, unless she could find a person as gentle and considerate as Daddy—but even then, how little she'd seen of him over the years. He was more like a visiting relative than a father, going off all over the world the way he did.

Her own bedroom was in the opposite direction from her mother's. And she was heading for it when suddenly, unexpectedly, she heard a sob, then a groan, as if someone was in dire pain—"Oh . . . my God . . . oh . . . please . . . oh God!"

She whirled, eyes widening in alarm. Her mother had always been superbly health, hardly even a cold through an entire year. Was something wrong? Maybe it was a heart attack—and nobody was around to help. Mother had a cleaning woman in three days a week, and on occasion summoned another woman who would act as part-time cook when she had a dinner party for guests at the apartment. For the most part, she dined out, leaving Tonia to her own resources. The kitchen was so beautiful that Tonia loved to experiment there for long hours,

when she had the time. She was proud of her one good dish, of taking scraps of meat, canned corn and tomatoes and au gratin potatoes and making a tasty and very filling casserole. The ingredients changed from week to week, as the mood seized her. But she loved to cook. That was one phase of marriage she wouldn't really mind at all—

Again the groan, huskier, more exacerbated.

She quickened her footsteps down the long hall to the right. She stopped short before a half-opened door . . . the door to Mother's bedroom. Her heart was pounding erratically, her fists were clenched with indecision.

"Oh darling—yes—oh no!—ahh—now, you fiendish brute—"

That wasn't a heart attack—darling . . . whom was Mother calling darling? Daddy surely wasn't home, he was in Paris—

A hand to her throat, she moved closer to the door . . . the faint light of the little lamp on the bedside table cast sufficient glow on the scene . . .

She recoiled, unable to speak, the outcry of surprise, of revulsion, of horror, of shock, stifled in her throat as if some invisible hand had grasped her by that milky column, shutting off her windpipe. Her temples throbbed, her eyes blurred—

But not before she had seen a lithe, tall, black-haired man, naked, astride her mother, whose stockinged legs clutched round his wiry, jerking hips; not before she had seen her mother's head flung to one side, the eyes shut tight, the nostrils flaring voluptuously, the cheeks flaming in the concupiscent heat of utmost passion. His hands disappeared under her mother's hips while hers had seized him by the ears to draw his mouth against one darkened bosom-flint . . . both of them rapt in the throes of ultimate fulfillment with no thought of an eavesdropper, with no thought beyond the intolerably pent-up fulfillment of their embattled, cohesive flesh.

She heard the man utter a profoundly shuddering gasp, then his head lifted from her mother's breast and his mouth locked down on Marcia's, and her mother's nails scored and ripped at his writhing back, her legs sporadically arched, unclenching only to wrap more tightly and higher on his vibrating body, as with a commingled

shout of supreme attainment, they both achieved erotic climax . . .

Numb with shock, incredulous, the young brunette backed away as silently as she had come. She thought the loud clangorous pounding of her heart would surely be overheard by them both. She felt fiery red rise to her bosom, to her forehead, and her eyes swam as she blinked them frantically. She reached her room, trembling so violently she could hardly stand, and she could scarcely summon the strength to close the door behind her and to do it noiselessly so that her mother and that horrifying interloper could not hear her entry into the apartment . . . then, for some inexplicable reason, she seized the key and turned it in the lock, before again the waves of attenuating weakness akin almost to a psychic hysteria burst over her.

She flung herself face down on her bed, and lay there shuddering, eyes tightly closed, willing the phantasmagoria she had just witnessed to vanish, willing the maddened beating of her heart to slacken.

Yet neither did.

And slowly she raised her head, staring at the opposite wall, and it was as if there before her, emblazoned in the faint luminosity of that little bedtable lamp, she beheld the entwined naked bodies of a man and a woman . . . the woman her own mother . . . and the trivial detail of her mother's wearing stockings and pumps and garter-belt to bed seemed to have imprinted itself indelibly into that reincarnated image there beyond her on the wall . . .

So this was love between man and woman. This was what she had read about in all the books of poetry and stories and plays all these many years . . . the shattering cohesive force that locked those bodies together had perhaps been given impetus by some immortal poem, some deathless paragraph which evoked romantic love.

Tonia rolled over onto her back, to escape the remembered and re-envisioned scene . . . but there it was again, repeated on the ceiling above her head as her haunted, tear-blurred eyes fixed upon it.

She began to tremble. She felt a tingling wave of sensation bubble along her thighs, while at her bosom, she became aware of a prickling irritation which increased at every erratic breath . . . lodging in her nipples, just as,

below, that other wave crept guilefully up her inner thighs to lodge at last in the very core of her being. Unconsciously, her soft hand moved towards that secret oasis . . . and her other hand tentatively touched first one breast, then the other . . .

She was so tired . . . and yet her body felt singularly languid and warm and receptive in a way she had not felt before. She closed her eyes, to banish the imagery whose every detail seemed to be depicted with a mercilessly realistic portraiture upon the canvas of her impressionable young mind. But that did not help either.

How could Mother have . . . have . . . let any other man . . . d-do *that*? When only Daddy had the right? And it should always be in private, no one else should ever witness such a thing between two people . . . love was ethereal and pure and surmounted the baseness of the body. Love was emotion and poetry and truth and beauty and—

She groaned and drew one knee up in the air, wanting to blot out the recollection. And as she did so, her slim fingers brushed against her groin . . . and a feverish awareness seemed to hold her in thrall: her senses were immeasurably sharpened as if they had been purposely whetted . . . her breasts ached—her palm could feel the throbbing of her nipples. Her pretty blue silk skirt slid back as her knee swung nervously to one side . . . she tried to draw back her left hand to grasp at her skirt and draw it down . . . and again her trembling fingers brushed against her tender, prickling groin . . .

Tonia's head fell back, rolling to one side . . . eyes desperately sealed tight, willing that scene to be obliterated forever, she surrendered herself to the tempestuous, new, unbearably bitter-sweet demands of her wakened senses . . . and in that chaste bedroom of a virginal young girl, presently, there rose a faint, sobbing gasp and cry . . . a paean of rapture tasted for the first time.

Chapter Eight

EXACTLY ONE WEEK LATER, Count Raoul de Monricard moved into Marcia Scott's apartment, and both his "masterpieces" adorned the walls of her bedroom. Two weeks later, the Count's one-man exhibition went on display at Dan Jacoby's art gallery. The art critics of the New York press did not endorse the judgment of either Jacoby or, indirectly, of Marcia, in furthering so "gauche and un-inspired a painter, who is assuredly having his tongue-in-cheek sport with those who view what he offers on canvas. There is a certain craftsmanship in his use of mass and color, but a first-year art student could detect the obvious hoax. The surprising fact about this exhibition is that it is under the sponsorship of Dan Jacoby, whose critical acumen we have had reason in the past to applaud." Thus ran the column in the *Press-Tribune*. And others were harsher still.

The surprising fact, however—which none of the learned art critics knew, since the information was more appropriate to a gossip column than an art review—was that Marcia Scott was the real sponsor. The cost of a press agent to arrange for ads, transit posters, brochures to be distributed at the salon, and publicity notices to be sent to all the newspapers, was borne entirely by her. Jacoby profited because she ostentatiously bought two of the Count's "daubs" at the salon, at handsome prices, and when he remitted to the Count, he deducted a handsome commission. In turn, the Count had to remit one more commission to his cousin by marriage. Everyone was happy, and Marcia Scott herself was in a seventh heaven of delight. Not only had she stolen this debonair and aristocratic artist away from that hideous harpy Gloria Delgado, but she had bought and paid for an attentive, imaginative and superbly virile lover. She no longer needed tranquilizers; Raoul's sage and expert caresses admirably soothed her jaded nerves.

Everyone was happy; that is, except for Tonia. She was aghast at the shameless way her mother had dared

to bring her lover into the apartment to occupy it as a guest of honor. For the very evening after the young brunette had chanced to watch her mother's infidelity, Marcia and Raoul dined together and Tonia was at the same table. Marcia presented him to her daughter as "Darling, this is Raoul. The Count de Monricard, from Paris, dear. I want you to be very nice to him. He's a genius. Yes, dear, I think he's going to be one of the most exciting new painters of our time. I've invited him to spend the summer with us. After all, we've plenty of room here, since your father will probably be abroad till Christmas."

Tonia blushed violently and lowered her eyes when the Count's gaze met hers. She had not seen the face of the man in ascendancy over her beautiful mother's naked writhing body, but she knew it was this smirking, sleek man at the dinner table. And if she had any doubts about his identity, these were dispersed by the tender look her mother flashed him, and by the further gesture of Marcia's putting her jeweled hand over Raoul's and squeezing it lovingly.

"H-how do you d-do?" she quavered, looking down at her plate. Tonight, the part-time cook had been pressed into service for the occasion. She had cooked a delicious meal, and there were many of Tonia's favorites on the menu—but the young brunette just couldn't bring herself to eat.

"Oh, my dear, what a greeting!" Marcia scathingly reproached her. "'How do you do' indeed—one day you will be proud to say that you met the Count Raoul de Monricard when he made his American debut. Now, remember, I want you to be especially charming to my dear friend. We must make his stay with us pleasant, now, mustn't we, dear?"

"Y-yes . . . M-mother."

Marcia frowned. The girl was really getting impossible. Just like a wallflower, always cooped up in her room with her books and her writing, mooning around like a sick calf with that distant look on her face as if her thoughts were planets away. And here she was all of 19, at an age when most well-balanced daughters are already marriageable debutantes. At least, Marcia thought, thank heavens the little fool's an utter innocent. Because with her looks and youth, being here in the same apartment with darling Raoul, she might take him away from me if she

knew anything at all about sex. What a relief, after all, that she prefers poetry to men . . .

"Well, see that you do. Now eat your dinner," she said sharply, not only to relieve her feelings but also to intimate to Raoul that she considered poor Tonia a mere immature child who wasn't to be taken notice of for a moment.

However, Raoul de Monricard did not in the least agree with his imperious mistress. As his eyes covertly scanned Tonia's scarlet face, denoting the poignant eyes, the sweet, pure, oval of her face, the milky glory of her skin, the swell of her round firm virgin breasts, he felt himself relishing the challenge she so obviously cast before him—though to be sure the last notion in Tonia's gentle mind was rousing this profligate Frenchman's interest. He told himself that rarely did a man have the perversely gratifying opportunity of enjoying both mother and daughter—and the more Raoul studied Tonia's graceful body and wistful face, the more he was determined to bring off this *coup d'amour*.

Oh, to be sure, it had to be done discreetly. To risk a scene would be to lose a comfortable and profitable tenure here. Marcia had insisted on giving him pocket money for his expenses. And of course he was to live here, with no date stipulated for his departure—that was tacitly understood, so far as he was concerned, to mean so long as he could satisfy Marcia's cravings. Thank heavens his cousin had persuaded him to see what Dan Jacoby had to offer before making any arrangement with that Madame Delgado, who was showing her age very badly, even though she might be far wealthier. At least he did not have to flinch when he took a patroness like Marcia in his arms; a man's pride, even when he is nothing more than a stud, has to be reckoned with. And Marcia was very desirable, very inventive, very passionate. But now this new turn of events—what a fortunate decision he had made in coming here! This Mademoiselle Tonia was perfection—to initiate so delicious a creature in the sweet intricacies of *l'amour* would be *tout à fait ravissant!*

He did not need her mother's assurance that Tonia was virgin to man. Practised amorist that he was, he intuitively sensed this. And her almost overt hostility to him was but another proof of that chaste innocence

which Marcia had touched upon—not in so many words, but with the euphemistic comment that “Tonia doesn’t seem to care for boys much, darling. She’d much rather lock herself up in her room and read some silly old book of poetry. Aren’t young girls foolish?” For was not hostility the origin of love, and did not some of the greatest loves of history begin with hate? In his male ego, he basked in the knowledge that Tonia was rude to him, since he diagnosed that this attitude naturally stemmed from her awareness of him as the aggressor and enemy to that maiden treasure which her *naïveté* warned her to keep intact. And the ruder she was to him—for she could not bear his fawning over her mother, nor the obsequious hand-kissings and slyly flattering praises he heaped on Marcia whenever Tonia was around to overhear—the more she presented a challenge as an adversary worthy of his steel of virility.

Six weeks passed, and Marcia felt she had been reborn. He was a taxing and insatiable lover who could infallibly keep pace with her; yet he always gratified her, made her feel what a prize, what a goddess, she was. Her skin glowed a rich creamy warmth, her mirror told her she was far from the 41st birthday she was rapidly nearing, she felt wakened and alive . . . and she had completely forgotten that she was still very much married.

Raoul had brought her an easygoing way of life that had charmed and bewitched her; late wakening after an impassioned night of love, a lingering brunch which consumed nearly the two hours most Frenchmen take at noon, perhaps a stroll in Central Park or a drive to one of the museums, then back for a nap—and perhaps a few hectic moments of renewed love-making—then a bath and leisurely dressing, followed by dining out at one of New York’s many fashionable restaurants. Then on to the theatre, or to some party one or another of her friends would give, and then home after midnight, to be locked in Raoul’s arms and to explore anew the hugely flattering byways by which he proved his adoration of her.

Again Tonia was left completely to herself. After a few tirades against the girl’s impolite and inhospitable conduct towards their honored guest—for the sake of form, if nothing else—Marcia no longer insisted on Tonia’s accompanying them. She was well aware of the adage that proximity leads to propinquity; and that, however

virginal and untutored Tonia was, forcing Raoul to take more cogent notice of her daughter's vivid youth and delicately haunting beauty might distract him away from paying her the full court she now so yearned to accept from him.

But already Raoul de Monricard was planning how to add Tonia to his list of conquests. It had been a long time since he had treated himself to the unique ego-aggrandizing experience of initiating a virgin. It would not be too difficult, however. Since Mademoiselle Tonia loved poetry, he would speak to her in the high-flown sentiments of Racine, Corneille and Rostand, with whose verses he had, happily enough, a passing acquaintance. He would even write a sonnet to her, and declare his hopeless love, a once-in-a-lifetime love that had come into being only because he had been fated to meet her against all odds—by which he meant that he had seen Marcia first.

Tonia herself had not the slightest inkling of this crafty project. She saw to it that she and Raoul met as little as possible in the apartment. She loved to swim, and with the summer holidays now in full swing, she walked five blocks nearly every afternoon to a YWCA where she spent several hours in the pool. As usually Raoul and her mother were out for the afternoon at the gallery or a museum, or, on two occasions, spending a weekend at the summer home of one of Marcia's closer friends, she had a good deal of time to herself. When she could, she ate dinner at a pleasant little cafeteria not far from the apartment, and she prepared her own breakfast and lunch at times when she knew her mother and Raoul would still be abed.

It was not till the first week of August that Raoul de Monricard found the opportunity he had been seeking.

Marcia had caught one of those summer colds difficult to shake off, and had decided to visit her doctor; from there, if she did not feel too weak, she intended to go to the hairdresser. She informed Raoul of her plans and told him she thought she would return about four-thirty. He in turn begged her indulgence for not accompanying her. It had been weeks since he had paid a courtesy visit to his cousin Gordon Emmings. Surely she would understand that he owed that much to the man who had made it possible for him to come to New York and meet the

one woman of his lifelong dreams. Marcia was touched by his thoughtfulness, flattered by his avowal of the role she played in his life. And so she willingly assented to forego his companionship, desolate though it would make her.

Raoul was enchanted with his acting ability. Everything was going beautifully. If he could only persuade her to divorce her always absent husband and to marry him, his future would be permanently secure. He would lack for neither money nor a complaisant mistress . . . and he would be close to Tonia every day. Sophisticated voluptuary that he was, having found the girl's mother so uninhibited in bed despite her outward aloofness and haughty manner when they were out together, he was certain it would be child's play to persuade her that in Paris, a *menage à trois* was an ideal arrangement and worthy of being emulated here. After all, a shy, untutored girl needed education in love to prepare her for marriage—what better tutor than, say, a stepfather who has no unscrupulous interest but can attune her to a genial acceptance of the pleasures of the marital bed. So much more practical than letting the poor darling get into trouble with some uncouth college boy. He had thought it all out very carefully. Marcia was enamoured of him; she would deny him nothing. And what a filip to his erotic adventures to have the mother herself lead the daughter to his bed!

He kissed Marcia's hand and saw her off into a cab en route to her doctor. Then he summoned another, and directed the driver to take him to the Emmings art gallery, where he spent exactly half an hour. Emmings was out, as it happened; but the studious bespectacled young woman in charge of the gallery during his absence would remember that he had come here and that he had asked where Emmings was, and that after she had told him her employer was meeting a client from Europe at the Waldorf-Astoria, he declared that he would take a cab there, as he had an important piece of information to relate. The alibi was thus set up—not that he would really need one. Nothing could go wrong. He had timed it perfectly. Having observed Tonia's punctual departures at about one o'clock for the YWCA pool and having noted that she was usually home by three-thirty, when she went to her room and shut herself up with her eternal books, he

figured he had a good hour to devote to her first lesson in the difference between the sexes . . .

It had been a wonderful two hours. The water, somehow, felt cleaner and cooler than it had all summer. Perhaps it was because swimming was clean and wholesome and could wash away her gloomy thoughts about that awful gigolo—that was really all he was—and Mother. How could Mother carry on so brazenly, flaunting her lover before all their friends? Not really “their” friends; Tonia knew she had almost none of her own. Perhaps only Mark Jorgenson. But he was in Kennebunkport for the summer, or she would have been delighted to go out with him again. He was so gentle and thoughtful. But didn’t Mother care any more about Daddy? And wasn’t she worried that when Daddy came back, some of those gossipy friends might talk and then Daddy would find out about the Count?

She wished Mother would get rid of him. She had done that with all the others. Tonia had never seen the others in bed with Mother, but now she was sure of what had been going on all these years. Was *that* what marriage was, scheming to betray your vows? The poets who were her favorites spoke of eternal, unswerving love, of star-crossed lovers who would die rather than be torn asunder. She did not think she ever would find true love in this day and age. And surely never from a simpering, conceited man like the Count. He fancied himself so much. Always preening in the mirror, with his silly beard, like a girl making up.

She let herself into the apartment, listened for a moment at the door. Thank goodness it was quiet. Mother and Raoul were out. Now a nap after her shower; she usually took her complete shower at home after a swim, because the shower stalls at the YWCA were always in demand during the summer and she hated to luxuriate and keep others waiting. Then too, she didn’t very much like running around undressed before lots of people, even if they were girls like herself.

She walked to her bedroom, thinking about Daddy and Mother. She wished Daddy wasn’t traveling all the time. He was so nice, she wished he could be around all the time. And he was handsome, not with those “pretty” looks like that awful Count—how could a sensible woman

ever find him good-looking?—but in a manly, comfortable way. Some of the girls at school had giggled and teased her about Mark, because he looked so intellectual and scrawny. Well, it didn't matter. She didn't care about a man's body, it was his mind that interested her. Besides, she didn't think she could ever be serious about any fellow.

Quickly she undressed, took her wet swimming suit out of the plastic bag and hung it up to dry on the shower rod. Then, naked, she clambered into the shower after testing the water daintily with one slim bare white foot. Not too warm and not too cold. There, that was just perfect.

Seizing the cake of perfumed soap, she lathered her breasts vigorously, closing her eyes and turning her face up to the pounding spray. Ah, it felt so good! She felt so relaxed after a swim and a shower. Maybe tonight, for dinner, she'd try one of the little Italian restaurants in Greenwich Village. Anywhere at all, to get out of this huge mausoleum—that's what it had become, now that Mother kept that dreadful man around.

Her slim white fingers worked the soapy lather along her belly, into the wide shallow kiss-dimple that was the jewel of that amorous goblet, then down her thighs; now, with eager fingers, she massaged and stroked her body free of it, till again the spray plashed on the firm smooth white plasticity of her supple nakedness.

She turned her back to the spray, and reached back to soap her lower back and hips and buttocks. Then she reached to turn on more cold water, to freshen and revitalize her flesh, and gasped at the chill shock of the icy spray. There, it was done. Now, pushing aside the curtain and stepping out onto the rubber mat, a young naiad, her glossy raven hair matted close against her scalp, wide-eyed, cheeks glowing, the tips of her young round breasts crinkly-hardened by the kisses of the spray, she reached for a Turkish towel and dried herself.

Then she drew on a white terrycloth robe, knotted the belt, and thrust her dainty feet into fluffy blue mules. And now for a nap. She stretched and yawned, suddenly completely relaxed, her body tingling from the shower. She felt clean and good.

She opened the bathroom door, and walked back into

her bedroom. Then she heard the knob turn, the door open softly. As she whirled, eyes wide with startled surprise, she beheld the bearded face of the one man she most detested.

“Good afternoon, Mademoiselle Tonia!” said Raoul de Monricard.

Chapter Nine

"OH—I—I THOUGHT y-you were with . . . with M . . . Mother!"

"But as you see, my charming one, I'm not. Your delightful mother has gone to the hairdresser. I'm glad, too."

"I . . . I was g-going to take a nap . . . if . . . if y-you'll excuse me—"

"Excuse you? But you are ravishing thus—out of the shower, fresh and sweet and adorable, *petite* Tonia! Do you know, here it is nearly two months that I am here, and you and I have said almost nothing to each other."

"I . . . I . . . y-you . . . you're M-Mother's friend and—"

Oh, why didn't he go? Instead of standing there on the threshold, looking at her with that fatuous, silly smirk.

"It was chance, *petite* Tonia, that brought me to your mother. But then I did not know that the loveliest of all the *demoiselles* of New York dwelt with her."

"T-thank y-you v-very much . . . b-but I . . . I'm very tired . . . I do want to take a nap—please—I—" she faltered. Tonia wasn't used to being rude, and she didn't want to say anything that might make this gigolo of Mother's report that her daughter had been ungracious. But just the same, he had no right to force himself on her privacy this way. Instinctively, she glanced down at her robe, to make sure it was belted . . . for she knew she was naked beneath it. She felt her cheeks flame at the awareness.

"But if you only knew, *ma chérie*, we have so very much in common. Marcia tells me you like poetry."

"Y-yes . . . yes I do . . . v-very much—"

"And so do I, *ma belle* Tonia. Have you read the poets of my country, like Rostand and Rimbaud and Baudelaire? How beautifully they wrote of love . . . will you not let me read to you some of their poems, *pigeonne*?"

He had advanced a few steps into the room, and stealthily pushed the door shut behind him. Tonia backed

away, eyes fearful, cheeks burning, dying of self-consciousness.

"Maybe . . . s-some day . . . w-won't you please . . . I . . . I w-want to have a nap before d-dinner . . . I . . . I'm really very tired—"

How enchanting the *gamine* was! Those big blue eyes, those tremulous soft red lips, that slim white throat . . . and he was very sure that under her robe she was white and soft and exquisitely supple, with the body of a young, uninitiated but ardently yearning girl.

"How can one so charming, so delightfully young, be tired, *ma belle* Tonia?" he murmured ardently. "Perhaps it is that you are afraid of me." Boldly, Raoul de Monricard, his pulses quickened by the sight of her delectable body which the white terrycloth robe moulded out so suggestively that it quite confirmed his suspicions of her being naked beneath it, cast aside the elaborate pretense of wooing her by poetry.

"Oh no!" she gasped quickly. "Pl-please—w-won't you go?"

He shook his head with a sardonic chuckle. "First you say you are not afraid, then you wish me to go. *Vraiment, pigeonne*, do you know what I think? I think you are afraid . . . not of me . . . but of yourself. *Oui, c'est justement ca!* You are jealous—but you need not be, *ma belle* Tonia—"

"J-jealous? J-jealous of *you*?" she echoed incredulously.

"Yes. Because you have seen me kiss your charming mother. And you wish I would pay attention to you instead. But I would gladly have done so, long ago, if you had not been so heartless, my adorable little one."

"C-Count, I . . . I'm not jealous and I . . . I'm not heartless—please, don't you understand—I . . . I want you t-to leave my room—"

"You are a child who knows nothing of life and fears it because she really desires it. Come, do not be afraid of me, *pigeonne*, I would not hurt you, only show you how to love—"

He seized her hands, and bore them to his lips, kissing them passionately.

Tonia uttered a strangled little cry, and tried to drag them away, while blushes flamed from throat to ears. "N . . . no . . . d-don't . . . please—I . . . I don't want you to t-touch me . . . oh . . . g-go away . . . I . . . I

. . . I'm not your f-friend—M-Mother is—please—g-go away!"

The belt of her robe was tied none too lightly, and as she tried to jerk away her hands, it came undone, and Raouls' eyes glittered as they caught the glimpse of her milky bare thighs, of the shadowy mystery of her virginity. . .

"*Tonia, ma toute enchantante et belle amoureuse!*" he breathed, and circled her waist with his sinewy arms, pulling her against him.

The young brunette uttered a cry of horror, of revulsion." Nooooo! I don't want you to touch me—I—I hate you—I . . . I want you to go away—do you hear—go away for good—"

He threw back his head and laughed, and with his narrowed eyes and the pointed black beard and the sensual lips curled into that rictus of taunting mockery, he appeared like a ruthless satyr to the frightened, shamed and self-conscious Tonia.

She thrust at his chest with one slim hand, and then, as he only laughed the more and tightened his hold, till she felt his loins arch obscenely against hers, enforcing upon her pure mind and naive senses the cogent reality of his manhood, she writhed and, uttering a choking cry of disgust and abhorrence, seized his beard with her other hand and jerked at it in a frantic attempt to free herself. "*Merde, tu m'agaces—sale tigresse, je t'en paierai—*" he swore hoarsely in his pain and wounded vanity.

And jerking the loosened belt entirely free, he began to unbutton the robe with his right hand, while clutching her round her slim waist with his left arm, heedless of her cries and maddened squirmings and the flurry of her little fists against his face. "Claw, tigress, I'll master you," he muttered thickly, "you resist, you tell me to go away for good, eh? It is because you really want me for yourself—admit it—"

"No—I—ahh—stop it—oh let me go—y-you coward—ahh—oh not that—for God's sake, don't take off my robe—I—*ohhhh!*"

Mastering her struggles with comparative ease, empowered by his rising desire, Raoul de Monricard had undone the first few buttons and laid bare her lovely round white breasts, rising and falling with spasmodic rhythm in the turbulence of her shame and terror. He

bent his head, intoxicated by the vision of that milky bosom with its dainty rosebuds, and his lips caught hold of one. Mad with disgust and loathing, Tonia twisted and hammered at his face with both her little fists. Savagely, then, using both hands, he husked the terrycloth robe from her body, and it crumpled to the floor. For the first time in her life, she was naked before a man.

Catching her right wrist with his left hand, he forced it behind her back, and, having pressed her back against the wall next to her bed, pinned her there, while his right hand fondled a naked round loveglobe, his moist, libertine's mouth setting down on her throat. Tonia's senses reeled; the shock, the horror, the shame of being naked and helpless before the man whom she had seen performing that repellent yet fascinating act on her mother's bed, utterly devastating her, leaving her futilely weak before his will.

"I will teach you love, I will waken you, *ma belle vierge dormante!*" he promised hoarsely. And twisting her wrist cruelly behind her back, he sank down on his knees, his right palm pressing hard against her waist to pin her to the wall, as with his lips he savoringly applied a rapid series of tiny stinging kisses from one white dimpled knee on up her thigh toward her amorous triangle. Tonia, half fainting with her overpowering shame, was helpless; but at the tingling surge which his warm sensual lips made along her soft flesh, the stabbing, prickling titillation of his beard, she writhed, a long shiver possessing her.

And as his mouth unerringly found the very core of her being, she uttered a sobbing, pitiful, lost cry—"Oh my God—oh noo—ahh—ohhhhh—"

The door flung open, and in the roaring of her senses, vaguely, she seemed to hear a woman's voice . . . a familiar voice, yet one altered by the blend of horror and anger that made it vibrate: "Raoul—what the hell do you think you're doing—let her go, Raoul, or I'll kill you—let her go!"

Marcia had returned unexpectedly early from the hairdresser. But her cry of warning to her lover was not at all motivated by anxiety for her daughter's maiden peril; it was summoned up out of a savage jealousy, to think her lover would dare prefer any other female but her.

Chapter Ten

AS RAOUL WHIRLED ROUND, stupefied by the accidentally early return of his inamorata, Tonia at last recovered her senses, and with a choking sob, swiftly stooped to retrieve the fallen terrycloth robe and hastily donned it, her eyes huge with horrified despair and shame, her round young breasts turbulently heaving. Her flesh still crawled from the sensation of his touches . . . his kisses . . . She felt vilified, cheapened, sullied . . .

"M-mother," she faltered, the back of one trembling hand against her quivering mouth.

Marcia Scott glared venomously at Raoul, completely ignoring her stunned daughter. "I'm waiting for an explanation, Raoul," she said crisply, almost spitting out the words.

"Dear one, it's not what you think." Raoul de Monri-card had adroitly recovered his aplomb. He knew he had to. His fate hung trembling in the balance scales, and just one fatal slip might cost him a secure and roseate future.

"Go on. I'm waiting."

"Your daughter is very beautiful . . . and very lonely."

"I'm aware of that. And that's why you had her naked, backed against the wall and . . . making love to her, right?"

"Marcia darling—how can you think that of me?" he cried, injured anguish throbbing in his voice.

"Are you going to tell me I didn't see what I just did, Raoul?"

He turned to face her fully now, hands outstretched, palms forward at his sides, the very portrait of wounded innocence. "I will tell you only what is the truth, *ma belle* Marcia."

"I'd like to hear it."

"M-mother . . . oh . . . m-mother," Tonia gasped, while tears rolled down her flaming cheeks.

"I went to see Gordon Emmings, darling, and then I came back here to wait for you. Tonia was already

home, and asked me if I wouldn't come read poetry to her—"

"Ohh!" A hand to her mouth, eyes large at the enormity of her assailant's lie, Tonia recoiled against the wall as if nailed there, her entire body shaking with the ague-like spasms of reaction to the unspeakable despair she bore within her psyche. Never before had any man seen her naked, yet this glib, smug liar, this man who had profaned Daddy's marriage bed, dared to stand there and tell Mother she had invited him to her room—oh, surely Mother would never believe such a thing—

"So, knowing how lonely Tonia is, I took pity on the poor child, *ma belle amour*," Raoul went on calmly, fixing his eyes on Marcia's taut, angry face as if he were the defendant in a murder trial pleading for his very life to the jury—and in some ways he was. "She'd apparently gone swimming, and all she had on was that robe. Before I knew what was happening, she'd told me she didn't care about poetry, she just wanted to talk to me . . . because she liked me very much—"

"No, no, Mother, it's not true—my God in heaven, don't listen to him!" Tonia cried.

But she was doomed to be misunderstood; Marcia's spiteful jealousy, enamoured as she was of the handsome Frenchman's devotion to and assuagement of both her spiritual and carnal needs, read into that piteously ingenuous denial a very affirmation of what her lover was saying . . . don't listen to him—yes, because what he is saying is true—that was how she heard the trembling young brunette's feverish words.

"And then, after a moment, I hardly remember what we said, she put her arms round me and kissed me and then she said, 'Aren't I prettier than my mother, Raoul dear? Wouldn't you like to love me too—I need love so very much'—and then she pulled her bathrobe off and she was . . . as you saw her—"

"Oh, that's not true, that's not true, Mother, I swear it's not true!" Tonia's voice shook with near-hysteria.

"Then how do you explain, Raoul, the fact that you were kneeling before her and kissing her—well, you know what I mean. That doesn't sound as if you were forced into a compromising situation," Marcia finished with a cynical laugh.

Raoul contritely hung his head. "That, I will admit,

my darling, and I ought to be punished. Understand me—she begged me to take her, saying how desperately in love with me she was—”

“Oh nooooo!” Tonia wailed, and clenching her fists, she banged them back against the wall in frustrated indignation at the outrageous falsehood he was concocting.

“*Ma belle* Marcia, I had no wish to hurt your lovely child—for she is only a child, nothing more. But she was in such an emotional state—I tell you, I feared for her sanity at that moment. So I told her I would kiss her, nothing more . . . and she seized me by the shoulders and shoved me down upon my knees, saying, ‘Then kiss me as you did Mother—do it all to me, darling Raoul!’”

“Oh, it’s a lie, you horrible, hateful beast you, it’s not true, not a word of it!” Tonia shrieked, then bowed her head, covering her congested face with shaking hands, and burst into racking sobs.

He stood before Marcia, still in that pose of feigned, complete contrition, awaiting her verdict.

Her eyes were warm and forgiving. “Go to my bedroom, dear. Leave me alone with Tonia,” she said softly.

He walked slowly past her, put a hand on her shoulder, uttering a deep sigh, and murmured, “Thank you . . . and forgive me, dearest one.”

The door closed behind him.

Marcia stood regarding her weeping daughter.

Then, setting her lips tightly, she advanced to Tonia, and, seizing the girl by the hair with her left hand, bestowed four or five vicious and furious slaps with the palm of her other hand, rocking Tonia’s head from side to side.

“You slut! You indecent hussy! To think you’d dare, under my very roof—oh, you incorrigible, shameless little slut—there—there—to offer yourself to a man that way, pure little virgin that you’ve been trying to act all this time, when you really had hot pants for my Raoul!” and she applied still another pair of slaps that made the unfortunate young girl reel and sag against the wall.

Panting, face livid with fury, Marcia regarded the hysterically weeping girl. “Now let me tell you something, precious lamb,” she sneered. “Raoul thinks he’s going to live off the fat of the land for the rest of his life by getting me to divorce your father and marry him. He’s got another think coming. But that’s no concern of yours.

For me, he's an interlude, nothing more, to compensate me for your father's neglect, for his traipsing off all over the world and so conveniently forgetting he's got a wife and daughter back here at home."

She glared at Tonia again as slowly she regained her composure, then went on: "But as I say, that's no concern of yours, do you understand me? However, regardless of my feelings towards him, I don't propose to have a lily-white innocent like you—passing yourself off that way, at any rate—making a pass at my lover. You deserve to be horsewhipped within an inch of your life, you little witch! But I'll get you out of temptation's way, never fear! You're not going back to Columbia this fall, Tonia. I'm going to send you to a girls' finishing school where you won't be exposed to anything in pants!"

She paused to catch her breath, her magnificent bosom rising and falling violently, her eyes narrowed as they fixed on the sagging, half-fainting girl before her. "Yes, Tonia, no more boys or men for you to lure into your room. I'm glad I found out what sort of creature you really are before you could get yourself into real trouble. Now stay out of my sight as much as you can till your new school term begins—or I swear I'll give you that whipping after all. You—you filthy little slut!" And, giving Tonia a last slap that made the unfortunate young brunette stumble and sink to her knees and one palm, as she rubbed her blazing cheeks with the other trembling hand, Marcia Scott turned on her heel and stalked out of her daughter's bedroom, slamming the door with a finality that symbolized her abrupt decision on Tonia's future schooling . . . a schooling more devious and complex than she could possibly have realized . . .

Chapter Eleven

RAOUL DE MONRICARD congratulated himself on his adroitness in emerging with untarnished status from what could so easily have been a destructive situation. Amoral and unscrupulous as he was, he gave little thought to the psychic damage he might have wrought on Tonia's sensitive mind, or the irreparable gulf he had opened up between mother and daughter by his spur-of-the-moment lie and the poised innocence by which he had so successfully carried it off.

Psychologically, he thought to have accomplished at a single master-stroke both his goals: deepening Marcia's affection for him into a dependency which must lead to the ultimate fulfillment of marriage, and the conquest of Tonia's voluptuous young virginity—since now she would certainly be in disgrace and so contemptuously treated by her mother that she would inevitably seek out consoling love . . . and he would then generously provide it.

However, his victory was only partial. He had not overheard Marcia's cynical declaration to Tonia after he had left the girl's room to go to her mother's bedroom as bidden; if he had, he would have realized that his hopes of becoming her husband and taking over her own accrued wealth were woefully illusory.

But with that smug maleness which believes that sexual aggression is the answer to everything, he calmly undressed and in her lush bed awaited her return from her maternal scene with Tonia, smiling as he smoked a cigarette and eyed the ceiling, then regarded his two "masterpieces" set in frames and hanging on her walls. That sight not only invigorated him for an act of "fidelity" to prove his unswerving adoration for Marcia and at the same time to demonstrate to her that her daughter's immaturity could never have turned him from their path of true mating, but it also let him indulge his ego in the triumphant mood of one who believes he has won

an infrangible contract from the gods and luck and fortune.

And so when Marcia entered the bedroom and found him there, insolently ensconced in virile nakedness, so certain of her, she laughed heartily as she slipped out of her dress and tugged off her slip: "You sneaking little swine, Raoul! You've no idea what a conceited egomaniac you are, darling. Fortunately for you, I like it in you, because we're two of a kind—because you've the good sense to prefer a real woman to a temperamentally immature and overwrought child."

"Can there be any doubt that it's you I want, more than any other woman?" he protested.

"Keep saying that, and I'll keep believing you, you scoundrel. And you know how handsome you are, don't you? I'm not entirely convinced you weren't more than a little to blame for that wicked child's behavior—but no matter." Her eyes fixed on him admiringly as she stooped to loosen the tabs of her pantie-girdle; then she reached back to unsnap her bra and let it flutter to the floor. Kicking off her leather pumps, she moved languorously towards him, her naked breasts jouncing as she came. And cupping them up towards him, she stood, straddlelegged, eyeing him mockingly, "See, darling? I'm still young enough for a despicable beast like you, aren't I?"

"I'll show you how much, *ma mie!*" he muttered thickly. The encounter with Tonia, the feel of her naked skin, her writhing limbs struggling against him, the sight of her nudity, had sent a fiery holocaust of desire seething through his body, and Marcia's provocative half-nudity completed his fierce, total attunement for the act of love.

Her hands slipped down from her breasts to her thighs, and she stroked them, emphasizing their rondures, their elegant creamy skin glinting through the cobwebby and diaphanously nuancing cling of gunmetal-gray nylon hose. The tips of her breasts were flinty with yearning, for it was a kind of spiritual incest that now drove her to him, winning him from her own daughter, showing him haughtily and imperiously that her fecund and imperishably youthful body had all he could seek of femininity, and that Tonia's tempting young charms had only taken their inception from her own flamboyantly nature beauty.

"Light me a cigarette, Raoul." Her fingers lingeringly

rustled over the sleek upper curves of her widened thighs as she boldly defied him, staring mockingly down at him, feasting her drowsy-lidded eyes on the sturdy, wiry maleness of his body, that body which met her own tempestuous needs and went beyond them, deifying her and worshipping her in the flesh as she yearned to be worshipped.

He turned feline on his side to the bedside table and opened the little silver humidor, extracted a cigarette, flicked the lighter to it and inhaled. Then he held the glowing end towards himself as he extended it to her. "Here, *ma toute belle, ma toute precieuse!*"

"You know, darling, you must do something new for Dan Jacoby's gallery. You can't maintain your reputation on the strength of just one show," she murmured as she moved towards him, reached out and took the cigarette, put it to her mouth while he lazily drew the backs of his fingers down over her belly and inner thighs, his eyes dark and fretful, calculating her caprices so that he might be readied for them.

"I will, I will, darling. But I'm so absorbed with you, totally, *ma chérie*, that I can't think of work."

"D'you know, Raoul," she purred wickedly, "there are houses in Paris where you could make your fortune if you fail as a painter. I've read of such places. Where expensively gowned, wealthy women who can't find love at home go, masked, and pay a fee to look through a peep-hole and choose their mates. Oh, you'd be the favorite in such a harem, you bold, selfish, ruthless devil you!"

"I wish only to be your favorite, *ma mie!*"

"Yes, I know. It would suit you, this life of ease, with no responsibilities—"

"Oh, you wrong me, darling," again the abject, little-innocent-boy look flashed over his suave face, but the satyr's beard, the moist quivering moustached lips, the virile sinewy ardent maleness of him, belied that innocence. "I'd do anything you wished—if you believe I can be a great painter, then I shall be—*pour vous seulement, ma chère princesse d'amour!*"

She emphatically crushed out the cigarette in the ash-tray beside the bed. Then she turned to him, as he reached up for the fruits of her dangling naked breasts, and she shuddered as his practised fingers once again began those delicately fleeting caresses by which he knew so well how to prepare her for the abandon of all save

the joyous yielding to flesh on flesh, within flesh to consummation.

"Your princess of love," she repeated softly—for the constant repetition of his Gallic endearments had by now taught her to understand the most familiar ones—"And not Tonia, then?"

"*Ma mie!* Didn't I tell you?" he groaned reproachfully, shuddering with longing for her.

"Words, words. Show me. Show me you love only me and can't think of anyone else . . . now, you wretch, you scoundrel . . . now . . ."

She stood against the edge of the bed; he raised himself on his side, turned to her, and his hands rucked down the pantie-girdle, and she was naked, the nylon hose slipping from their unwrinkled tautness along the beautiful columns of her shapely thighs.

"Show me," she repeated evocatively as his hands grasped her naked creamy hips. "Kiss me . . . the way you were kissing her . . . the most exquisite kiss of all, to waken and soothe a woman . . . ahh—yes—ohh, you beast—ahh—yes—more—ahh—more—"

Her fingers twisted in his hair, her head fell back, her face contorted with frenzy as his lips attacked her at the crux of her being, and even as she writhed in her furious yearning, she thought to herself, it is me he desires, not Tonia, and even when he kissed that innocent little slut, it was me he was kissing . . .

And with a hoarse cry, she flung herself onto the bed, thrusting him onto his back, mastering him, taking a reversal of their roles, as they entwined, lips and hands questing to the reckless attainer of their commingled needs, drunk with each other, careening into an inchoate and sublime and shattering fulfillment . . .

The very next week, Marcia Scott wrote letters to several exclusive girls' finishing schools, and upon receiving their catalogs, decided to send Tonia that September to the Corley School in New Hampshire.

The injustice of Raoul's charges and her own mother's acceptance of their falsehood had the effect of making Tonia turn more than ever in upon herself. She scarcely spoke to Marcia when, at infrequent occasions, they dined together. Raoul was at least tactful enough, perceiving the girl's brooding state of shock and listlessness, to keep

silent in her presence, and grudgingly told himself he would make no further overtures to the lovely brunette, at least not till she came back for the Christmas holidays.

August dragged torturingly for Tonia. She read, she went swimming at the YWCA, she took long walks by herself in the afternoon, and she found solace again, more than ever, in her beloved books. She had two letters from her father, gay and encouraging, urging her to keep up her studies but at the same time to find new friends and to try to adapt her academic studies to the practise of simple, wholesome living. Between these lines of paternal advice, she read how absorbed he was in his new theatrical productions, how much he loved Paris and how he hoped some day she might come there and spend some time in the City of Light. "It would do you good, darling," his last letter told her, "to be among these utterly charming, unconcerned people. They seem to get even more work done than we do in New York, yet with much less outward effort. Two-hour lunches, ample time in the afternoon to relax, an *insouciance*—that's the only word that aptly describes their outlook—and yet underneath it all they enjoy life and pursue their ambitions much as we do, except they've learned the secret of tolerance and relaxation. It looks very much as if I'll be here till the Christmas holidays at least. Do write and keep me informed of your progress."

Tonia did write, but guardedly. Not for anything in the world would she have let him guess of the rift between her mother and herself, and still less of the brazen infidelity which Marcia was practising with Raoul. She had resigned herself to going away to school to finish her college studies. Perhaps it was best, after all. Then she wouldn't be in the same apartment with that dreadful Count, and Mother couldn't say such terrible things about her. Twice she had tried to intercept Marcia alone and falteringly explain that Raoul had lied, but each time, Marcia, preoccupied with this party or that outing to a new art gallery, had curtly told her she was busy and had no time to chatter.

The day after Tonia had been packed off and sent on to the Corley School—with Marcia's letter to the head counsellor requesting that Tonia be given special attention and vigilant supervision, as she was a moody, difficult girl and inclined to sulk and be morose, already having

preceded her—Raoul, lolling in bed with his beautiful paramour, whispered, “*Ma mie*, won’t you make me the happiest man in the world and let me become your husband, so that I can look after you and Tonia?”

Marcia threw back her head and laughed hilariously. “Marry you? Oh, Raoul, what a naive idiot you are, for all your rascally ways with women! I’d never marry a parasitical scoundrel like you. Do you realize you’ve done exactly one painting since you moved in here with me? Dan Jacoby’s given up on you. I don’t think you’re going to be the new Picasso, really I don’t, lover. So why not, while we’re still on the friendliest of terms—like this, for instance—why not call it quits?”

“Marcia, you can’t mean that!” Raoul gasped, momentarily floored by that cynical dismissal.

“But I do, dear. I hate scenes and recriminations. And before we reach them, let’s break off, so we’ll each retain a happy memory of the other.”

“Darling, no, you can’t be so heartless—” his hand slid down her moist inner thigh. Marcia giggled and rolled away from him, swinging her lovely creamy legs over the bed as she sat up and reached for a cigarette from the humidor.

“Oh, but I can, Raoul. As heartless as I know you’d be, given time. Now that you know you’ll never be my husband and have any chance at the money I have in my own name, do you really love me as terribly as ever? Be honest—if you can be.”

Piqued in his vanity, seeing a sinecure coming to a drastically unforeseen end, the black-haired Parisian took refuge in petulance. “*Voilà qui parle!* Look who’s talking about honesty, Madame Scott!” and the sibilliance of his voice made her married name sound like an insult, “you know very well you wanted someone to tell you how wonderful you are, to dance attendance on you, and to take you to bed. Well, so I’ve served my purpose, have I? *Jem’en fous!* And so have you. And if you want to know, your little Tonia would have gone away with me—all I had to do was snap my finger!”

“You’re a liar!”

“Oh, no. You remember that afternoon you came back much too early? Ah, but it wasn’t the first time, *ma belle*. And, given a little time, she would have turned out to be a much better *amoureuse* than you!”

"You utter swinel!" she slapped him across the mouth.

"*Merci.*" He rose gravely, with as much solemnity as a naked man can muster on such an occasion. "I shall go back to my cousin. He will find me some other foolish woman who will think I am a great painter. Oh—you may keep my two works of genius, Madame. As payment in full."

"Get to hell out of my apartment, this minute, you bastard" she swore vituperatively at him.

"I think," he reflected as he shrugged himself into his bathrobe, "that Madame Delgado will appreciate my particular talents. And when I tell her—as I shall—how much more beautifully she makes love than you—I'm going, I'm going"—for like a raging harridan, the naked matron had seized the humidor and flung it at him, narrowly missing his head.

He slammed the door of the bedroom behind him. Marcia Scott, bursting into hysterical tears, flung herself down on the rumbled bed where only a few moments before they had lain entwined in sensual ecstasy. A goddess does not relish being abandoned by a mere acolyte, especially when he points out that she has feet of clay.

Chapter Twelve

THE CORLEY SCHOOL was picturesque, located in a charmingly bucolic section of upper New Hampshire. Its directress, Mrs. James Corley, prided herself on the diversified curriculum, the highly competent instructresses, and the happy family-like relationships not only between pupils and their teachers, but also between pupils and their classmates. Highly selective as to entrance requirements—wealth and social prestige counted for a good deal more than scholastic standing—the Corley School was actually one of those institutions which catered to preoccupied parents and relatives who really wanted to rid themselves of the encumbrances of daughters and nieces and yet at the same time assure themselves that the girls would be properly supervised and ultimately graduated with renown. There were some 150 girls, divided into the four scholastic rankings of freshmen through seniors. Tonia, as a sophomore, was judiciously paired with a junior as her roommate. Mrs. Corley, as well as her dean of women (who acted as counselor, mother confessor and also as wailing wall when no letters came from home), felt that the best thing for a "difficult girl" like Tonia was to force her into a companionship with one slightly older and more of an extrovert.

Their choice fell upon Joan Crenshaw. And when Mrs. Corley wrote Marcia Scott in her enthusiastically glowing way about Tonia's first week, she saw fit to mention this pairing in a phrase which had a stronger connotation than she herself could fathom: "Your dear Tonia will spend her sophomore year with a very delightful young woman who is well thought of at Corley. She is gregarious and wonderfully friendly. I am convinced she will compel your Tonia to come out of her shell, for she has the good-natured personality of a friendly puppy."

It was true that Joan Crenshaw had that kind of personality. The 20-year-old svelte auburn-haired junior made friends easily—among both sexes. Her parents were divorced, and currently her mother had custody of her.

Joan's father was a "stuffed shirt," in both her and her mother's opinion, Cecilia Crenshaw being twenty years older than her daughter and loving a good time with little concern for monogamous adherence to marital vows. Being an enlightened mother, she had also told Joan "what every girl should know" at an early age, embellishing her factual teaching with her own philosophy that judicious experimentation was much better than blind infatuation or going steady with just one dull boy till a girl found herself in the trap of marriage.

Accordingly the red-haired junior took advantage of the leeway her easygoing mother permitted by going out on dates as early as her thirteenth year, by necking by the time she was fifteen, and by "going all the way" on her sixteenth birthday. Now, at twenty, she had just concluded a passionate affair with a handsome young truck-driver who delivered supplies to the Corley School and whom she had been meeting rather regularly in a deserted barn a few miles away from school. She had also tasted the exotic delights of Sappho, having seduced at least three freshmen last semester. One of them, a brown-haired olive-skinned girl of 18, Chloe, was still enamoured of her and eager to continue the liaison. Joan had been thinking of resuming with Chloe when Miss Murrow, the counselor, had called her into her office the week before school started to inform her that she was to room with a very sweet but overly shy girl from New York whose father was the famous theatrical producer, Carl Scott. Joan therefore had decided to hold Chloe off a little while longer till she found out just how shy and sweet this newcomer was.

In this respect, the attractive red-haired junior was not so much Lesbian by nature, predilection or conviction as amorally enthusiastic in her search for sensual excitement. She was not the shy, clinging and timorously yielding partner when her erotic needs led her to merge her lissome body with a male; and when she drew the exciting, somewhat perverse though outwardly hesitant Chloe to her bed for the first time, it was in a frank experimental mood by which she sought to compare the effect of her caresses on the body of one of her own sex as opposed to the male's, and, conversely, how she herself was stimulated when a girl instead of a boy kissed and fondled her most erogenous thresholds. From the practical viewpoint,

too, she found a certain relish in having a lover of her own sex; there was no danger of pregnancy, no unesthetic preparations were required, the tender and romantic illusion of wooing was lengthier and far more imaginative than anything she had experienced with boys—who preferred to bypass all dalliance and byplay—and, pursuing that theme to its logical conclusion, she found that her own deep-rooted climaxes were drawn forth more fully and satisfyingly by the lingeringly prolonged rituals of Lesbos in sometimes frustrating contrast to the all too often brusque and inconsiderate exigencies of the male.

She could not be called a "butch" by the most critical standards; though admittedly the aggressor with Chloé and intending to play the same role with shy Tonia, hers were solely an amoral quest after physical gratification, not a frenetic or morbid fascination for her own sex. And while it is doubtless true that the definitive Lesbian is motivated by the accidental chemistry of blood or genes or by a highly intensified introspection as well as by that singular accident of birth which gives her, in the case of a true "butch," a stronger masculine impulse so that she becomes the "husband" in a Sapphic liaison, Joan Crenshaw's basic motivation was quite simply her own highly sensitized eroticism which made her eager to experience all forms of sensual stimuli and fulfillment.

Tonia moved in with Joan exactly one week before the fall semester was to begin. That week was all Joan needed to make up her mind that here, close to hand and ideally suited for the purpose, was a perfect partner for her secret indulgences. Tonia blushed frequently, was highly self-conscious about not undressing in Joan's presence—a traumatic result augmented by Raoul's bold assault on her that indelible afternoon—and when Joan amusedly asked her whether she had any boy friends, Tonia "clammed up" on all such dangerously titillatory subjects. Ergo, Tonia was indrawn and yet so breathtakingly lovely and so sensitive, that she could not help but find Lesbian attentions the perfect solution to her carnal needs. Joan reasoned speciously, but to an extent she was right in one prime deduction: Tonia had let Mark Jorgenson's naively decent behavior towards her slip to the farthest part of her mind; whenever she thought now of boys or men, she could remember only the shockingly embarrassing and annihilating experience in her bed-

room, when Raoul de Monricard had taken rights she had allowed to no human being until that shattering moment.

And the occasion for Joan's putting her theory to the test came during the very next week. It was the custom at Corley School to "welcome" all new girls shortly after their enrollment as members of either one of two secret sororities. Cliquism is as prevalent at an expensive and exclusive finishing school as it is on ordinary college campuses, or more so. Joan herself being a minor officer in one of these secret cliques—whose members called themselves "The Amazons" as against the competitive "The Hetirae"—, it was child's play to suggest to lovely Tonia that everyone who came new to Corley had to join some such select group and that since her own roommate was in "The Amazons," Tonia should of course put in for membership.

Poor Tonia was on the emotional rebound after her disastrous summer. She had, through the weeks following Raoul's humiliating manhandling of her chaste body, withdrawn so completely into a turtle-like armor of obliviousness to people and the outside world that now this change of scenery and companions seemed to herald a new start in her life. Away from Marcia and Raoul for good, even though lonely and shunned and with the feeling of having been for all time to come repudiated by her own mother, Tonia believed that her stay at Corley would help her go back to the gentle way of vicarious living through books and contact with persons sympathetic to them. And so she consented to join Joan's sorority.

Thus, that Friday evening after dinner, Tonia found herself ushered into one of the basement recreation rooms, sponsored by Joan herself. "We have a little initiation, darling, nothing to be worried about, but you have to show you're a good sport by going through with it," Joan had advised her. Tonia blushed a fiery red at this, and tried to get Joan to tell her what it would comprise, but the svelte redhead just shook her head and told her that it was a secret and if she were to divulge it, all the element of mystery would be removed.

Despite Joan's egregious friendliness to her all during their first days together as roommates, Tonia had misgivings. Nonetheless, she allowed Joan to blindfold her before leading her into the basement room, and she had

been instructed to wear as informal attire as she owned for the occasion. Accordingly, she had put on black satin Capri pants, white open-throat short-sleeve blouse and dainty thong sandals. The snug satin pants entrancingly hugged the exciting curves of her thighs and hips, and the informal blouse provided an equally delicious avowal of her milky throat and chest and the surging firmness of her round young bosom.

When Joan led her through the door, some fifty girls confronted the sorority sister and her neophyte pledge, lined up in two facing rows, all of them armed with initiation paddles. The president of "The Amazons," a handsome, bold-faced sandy-haired senior of 21 named Elsa Henshaw, solemnly greeted the quaking Tonia, bade her submit herself to the test of fortitude; and Joan, at Elsa's sign, then whispered, "Now, honey, get down on your hands and knees and crawl forward . . . go straight on ahead till you're told to stop."

"W-what is it, J-Joan? What are they g-going to d-do?" Tonia nervously quavered.

"Shh, don't be a baby! You have to go through with it—or they'll really make it hard on you. Now don't let me down, I sponsored you, remember, Tonia sweetie? Go do what I said, huh, that's a doll," Joan encouraged.

Uneasily, Tonia sank down on all fours and hesitantly moved forward. The waiting girls tightened their grasp on their paddles and awaited her advance with relish, while Joan herself took place at the very end of the line in back, and brandished her own rectangular pinewood implement of "welcome."

The silence was broken by an emphatic and sonorous *smack* as the first girl's paddle swept crisply against the tightest part of Tonia's glossy satin Capri pants.

"Oww! Oooh, that hurts! What . . . what are you d-doing—" Tonia gasped her startled discomfort, pausing to reach back to rub the stinging area so rudely and unexpectedly greeted.

The girl opposite her first initiatress promptly dealt Tonia another sonorous whack over her vulnerably up-turned posterior, and with a squeal of pain and distress, the blindfolded young brunette realized that she was running a gantlet, and instinctively began to crawl forward as fast as she could. The girls weren't too harsh on her, all things considered, since for the most part they

had nothing against her. But the female of the species is usually crueller to her own fair sex than is the male, and by the time Joan Crenshaw herself applied a final energetic swat and Elsa called, "That's enough! Candidate Scott, you may rise and hold the back of your neck with both hands while we remove your blindfold and prepare you for the final test of courage," poor Tonia was shifting from sandaled foot to foot and sobbing in earnest, feeling as if a swarm of hornets had visited her tender posterior and inflicted their burning stings in every cranny of her firm young buttocks.

But at least the worst was over, she told herself, though it took all her stamina to obey the order to hold the back of her neck and not keep on trying to rub away the furious smarting pangs that had seemingly lodged in her tender flesh for all time to come. Joan herself doffed the blindfold, congratulated Tonia on her bravery, and the final ceremony consisted only of being blindfolded again and being obliged to walk barefooted through a tubful of spaghetti "worms." Then Tonia was duly sworn in as an "Amazon," and the girls celebrated their acquisition of a new sorority sister by serving coffee and cake.

The lovely brunette wanly accepted compliments on all sides for her bearing through the ordeal—and it *was* an ordeal to have to stand, she didn't dare sit down. At last Joan Crenshaw, who had been watching her closely all through the seance, murmured, "Honey, if you'd like, I think we can leave the party now, okay?"

"Oh my gosh, yes, Joan! I . . . I would like to, if you think it's all right?"

"It sure is. I'll tell Elsa you're all tired out—she'll understand. And I'm glad you're one of us, honey." Joan squeezed her arm and flashed her an approving smile as she made her way through the chattering girls to Elsa, whispered in Elsa's ear and got an authoritative nod. Returning to Tonia, she murmured, "It's okay, Tonia baby. Come along. They're going to talk business now, anyway, about their plans for the Christmas show our club always gives. We show up those crummy 'Hetirae,' you'll see!"

She led the way upstairs to their room, and Tonia cautiously eased herself into the soft armchair near the door, only to grimace and gasp, "Ouch!"

"You poor baby," Joan gently commiserated, "tell you

what, whyn't you undress and let me rub on some cold cream or lotion—you know. I bet it does hurt a lot. But at that, you got off real easy. I've seen Elsa give the high sign to take down some of our newies, and they couldn't sit down for a week. But they like you, honey. You're class, nothing stuckup or fake about you. Only—well, you've got to be more sociable. But that'll come. Now let me help you get comfy, hm, dear?"

She bustled about like a mother hen, turning down the covers of the wide bed, then went into the bathroom and turned on the cold-water faucet, dropped a washcloth into the basin to soak, and rummaged in the medicine cabinet for some mentholated cold cream.

Meanwhile, Tonia wanly unbuttoned her blouse and laid it over the back of the armchair, then slowly drew the zipper of her Capri pants and began to pull them down, grimacing as the tight sheath rubbed her where she was the sorest. She didn't feel like stooping down to retrieve the pants, and stood a moment, an exquisitely provocative vision in the deshabelle of pink satin bra and panties with narrow garter-belt holding up flesh-colored nylons with its snug tabs. Now, gingerly, she put her hands behind her and tentatively palpated her smarting, throbbing seat. Ouch, it still felt as if the hornets hadn't let up . . . ruefully she thought to herself that if this was their idea of letting her off easy, she'd certainly hate to have aroused their ire.

Joan came out of the bathroom with the wet washcloth and the jar of cream. She had made herself more comfy too, and wore just her peach-colored silk slip, slippers and a loosely belted bathrobe over the slip. She was strikingly exotic, with high forehead, anglingly highset cheekbones, almond-shaped green eyes, a straight nose with broadly flaring wings, and a ripe wide mouth which suggested the ardent quality of her temperament. Her auburn hair was styled in long pageboy, with curls turned under. And her skin had that creamy tint with tiny rosy flecks like a strawberry blonde, devastatingly exciting—at least the young truckdriver had thought so.

"That's better, baby," she approved huskily, walking toward the bed. "Now just take off your panties and garter-belt and stretch out on your tummy on the bed. Mamma'll make you feel better in a jiffy."

Tonia turned scarlet to her dainty ears. "I . . . I can do it . . . b-by myself, Joan . . . really I c-can . . . t-thanks anyway—"

Joan cocked her head, eyes narrowed, a teasing little smile on her full lips. "Know something, honey? Ever since you got here, I've noticed how you keep from showing off that lilywhite shape of yours . . . now this isn't a coed school, you know. Nobody's going to rape you. I'll lock the door, so nobody'll barge in, how's that?"

She moved to the door, and turned the key in the lock. "There now. Nothing to be afraid of. Now you go ahead. I promise I won't look till you tell me to. Get on that bed and I'll take the burn out of that paddling—or would you rather try to sleep with it still warming you up, hm?"

"N-no . . . all . . . r-right . . . b-but . . . d-don't you look till I say so," Tonia hesitantly faltered.

Joan turned her back, but a secret smile of anticipation deepened on her full sensual mouth. Tonia hastily drew down her panties, stepped out of them; then, hastily and fumblingly unfastening the supporters, unhooked the garter-belt and let it fall to the floor atop the rumpled panties. In only her bra and sandals, she quickly moved to the bed, flung herself down on it, and wriggled onto the middle, burying her face on one of the pillows and lying very still, with arms at her sides.

Then she stammered, "All r-right."

Joan turned, her eyes avidly laving that milky white nudity, on whose smooth voluptuous sleekness only the narrow band of the bra interrupted the graceful, soft-sheened vista of girlish femininity.

And against the impeccable milky whiteness of that virginal flesh, the flaming, swollen dark-reddened round tightly-set hemispheres of her buttocks stood out with almost a lubricious invitation to Joan's quivering fingers. Long shivers ran up and down Tonia's graceful lithe thighs, which she instinctively clenched as tightly as she could.

"Now that's fine, baby. Mamma'll make you feel so much better in a jiffy, you'll see," Joan crooned breathlessly as she came forward. Gently she laid the cold wet washcloth over the reddened nether globes, and Tonia started with a gasp, then relaxed slightly, keeping her blushing face buried tightly in the pillow.

"Just a minute now and I'll rub in some cooling

cream, honey," Joan murmured, her eyes devouring that abandoned, voluptuous young body. She slid off her bathrobe now, to be more at her ease, and the hard narrowly spaced small pomegranates of her breasts began to swell with a sporadic rhythm that betokened her mounting excitement.

Tonia sighed languorously. The cool cloth on her hot smarting bare buttocks had begun to allay some of the throbbing intensity of pain. Then suddenly it was whisked off, and she felt slim soft knowing fingers gently smoothing the hot naked skin . . . and a sudden coolness sent nervous tremors rippling all along her legs and hips, deepening the adorable hollow of her spine. Joan had begun to rub in the mentholated cream, working it in lightly, without haste, her eyes all the while savouring the girl's body, the delicate sensitivity which these voluptuous shivers expressed.

"That better now, sweetie?"

"Mmm . . . hmmm . . . lots better, Joan . . . t-thank y-you v-very much."

"Think nothing of it, baby. Mamma loves to make her pretty little girl feel better. I didn't dare tell you they were going to put you through the mill, though—all these initiations are strictly hush-hush, you know. You're not mad at me, are you, honey?"

Tonia shook her raven head. Her beautiful glossy black hair shimmered in a rich thick cascade to her shoulder-blades, and further accentuated the milky purity of her bare skin.

On and on Joan's fingers moved, till the cooling cream had dried. The angry inflammation of Tonia's buttocks gradually began to fade, and the naked girl uttered faint sighs of relief at this consoling treatment . . . little by little, her slim bare legs eased their clenched tensioning.

"There . . . Mamma's done . . . does it still hurt?"

"N-not too much . . . t-thank you . . . J-Joan."

"For nothing, honey. Know what the saying is—Mamma ought to kiss it and make it well," Joan giggled boldly. Then, bending down over the naked girl, her hands stroking Tonia's hips, she imparted a soft evanescent kiss on the girl's upper right thigh. Tonia uttered a startled gasp, turned her crimsoned face, eyes wide and questioning.

"You've the loveliest soft skin, Tonia," Joan said won-

deringly as her fingertips delicately glided over the sleek bare hips, trembling and twitching in nervous reaction from the initiation spanking. "I'll bet the fellows are just crazy about you, hm?"

"Oh no! Oh, Joan, you mustn't say such a thing!" Tonia breathed, aghast. "Oh please give me a robe or something . . . I . . . I—"

"Shh, honey," Joan cooed gently as she seated herself on the edge of the bed, reaching out towards the frightened, nervous brunette to run her fingers through that flowing sheaf of raven curls. "But I didn't say anything wrong. If you've a steady boy friend—"

"But I don't, I don't!" Tonia cried, "and I'd never let him see me l-like t-this, even if I did have!"

"You're shivering so, darling," Joan consoled her roommate. "I'll bet I know what—you had something go wrong and you don't like boys any more—is that it?"

"N-no . . . I . . . I . . . c-can't tell you—"

"A man, then," Joan shrewdly ventured, her fingers caressing the milky satin rondure of a slim shoulder. "I won't tell any of the other girls anything about what we talk about, honey, you can trust Joanie. Now, 'fess up—was it a man that made you so set against the species, hm?"

Tonia nodded, miserably, and again buried her furiously shamed face in the pillow.

Joan eyed the quivering girl. Then, felinely, she stretched out on the bed beside her, turning on her side towards Tonia, her left hand softly and lingeringly stroking the smooth dimpled white back, the smooth-sheened shoulders, the flowing luxuriance of glossy black curls. "Tell Joanie . . . I promise I won't breathe a word to a soul, honey," she coaxingly murmured.

And Tonia, in her emotional enervation, the glowing, tingling aftermath of the paddling acting on her like a purifying and purging chastisement that she subconsciously accepted because she felt she had somehow sinned against her mother and herself by permitting Raoul de Monricard to see her nakedness and be lustfully inspired enough to accuse her of wantonness, sobbed out the entire story of that fatal afternoon.

Rather fortunately for Tonia, she had a sympathetic listener in Joan. For the candidly pleasure-seeking red-head did not inveigh against the barbarism of the male

nor hypocritically warn her to shrink henceforth from his company.

"Listen, honey," she said, snuggling closer to the naked young brunette, her soft palm gliding down from Tonia's back over the promontories of the hips and restlessly shivering buttocks—whose angry hue had by now diminished to a flushed, exciting pink tinting—"some day you'll meet a guy who'll think of your happiness first. Not every guy you meet is a dirty dog out for just what he can get, like that French gigolo you ran into back home. He just wanted to have his cake and eat it too, see? He was going to try to get your mother to marry him and support him the rest of his useless life, then make a pass at you because you'd be real convenient and handy, get me?"

Tonia nodded hesitantly, her great clear blue eyes misted with the film of tears, and Joan was erotically moved by their ardent, supplicating glow.

"So don't clam up into your shell just because of that one wrong guy, baby. Some day there'll be a fellow who'll be everything you want in a lover—tender, gentle, thoughtful, yes, and passionate too—"

"Oh no, I—"

"Shh, darling. Mamma knows best. You're read a lot about love, and I can tell you it happens and it's even more thrilling than in the books, believe me."

"B-but I'd be af-afraid of . . . of being . . . h-hurt—"

"Are you afraid of me, for instance?"

"Oh no!"

"Some day, you watch and see, Tonia, there'll be a nice sweet guy who'll like you as much as I do and know how to make you happy—in some ways that I can't, but in lots of the way I can, too. I know."

"W-wh-what do you mean, J-Joan?" Tonia breathed, searching the redhead's sensual features.

"Let me kiss you and show you, darling . . . let me make you forget that little spanking, hm? There . . . that's a darling . . ."

Snuggling up closer to the naked brunette, Joan cupped Tonia's chin with her right hand and pressed her soft moist red lips to Tonia's trembling mouth, her left hand moving with the utmost gentleness and lingering persuasiveness over the girl's quivering bare back.

Tonia moaned faintly as that exquisitely gentle kiss

prolonged itself; and under it, her lips shyly parted, opened like a flower's petals to the warming sun.

"Put your arms around me, baby," Joan crooned in a husky voice, her eyes sparkling with nascent desire.

Slowly, the naked girl obeyed, felinely rolling onto her right side to face the red-haired Lillith, and shyly her lovely bare white arms held Joan round the shoulders.

Joan's mouth fused to hers, then, passionately; her right hand stroked Tonia's hair while her left moved here and there, with the most delicate touches, over the quivering, still furiously warm buttocks, round the elegant arch of one bare hip, down the febrilely trembling shapely rounded thigh, and back whence it had come . . . till her fingertips loosened the bandeau of the bra. Tonia writhed and uttered a stifled, "Oh, no, J-Joan—" but Joan's mouth sealed that sweetly plaintive outcry, and now the darting pert tongue of the redhead began to ply Tonia with the languorously delicious titillations of amorous cajolery.

Bared, the round sweet bosom convulsively swelled against Joan's small hard breasts, and now Joan's left hand came round the trembling thigh towards the secret niche of all desire. Tonia stiffened; with one hand she tried to deny Joan's will, but the redhead's lips and tongue seduced her with a thrilling impetuosity till at last her hands clutched Joan's shoulders as for support, her body shaking in the turbulence of the new emotions Joan's caresses had begun to waken.

"You're so lovely . . . dearest . . . little Tonia . . . ohh, so sweet . . . there . . . kiss me back . . . you lovely baby . . . you wonderful little sweetheart," Joan purred ardently, and her hand no longer found denial as Tonia, shuddering, eyes closed, nostrils violently flaring, let her have her way . . .

For an instant, she halted that delicate wooing. Swiftly she doffed her slip, and her svelte nakedness vied with Tonia's. Then, with a throaty gasp of desire, Joan Crenshaw merged herself against her roommate's body, and their lips met as Tonia's hands, wonderingly, hesitant and shyly, at last grew bolder, more curious, and began to emulate those delicious and mysterious ritualistic caresses by which two kindred souls achieve the nirvana of their yearning . . .

Chapter Thirteen

TONIA'S ENROLLMENT at the Corley School came to an abrupt end towards the end of October. Carl Scott put through a transatlantic phone call to Marcia, and after some delay reached her late the next night. The art-loving matron, after having given Raoul de Monricard his walking papers, had become enamoured of an Adonis-like Greek sculptor whom she had named Phidias and whose muscles and erotic prowess were styled in the grand manner, after his own heroic life-size groups depicting mythological scenes. True, the size of his creative work presented one major problem; it would be difficult to place a ceiling-high statue of Laocoon and the sea serpent in her bedroom. But the sculptor himself was quickly introduced into that luxurious chamber, and so ardently did he prove his gratitude and devotion that Marcia got into the habit of letting the telephone ring endlessly without bothering to answer it.

When she finally did answer it that night, it was to be startled by the sound of her husband's voice: "Marcia? Where the devil have you been? I've been trying to get you for two whole days!"

"Oh—C-Carl . . . d-dear—I . . . I've been busy . . . Dan Jacoby has been working with me to have an exhibition of a simply divine sculptor—"

"Never mind that folderol. Why haven't I had any letters from Tonia? Is she still at Columbia?"

"Er . . . n-no, dear . . . I . . . er . . . sent her to a very exclusive finishing school up in New Hampshire."

"Are you out of your mind? Finishing school? Why?"

"It . . . it's difficult for me to tell you, Carl dear. Really, the child has been a problem—if you'd stay home for any reasonable length of time, you'd realize—"

"I didn't call you to get a lecture on how to bring up our daughter, Marcia. Or I'd read you a stiff one on neglecting your maternal responsibilities. It was evident to me when I last saw Tonia and urged her to go to Columbia, that she needed to mix with normal people

her own age, to make friends, to get out of herself for a change. Now I find you've shut her up where she'll turn into as much of a snob as you are."

"Well, really! Did you call me all the way from Paris to insult me?" Marcia sniffed disdainfully.

"Not entirely, my dear. First of all, where did you send her? I want the name of the school."

Marcia grudgingly told him. Then she added peevishly: "I tell you, she's a great problem to me. Out of consideration for her self-respect, I'm not going to tell you what was going on here this summer. But that's why I sent her to a girls' school, where she wouldn't be able to give in to her . . . well . . . her unfortunate tendencies."

"Stop talking in riddles, Marcia. What precisely do you mean? What happened this summer?"

"Well, I . . . er . . . I was sponsoring a very gifted French painter, and I came home one afternoon to find your daughter naked and letting him kiss her, that's what!"

"That's a damned lie! You're not telling me the whole thing, Marcia. I've had a suspicion for some little time that you've been letting this passion for the arts act as a pretext for your fooling around outside of marriage. Mind, I'm not accusing or sermonizing you. But I'm going to do two things—file suit for divorce, and get my daughter here with me in Paris."

"Oh, sure! Go ahead," Marcia cried furiously, "that'll do it! She'll turn out to be a real slut in that atmosphere, with all those free lovers and Left Bankers. Well, Mr. Carl Scott, she was on her way to becoming that right here, so if that's the way you feel, go right ahead. But you just try to divorce me and see where you get!"

"To the stage of final decree," was his stern answer, and she heard it clearly in spite of the thousands of miles between them. "I've had a good friend who runs a discreet private investigation agency keeping tab on your activities while I've been in Paris. And judging from the reports he's been sending me, I don't think I'll have much trouble, Marcia. Now if you're sensible, you won't contest the action, and I'll see you get a decent settlement. Then you can cavort to your heart's content with your French or Brazilian painters—what sort did you pick this time?"

"You go to hell!" Marcia shrieked and banked down

the phone, then burst into a tantrum. So piqued was she by her husband's disclosure that she took a fruit knife and viciously slashed the two canvases which Raoul de Monricard had donated to her bedchamber and which were now gathering dust in the linen closet . . .

And a week later, Tonia was in Paris, reunited with her father, with her own little studio apartment not far from his hotel, and with the prospect of three intensive months of studying French to prepare her for the Sorbonne.

She had no regrets. She was happy at last, being with her father and away from the hostile enmity Marcia had always shown her. But if she thought of anything to regret, it must have been that brief but intense friendship which she had known with Joan Crenshaw. In those seven short weeks at Corley School, Tonia had been closer to Joan than she had ever before been to anyone else on Earth . . . closer as confidante, as friend, and as lover. She had learned, though still with a secret feeling of guilty shyness, the exquisite rapture that the human body can procure and proffer. She had learned the bittersweet languor, the pulsing climax, the beatific and burgeoning attunement of physical fruition. Joan had erased the perverse impact of Raoul's assault by teaching her to glory in, and be unashamed of, her own voluptuous young naked beauty.

She had prepared Tonia for Arlette . . . and for the dream lover who was to follow Arlette. She would never know this. But she had not been a corruptress. And her legacy to Tonia had been the credo of sharing bliss . . . a credo which, transferred from two women who are in love, to a man and woman who come together tenderly, is the sum total of all we know of love upon this Earth . . .

Chapter Fourteen

TAWNY-HAIRED ARLETTE VALORY did not make overt love to her beautiful new American pupil at the very outset. Her subtle designs on Tonia were calculated from their very first meeting to bring about a gradual *camaraderie* between them, thence to transform it into a bond of dependence which would ripen into the physical union Arlette sought. It would come logically with the cohesion of Tonia's sensitive and readily impressionable mind to hers as she taught the charming brunette a mastery of the French language. And to do this, she had exactly three short months, which meant that at the very start of their relationship, one false move, one overly blatant overture, might frighten the girl and destroy any possibility of acceptance, just as it might impede Tonia's interest and progress in her studies.

So for the first two weeks, Arlette concentrated on spending as much time as she could with Tonia to give her the basic grammar and a workable vocabulary, to familiarize her enchanting pupil with a daily use of the language so that fluency would develop as a natural step. This was not at all difficult, for Tonia, thanks to her omnivorous love for books from the days of her childhood, had acquired a feeling for words and a sensitive perception of their nuances. The language of Racine, of Villon, of Voltaire and of Clemenceau has been called the world's supreme idiom in the field of international diplomacy, so delicately apt is French in expressing a precise shade of meaning. Not only in diplomacy—but also in love. And Tonia's delight in poetry had instilled in her an avid interest in these linguistic nuances. After a month, she was reading *Le Matin* with a ready comprehension and beginning novels by Daudet and Pierre Loti. Wisely, Arlette had held back excursions into French poetry till Tonia's vocabulary grew—and also, till she judged the moment propitious to share with her delectable charge the intimate rhymes of the Sapphic poets, the amorous concepts of Pierre Louys, the doctrine of

woman's emancipation as set forth so loftily by Simone de Beauvoir.

Carl Scott celebrated his 51st birthday with a party at Maxim's. The years had dealt kindly with him. Six feet tall, sturdily built—he had played football in his college days and made all-state tackle rating—his thick, curly brown hair liberally sprinkled with distinguished gray patches, a candidly rugged face that had attraction for the opposite sex, he had a warm sincerity which made those who worked with him in his production like him from the very beginning. Hortense Lastagnet's feelings for him were much stronger. She had definitely set her cap for him after having met him at that party; she wanted him as a man and she wanted the prestige and wealth he could give her. More than that, she wanted a major part in the new show he was going to produce.

It was a comedy by a young American playwright who had hit the jackpot his first time out. Whimsical and ultramodern, entitled "Dorothy Declines," it dealt with a high-spirited college girl whose socially ambitious parents were planning an expensive coming-out party for her and hoping to arrange a propitious marriage to one of the city's most eligible bachelors. The heroine was something of a bluestocking, despising social snobbery and the trappings of wealth. She defiantly took a job in an East Side garment factory to demonstrate her belief in social equality. She became a union organizer, and fell in love with a young man who worked in the office and was on the side of management. The play ended with her accepting his proposal of marriage, only to find out that he was actually the bachelor her parents had dreamed of her wedding in the first place.

Hortense saw herself as the heroine, despite being in her thirties. She broached her aspiration to Carl Scott, who generously gave her an audition and then gently but firmly told her the role was not for her. The young playwright had joined him in Paris to collaborate with a capable translator who was also the author of several witty comedies which had won acclaim in major French cities. The latter suggested the addition of several characters and typically Gallic situations to add comedy relief with Parisian audiences in mind. These were cooperatively accepted by the young playwright. Carl Scott proposed that Hortense read for one of the newly inter-

polated roles, a minor one, to be sure, but nonetheless requiring a compelling femininity and a flair for pert coquetry. Hortense eagerly agreed; to decline would hardly have furthered her plot to ensnare him in matrimonial shackles.

But if she thought that Carl Scott was unaware of her real motives in making herself as charming to him as she could, she was vastly in error. He found her attractive, undeniably desirable and certainly full of Gallic verve—but she was far from being his ideal as a prospective mate to replace Marcia. For one thing, her scheming shrewdness betrayed itself too often and when this occurred, she reminded him a little too unpleasantly of Marcia. No, what he wanted, if he were going to remarry at all, was a woman who would have no hobbies other than himself, a woman who would be without pretense, affectatious foibles and egoistic self-seeking.

Two days before "Dorothy Declines" was to open at the *Comedie Francaise*, under the French title of "*Mademoiselle Dit Non à L'Amour*," he left his hotel early in the morning and took a cab out to the riding stable two miles to the south of the Bois de Boulogne. He had always loved horseback riding, and this morning he wanted to enjoy a brisk canter, then a hearty breakfast, and then a long nap till evening. He had been keyed up through the arduous months of work on this new production, much more than he had ever known himself to be with any of his other shows. Wryly he told himself that the state of his domestic affairs had been mainly responsible.

But from now on, it should be easier sailing. He had telephoned his New York attorney to start divorce proceedings against Marcia, who had agreed to the settlement after the attorney had called on her to show her a copy of the report from her husband's private investigator. Tonia was with him and would remain in Paris, meet new friends. If this show turned out to be a success, he might even consider living in Paris permanently. He liked the easygoing yet sophisticated tone of the city. He spoke French as well as he did English, and he'd always, like most producers, had a play of his own in the back of his mind. Maybe settling down in one place with Tonia was a smart idea for both of them. And

maybe, even though he was 51, he could think of marrying again . . . with better luck this next time.

The skies were leaden, the air crisp and cool, just the weather he liked best. The riding master had picked a spirited roan mare for him, and the animal responded to him at once. He cantered down one of the picturesque bridle paths leading into the park.

As he veered to the right to get onto the main pathway leading to the outskirts of the Bois, he caught sight of an equestrienne on the opposite bridle path. She was having trouble with a snorting black stallion, though she was showing perfectly poised control, speaking gently to the nervous animal and holding the reins up short. Then suddenly the stallion reared and flailed the air with its hooves, took the bit and galloped madly off.

Carl twisted his mare's head to the left and broke into a gallop to overtake the runaway. Its rider, despite her peril, seemed to be in no way panicky; drawing on the reins and digging her booted heels into the stallion's sides, she tried her utmost to regain mastery.

Spurring his mare, Carl drew abreast of the woman, and, reaching out, adroitly seized the reins and yanked them violently, sawing the bit in the stallion's mouth; the animal stopped, whinnying resentfully, and reared; Carl leaped down and swiftly pulled its rider off to safety.

He held her tightly against him, as, panting, she shudderingly reacted to the aftermath of her hectic ordeal. "There, it's all right now . . . are you hurt?" he asked soothingly. He found himself looking at a lovely honey-haired woman, fashionably attired in riding breeches and jacket, blouse and bowtie, and trim bowler hat. Her face was heart-shaped, with firm sweet mouth, small aquiline nose, and dimpled chin. And he thought that her widely spaced large gray-green eyes were the most expressive he had ever seen, their intensity underlined by thick brows and short, very curly lashes.

"*Oui . . . je vous suis tres reconnaissante, M'sieu,*" she gasped. His arms were round her shoulders, to support her, and in spite of her masculinely trim riding outfit, he was aware that she was entirely feminine. As he had caught her to him, he had felt full round, closely set breasts mash against his chest. The crown of her bowler hat came just to his chin. She was just the ideal height, he thought, *à propos* of nothing.

"That was a close call, Mam'selle," he said in French.

"Madame," she corrected with a wan smile as she straightened. "Thank you, I think I can stand now . . . but I am very grateful. I do not usually let my horse run away with me. But the stable master assured me this one would give me no trouble. Perhaps something frightened the poor beast."

"I'm glad I was near enough to help, just the same. You ride very well—it could have been much more serious if you'd panicked."

She nodded, with a pretty smile. "Very true, m'sieu—m'sieu—?"

"Carl Scott. American."

"But how well you speak French, M'sieu Scott! I am Madame Genevieve Duran, and I owe you my life."

Now the smile had left her full, frank, kissable mouth and she was gazing at him with serious mien. He chuckled. "That's much too solemn a declaration on an empty stomach. Madame Duran. You can repay that debt by having breakfast with me, if you will."

"But I should be enchanted, M'sieu Scott!" And now the smile returned, abetted by adorable dimples at her rounded chin.

"Suppose you try my horse back to the stable, and I'll ride yours," he proposed.

En route to the stable, they chatted amiably. He learned that she was a divorcee of two years' standing, childless, and the owner of a small but exclusive dress salon in the Rue Faubourg. By the time they had had a filling breakfast of melon, *croissants*, honey, omelet with minced ham and coffee, Carl Scott felt himself relaxing with Genevieve Duran as he had never been able to do with Marcia. She had no affected manner, but was entirely straightforward and with a sense of humor he admired. He did not delve further into the matter of her former marriage, but invited her to the opening of "*Mademoiselle Dit Non à L'Amour*," and she readily accepted.

Genevieve Duran was enchanted with the play, and Carl Scott invited her backstage to meet the performers. Shyly, the lovely blonde divorcee praised them and thanked them for the pleasure they had given her. They in their turn expressed their sincere appreciation for

her praise. Only one of them, Hortense Lastagnet, was piqued by seeing Genevieve beside Carl.

She sensed already that she had a dangerous rival, for, shrewd woman that she was, Hortense had the perception to detect in Genevieve Duran those qualities which she herself lacked. Yet she made herself as charming as she could be under the circumstances, and was rewarded by Carl's quiet praise of her portrayal of her minor role. She had, it must be admitted, shown considerably more talent this night than heretofore in her previous theatrical career; but then, the dual goal she sought had given her inspiration. Now, however, she began to have a premonition that both these goals might be slipping away just because Carl Scott had chanced to meet this blonde matron out of nowhere. But when Genevieve laughingly made a comment that if it hadn't been for Carl Scott's horsemanship, Hortense heartily wished she had cultivated some athletic pursuits earlier in life. Why hadn't she thought of going horseback riding with him, all alone of an early morning in the Bois?

After the champagne party which followed the performance, Carl took Genevieve Duran back in a cab to her modest little apartment on the Rue Pleyel. She turned to him at the door, beaming, and held out her hands. "What a lovely, lovely evening, M'sieu Scott! And it was so gracious of you to bring an utter stranger along to your wonderful play."

"I don't feel you're a stranger, Madame Duran. Quite the contrary," he said slowly.

She blushed like a schoolgirl, which only made him admire her the more. He was discovering, as if he, too, were back in the days of his youth, how refreshing it was to be with a woman who made no demands on you, who acted naturally and wholesomely without subtle and complex motivations. How could any man in his right mind have let a woman like Genevieve Duran go, he asked himself. But he wasn't going to pry into her affairs, he didn't have that right. Not yet, at any rate.

"I want to see you again," he added, keeping hold of her hands.

"I . . . I'd like that too, very much, M'sieu Scott," she breathed, again blushing like a school girl. And for him, the contrast between Marcia's haughty narcissism and

Hortense's sensual but wily machinations made Genevieve's candor and sincerity stand out the way phosphorus does against darkness.

So much so, indeed, that he didn't yield to the temptation of kissing her on their very first date, though it was all he could do to resist that impulse, holding her soft hands in his and watching her soft carnation skin color divinely with a girlish flush.

"Good," he said huskily, striving to keep control of his emotions—for he had been entirely continent and faithful to Marcia all these months in Paris, strain though it had undeniably been on this virile, mentally alert and creative man. "Let me phone you some day soon, and maybe we can go horseback riding in the Bois again, then a lunch at some little farmhouse in the country—"

"How lovely that would be, M'sieu Scott—"

"Only I won't ever call you again unless you use my first name, Carl. 'M'sieu' sounds so formal and cold."

Her soft laugh had not the least affectation to it, only the sound of a charming woman who is honestly pleased. "I don't want to be that way with you at all, Carl. I . . . I've had such a wonderful time, truly. And I'll be very happy to have you call."

With this, she drew away her hands, then turned to open the door to her apartment building.

He was grinning happily. My God, he said to himself, nothing like this has happened to me since I was in high school. And I really don't know anything about her—but she's good for me, I know that much.

"Hey, wait—I need your phone number if I'm to call you, Genevieve," he called out, remembering just in time before she vanished.

She laughed again, nodded with a charming smile, and, opening her purse, took out an engraved card, which was that of her dress salon. Quickly she wrote her private phone number on the back, and handed it to him.

"*Voilà!*"

"Now I've got your number—and it's a very nice one," he chuckled, as he kissed her hand, then watched her go on into the building, slowly ascend the winding flight of stairs. With a sigh, he at last turned and hailed a cab.

Chapter Fifteen

FOR CARL SCOTT, the weeks that followed up through the Christmas holidays were all too swift. The comedy, translated deftly into French, was a box-office success, and the manager of the *Comedie Francaise* made him a tempting offer just two weeks before Christmas: if he and the young American playwright could collaborate and create an original play styled in the Gallic manner and in French—not too preposterous a request, since M'sieu Scott himself spoke and wrote French so admirably—it would be offered with fanfare and eclat as a leading vehicle for the famous Parisian theatre early next year. Moreover, the *Comedie Francaise* would be willing to pay handsomely for an acceptable adaptation into French of any of his previous American stage successes.

John Kemmering, the modest and gifted young playwright, enthusiastically agreed. He had another motive besides theatrical success in a foreign country to spur him on. During the Paris run of this his first play, he had been introduced to a willowy brunette named Gabrielle Sarnot who had been cast as a maid. Captivated by her beauty and sauciness, he was quite willing to elevate her status in real life to the role of Mrs. John Kemmering. John had taken French in high school, but Gabrielle promised that she would teach him to speak as idiomatically as a native Parisian so that he could write his original plays in that eloquent tongue.

And besides, Carl Scott, in his 51st year, felt it high time to end his wanderings and settle down to enjoy a placidity of domestic life which had been denied him over the years. Genevieve Duran was mainly responsible for this decision, although he had as yet said nothing to her. When the weather permitted, they went horseback riding in the Bois; and when it was raining or snowing, they acted like tourists and visited the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower and the grandiose Cathedral of Notre Dame, or took drives into the countryside in the little Fiat which Carl acquired just for that purpose.

There was hardly time enough to do all the things he wanted to do. To an extent, he neglected Tonia, so engrossed was he in discovering ever new facets or Genevieve Duran's easy-going and warmly sincere personality. He would phone Tonia to chat with her about her progress in her French lessons with Arlette, and perhaps once a week visit her and talk to her in French about the most trivial things. But for the most part, when his time was not occupied at the theatre in making minor changes to speed the action and increase the fluidity of the show, he was with Genevieve.

She was 36, and had been divorced three years. Her husband had been chosen for her by her parents, a typical *mariage de convenance*. The marriage had lasted thirteen years, and she had grown fond of him in a comfortable, emotionless way. She knew he sought other women for passion, but he was at least discreet about his casual amours. What had finally disrupted their marriage had been a *grande passion* for a beautiful and avaricious 19-year-old waitress with whom he had flirted in a sidewalk cafe and fallen madly in love. She wanted material things as proof of his devotion, so Genevieve's weak-willed husband had begun to embezzle from the import firm where he had a high position of trust. The scandal had at last broken and been smeared all over the Paris tabloids in the most lurid details. Genevieve's pride and good name had been hurt by this revelation, and so she had divorced him.

Her elder sister, who was Carl's age, had married and was living in Lyons. She had one child, a son named Jacques, now 26, who had displayed musical gifts at an early age, gone to the Paris *Conservatoire* and won the Prix de Rome for an orchestral tone poem. Genevieve was very proud of her nephew. She thought that he was versatile enough to write popular music, and some day might even compose original music for one of Carl's Broadway shows. He was to return from Rome in time to spend Yuletide with his parents, and perhaps they would all come to Paris shortly after the first of the year. Then Carl could meet him.

Two days before Christmas, Carl at last made his decision. He would stay in Paris for good. The final decree of his divorce had just arrived. There was now nothing to prevent his asking Genevieve to be his wife. And that

evening, at her tastefully furnished, modest little apartment, he slipped a diamond solitaire onto her finger and asked her to marry him. Her happy smile and the fervor of her embrace answered him beyond the slightest doubt.

But if these weeks of November and December sped far too swiftly for happy, rejuvenated Carl Scott, they were quite the reverse for his lovely daughter Tonia. Intensifying her work so that she could be ready for the Sorbonne's first semester week in February, the sensitive brunette had begun to think that all she knew of Paris were the four walls of her apartment, the pile of grammar books, novels, plays and history texts which Arlette Valory set before her—and Arlette herself.

For the chic Lesbian, these weeks were commingled joy and torment. Now that Hortense Lastagnet had dismissed her and left her without a lover, she found herself spending most of the morning and afternoon with the delicious American girl, and this continued proximity stirred her most elusive ardors.

Only by using the most rigorous self-control was Arlette able to forbear making the slightest overture, waiting till Tonia's command of her own native tongue should suffice for her to express herself in those delicately nuanced terms which are suitable only in this most precisely shaded of all languages. With impatience that grew well-nigh into obsession, she corrected, questioned, examined and tested her raven-haired white-skinned pupil. Tonia's quick mind had at once grasped the basic grammar, and her avid reading habits stood her in good stead to acquire a comprehensive vocabulary. Arlette insisted that they speak only French together, and refused to answer when Tonia at times, groping for the exact word or term, veered off into English.

Thus, by the week before Christmas, Arlette could finally declare that her pupil had, through diligent study, acquired sufficient competence to progress into the most complex phases: the Alexandrine verses of Rostand, the exotic prose of Pierre Louys, the psychologically probing commentaries of Simone de Beauvoir's "*La Deuxième Sexe*."

And finally, one stormy evening, her long-deferred opportunity came.

Tonia had eagerly asked her that afternoon, at the conclusion of their lesson, when they might read together

Baudelaire's "*Les Fleurs du Mal*," of which she had heard so much.

"*Ma petite*," Arlette purred seductively, a hand on Tonia's slim shoulder, "this book is really not for a sweet innocent like you. Baudelaire, *voyons*, had a depraved and sensual attitude towards life. Oh, *oui*, some of the poems are *rhapsodiquement belles* . . . but some I would not let you read at all."

"Depraved? In what way, Arlette?"

"Because, you see, this great poet died very tragically. Often, to achieve his illusions, he had recourse to drugs. And some of these poems, though their words are truly magical, *ma chérie*, speak of hallucinations which the happy, normal person, like yourself, *par exemple*, is better off not knowing."

"But couldn't you point out the really fine poems that you think I could read, *chère Arlette*?"

"Of course, *petite*. Tell you what, you have been such a hard little worker, tonight you and I will take a little holiday—that is the word you use in *Amerique, n'est-ce-pas*? What do you say to a little dinner at a very special family restaurant I know where the *coq au vin* is"—she kissed her fingertips to denote perfection—"and then we shall take in the cinema . . . there is a Raimu film you will adore, *ma chérie* . . . and then we shall come back and have a *petite liqueur* and read Baudelaire together. *Ca va?*"

"*Ca va bien, merci!*" giggled Tonia, unturning her entranced face, eyes glowing with pleasure.

Arlette felt her own pulses quicken at the beguiling vision of that soulful, joyously trusting look in Tonia's blue eyes. And, putting her fingertips on Tonia's shoulders, she kissed the girl on the forehead, then murmured evocatively. "Now, you must mind your teacher, *ma belle*. Take a little nap so you may be rested for the evening ahead. I shall come back for you at seven. *Au revoir!*"

Tonia nodded happily. She had come to regard Arlette with a growing dependence, seeking her advice not only in matters linguistic but also about her future: what courses should she concentrate on at the Sorbonne, what clothes would be most appropriate for an austere school like that, what attitude should she adopt to make her classmates like her?

And when she fell asleep obediently on her chaste couch, a smile of anticipation of the evening's delights framed on her soft lips, into her dreams there came the sophisticated, sensual face of Arlette . . . and it seemed to her that Arlette's great haunting liquid brown eyes were staring ardently at her with a message she could not quite discern but which she felt was supremely significant . . .

The evening more than lived up to all her expectations. The little family restaurant in a tiny dead-end street south of the Place Concorde was unpretentious to the extreme, with round marbletop tables supported by study steel legs and with sawdust on the floor. But the repast itself was as delicious as anything she had tasted in all Paris, from the rich barley soup through the marvellously flavored *coq au vin* and a kind of floating island pudding which she could not identify but whose rich taste was an unforgettable experience.

Then to the movie to see Raimu in "The Baker's Wife." And by now, Tonia understood French well enough to savor that incomparable actor's earthy idiom, to delectate over the homely philosophy which made the villagers send a deputation out to the little island where his lovely young wife had taken idyllic refuge with her lover, imploring her to return to her rightful spouse so that he might once again give the village the bread of life.

And, to conclude the evening, half an hour spent at a sidewalk cafe watching the elegantly gowned Parisiennes and their handsomely groomed escorts coming out of the opera house, while she and Arlette sipped a Pernod and chatted gayly over the movie.

It was well after midnight when Tonia and Arlette returned to the former's little studio apartment, and the young brunette was radiant with awakening—for this evening out had seemed exactly that after the laborious mornings and afternoons spent poring over her lessons.

Once inside, Arlette pretended to be shocked at the lateness of the hour.

"*Chérie*, I had no idea," she gasped, gesturing to the alarm clock which stood on Tonia's dresser. "You must get your rest if you are to be fresh for tomorrow's lessons. Your so generous father is paying me much too well to

neglect you, and I would never forgive myself if I did not sufficiently prepare you for your courses at the Sorbonne, in accordance with his wishes."

"Oh, Arlette, don't treat me like a child," Tonia giggled. "I'm almost twenty, you know, and I've stayed up past midnight lots of times before, when I was much younger."

"Then you ought to have been spanked like a naughty baby," Arlette feigned maternal sternness. "Very well, I promised, did I not? Then you will do me the favor, Mademoiselle, of obeying me as if I were your *gouvernante*. You will undress and prepare for bed, so that when have finished these poems you so much wish to read, you can go right to sleep, *entendu?*"

Tonia nodded, flushing hotly as Arlette stood, hands on hips, vigilantly waiting for compliance.

Thanks to Joan Crenshaw back at the select finishing school, she had learned to be less ashamed of her body, less secretive as to revealing its charms. Still, the psychological block persisted to an extent; the influence of Raoul de Monricard had not entirely been dissipated. Yet, she reasoned, why should she be morbidly shy before dear Arlette, who was such a good friend and who had been with her day after day for two whole months? It was silly, really.

Arlette divined the sweet confusion that made her charming and desirable pupil hesitate now. And with a broad, comradely wink, she added slyly, "*Eh bien donc*, I see I myself must set you the example, as a good *gouvernante* should. I will undress too, so that we shall both be ready for sleep when we have done out last lesson. If, of course, you will permit me to spend the night? Then we should both be ready to start early with our lessons *demain matin . . . qu'en pensez-vous, petite?*"

"Oh, that would be nice, Arlette! Yes, by all means, do stay. It's too late to go back to where you live, all by yourself," Tonia insisted.

And this, of course, was exactly the invitation Arlette had so long sought. "*Merci, pigeonne,*" she purred, and then, after hanging up her coat and hat, regarding Tonia with a piquantly cajoling look, stooped to draw her modish green silk dress up over head and shoulders, draped it carefully over a wire hanger and, turning her

back on the brunette, stretched like a cat to hook it onto the clothesbar in Tonia's closet.

When she turned back to confront her pupil, it was to reveal her lithe, enticing body in the provocative deshabille of demurely cut white satin slip, bra and pantie set of the same material, with the narrowest of garterbelts providing tabs to hold up snugly and without the slightest suspicion of a wrinkle, the smoke-hued silk hose which caressingly followed the sinuous grace of her sleek high-set calves and the admirably rounding contours of her thighs.

Perhaps an inch taller than Tonia, Arlette possessed a figure over which her former lover, Hortense Lastagnet, had exclaimed with the most rhapsodic praise. Her skin had an olive duskiness to it that was absolutely ravishing and made her seem like an Oriental houri. Her breasts were small, widely spaced, jouncy oranges, but the nipples exceptionally ripe in their narrow dusky-coral aureoles. Tonia beheld them now through one scant thickness of fabric—for Arlette, continuing to eye her teasingly, had just removed her slip and draped it over the back of a straight-backed chair.

"*Voilà!* Now you, too, *petite!* This nice room of yours is so very warm, we shall be most comfortable thus, and, as you see, it will not take a moment to be ready for bed when we conclude our last lesson tonight. Come, Tonia, *chérie*, do as I do!" Arlette encouraged.

Flushing and lowering her lovely blue eyes, Tonia hesitantly obeyed, and soon was standing in her beige satin silk bra and pantie-girdle, whose supporters clamped tautly to the tops of charcoal-brown nylon hose whose faultless cling enhanced the slender grace of her gently rounding thighs.

"*Mais tu es gentiment belle, petite pigeonne* (Why, how nice and lovely you are, little pigeon)," Arlette cooed as she approached the table in the middle of the little room where they had their usual daytime lessons.

"T-thank you," Tonia stammered faintly, for the brown eyes of her sensuously troubling instructress had a singular, disturbing glow . . . one which, it vaguely seemed to her, she had observed before.

Arlette drew out her chair and beckoned to Tonia, who shyly approached. "Here, beside me, *chérie*. And here is *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Now I will mark one of the

poems you may read, and you shall read it aloud to me. I will correct your pronunciation and ask you, at times, the meaning of the verses. *Ca marche?*"

"*Ca m-marche, Arlette,*" Tonia gave a little nervous laugh as she seated herself. Her milky skin was accentuated by the vivid crimson blush suffusing her soft cheeks, and Arlette's eyes flamed with longing. She had seated herself very close to the brunette, so close, in fact, that their thighs brushed together, and when this occurred, she felt her exquisite raven-haired pupil shiver.

Seated at Tonia's right, Arlette could covertly observe the jouncy surge of that beautifully moulded round firm bosom, the kissably dimpled cast of Tonia's soft shoulders. She could devour the smooth-sleek milky column of that all but naked back down to the waistband of the pantie-girdle, and her nostrils could inhale the subtle perfume of that fresh young skin, that glossy raven hair. Her senses were kindled, and her long abstention from the mystic joys of Bilitis showed itself in the delicate flaring of her nostrils, in the quickened rhythm of her breathing, and in the long tremors which visited her own graceful silk-sheathed thighs each time Tonia's leg evanescently brushed against her own.

"We shall begin with *L'Examen de Minuit*—or as you say in English, what?" Arlette commenced in a husky voice that betrayed her access of desire, so keenly whetted by the pure virginal loveliness of Tonia's milky-skinned body and by the knowledge that she was alone with her sensitive brunette pupil, each sharing a *deshabille* so readily accessible to the most intimate caresses . . .

"'The Examination of Midnight,'" Tonia translated into English. "*C'est bon,*" Arlette approved. "*Continuez donc, ma belle.*" And Tonia, in her soft clear voice, began to read:

*"La pendule, sonnante minuit,
Ironiquement nous engage
A nous rappeler quel usage
Nous fîmes du jour qui s'enfuit:
—Aujourd' hui, date fatidique,
Vendredi, treize, nous avons,
Malgré tout ce que nous savons,
Mené le train d'un hérétique."*

"Your pronunciation is excellent, *chérie*. Now tell me in English what those lines mean," Purred Arlette.

Tonia nodded, frowningly regarded the page, then said:

*"The clock in striking midnight
Ironically forces us
To recall what use
We made of the day now taking flight—
Today, fatal date,
Friday the 13th, despite all we know,
We have behaved like a heretic."*

"*Parfait, ca!*" Arlette nodded. "Now, the last last stanza, *ma petite*, contains the essence of Baudelaire, his gift for symbols and sounds which evoke an atmosphere of perversity and fleshly joys . . . read it aloud, dear."

Tonia complied, and as her tremulously full sweet lips came to the final lines—

*"Vite soufflons la lampe, afin
De nous cacher dans les ténèbres!"*

Arlette moved closer to her rapt pupil, till their stockinged thighs clashed in a warm, tingling unison, and her left hand crept insinuatingly over the bowed slim neck of the delicious raven-haired girl.

Slowly Tonia turned her face towards Arlette's, her eyes wide and questioning, their lips but scant inches apart.

"It's beautiful, Arlette," she murmured faintly.

"*Oui, comme toi, m'amour,*" the tawny-haired instructress gently slipped from the formal "*vous*" into the intimate "*toi*," a nuance which, even more transparently than these guileful pressures of hand and thigh, announced her amorous desires.

Tonia did not move, but sat there as if transfixed, staring into Arlette's wide humid intent brown eyes, seeing that beloved, provocative face as she had seen it subconsciously in dreams.

"He is rich in images, *n'est-ce-pas, petite?*" Arlette evocatively murmured. "Let us try one which, even more exquisitely, summons up a whole world of imagery and poetry . . . here, read me this, *ma toute belle!*"

She leaned forward, till one bare olive-sheened shoulder brushed Tonia's cheek, impinging on that milky skin the perfume she had so guilefully applied by spray to her naked body before returning that evening to escort her pupil for their outing . . . the perfume mingling with that elemental, delicately exotic scent of her own bare skin and the faint moisture which the warm room had evoked upon her flesh.

She turned the pages till she came to the "*Pièces Condamnées*," and to the 155th canto, "Lesbos." Then her carmine-tinted index fingernail brushed the title with a catlike caress as she huskily whispered, "And now, Tonia, *ma belle pigeonne*, read me this. With feeling, so that it is not just words you read, but all the emotion the poet sought to convey."

Troubled by the wanton nearness of Arlette, finding herself involved now in a physical awareness which had hitherto not existed between teacher and pupil, Tonia dutifully bent her raven head, her slim fingers grasping the book as her eyes fell upon the opening lines; and in a voice that trembled with hidden languors, those secret distillations of a force that was gradually making its emprise felt upon her tautened nerves, read:

*"Mère des jeux latins et des voluptés grecques,
Lesbos, où les baisers languissants ou joyeux,
Chauds comme les soleils, frais comme les pastèques,
Font l'ornement des nuits et des jours glorieux,
—Mère des jeux latins et des voluptés grecques,*

*Lesbos, où les baisers sont comme les cascades
Qui se jettent sans peur dans les gouffres sans fonds
Et courent, sanglotant and gloussant par saccades,
—Orageux et secrets, fourmillants et profonds;
Lesbos, où les baisers sont comme les cascades!"*

She stopped, her face turning again to Arlette's. And the tawny-haired Sapphist extended her right hand to grasp one of Tonia's wrists while her left palm gently stroked Tonia's raven curls. "Now, *petite hirondelle*, say to me in English what this means," Arlette softly enjoined her.

Tonia shivered; Arlette's fingers on her wrist were warm and quivering, touching her rapidly beating pulse

and divining her own innermost life . . . how soft, how sweet, how compassionate, the caress of that gentle palm against her hair, her neck, and now, one milky shoulder.

"Y-yes . . . Arlette," she stammered very faintly.

And she began, in a voice that was as tremulous as her soft full lips:

*"Mother of Latin games and Greek voluptuousness,
O Lesbos, where kisses, languishing or joyous,
Warm as the sun, fresh as watermelons,
Compose the ornaments of nights and of glorious days,
—Mother of Latin games and Greek voluptuousness,*

*O Lesbos, where kisses are like the waterfalls
That hurl themselves fearlessly into bottomless abysses
And run, sobbing and gurgling by fits and starts,
Stormy and secretive, multiplying and deep;
Lesbos, where kissees are like the waterfalls!"*

"Oh, Arlette . . . it . . . it's so lovely," she breathed reverently, again turning to the tawny-haired Lesbian.

Arlette slowly nodded, then murmured, "Read for me in French the third line of that second stanza, and linger over the words to produce their richest sound."

"Y-yes . . . A-Arlette . . ."

Arlette's narrowed humid eyes fixed on the girl's soft trembling red lips as Tonia repeated, very slowly, her voice even more tremulous than before:

"Et . . . courent . . . sanglotant . . . et gloussant . . ."

And as those quivering young lips pronounced the rounding, onomatopoeic French word which so graphically evokes the image of water gurgling along a riverbed, Arlette could bear no more.

Her left hand tightened in Tonia's raven curls, and with a sweet dominance, she drew the girl's head back, uptilting that exquisitely languorous face; and as her right hand gently shoved away the book, her moist small firm mouth crushed to Tonia's in the fusion of a deliriously ardent, searchingly voracious kiss.

At the same time, her sleek stockinged thigh surged tightly against Tonia's till it seemed they shared the same shattering *frisson*, the same permeating attainer of bliss-questing surfeit.

"Ar-Arlette . . . oh—n-no . . . ohhh—Arlette—" Tonia moaned, her voice choked, her eyes huge and misty.

"Yes, yes, sweet one . . . *chère petite amour*, yes, *je te desire . . . tes baisers . . . tes caresses . . . tout de toi, m'amour*," Arlette sighed passionately, and again took Tonia's trembling mouth.

Stealthily, releasing the tousled raven curls, her left hand crept down the smooth milky twitching back to the narrow band of Tonia's beige silk bra . . . and as her pert pink tongue crept wantonly between Tonia's yielding, abandoned lips, she unfastened the silken sheath, which fell softly into Tonia's quivering lap, and the beautiful young brunette was nude to the waist.

"Ohh—please—ohh—Arlette—ohh—y-you m-mustn't —" Tonia panted as her senses swirled.

"But I must . . . so adorable . . . so sweet . . . *je t'aime, ma petite Tonia, ma mie, ma pigeonne*." Arlette's husky voice both entreated and beguiled. Her left arm slipped round Tonia's bare shivering satiny waist to pinion her pupil to her, while her other hand swiftly reached back to unhook her own bra . . . and the palpitating dark-flinted tips of her small but perfect breasts thrust out boldly in their longing.

"Hold me too, *chère amie*," she whispered, kissing Tonia at the crook of neck and shoulder, then up along that slim neck till she reached the girl's ear, her breath sending tiny caressing gusts into that sensitive nook, while Tonia writhed and sighed, head falling back, eyes closed, lids blinking violently with the accession of voluptuousness.

And now her right hand, emboldened, would brook patience no more; it reached out to cup one of Tonia's naked breasts, to fondle and palpate it, then to glide suavely titillating fingertips over the deliciously resilient rondures of first one then the other love-twin, while the raven-haired love captive sighed and trembled, will-less, powerless to deny or to prevent her instructress from realizing that consummation which Arlette had vowed to achieve the very first day of their meeting.

"Hold me there, too, *bébé*," she whispered fiercely, her fingertips plucking as they would a shimmering harp-string.

With a choking little cry, Tonia turned towards Arlette and clutched her naked torso with both slim

white arms, hid her scarlet face on Arlette's olive-satiny warm shoulder. And the tawny-haired Parisian soothed her charge, her left hand stroking Tonia's cheek and neck, her side and back, feeling the waves of fitful trembling mount in ever-growing intensity, waiting till that rhapsodic instant when they should culminate into the tidal wave that would sweep aside all hesitant restraint, all prudery and inhibition . . .

"Come, *pigeonne*, come," she whispered, kissing Tonia's dainty earlobe, nibbling it between her sharp little white teeth, revelling in the violent shudder which her knowing fingers now felt shake Tonia's supple yielding half-nudity.

Gently she raised the half-swooning brunette, whispering tender instructions, and Tonia, as in a dream, circled Arlette's willowy olive-sheened bare back with her graceful white arms, their naked bosoms brushing together with galvanizing shivers. Arlette smiled victoriously as she felt Tonia's hot face hide itself against the crook of her shoulder.

Both her hands now began to caress the supple smooth estuary of Tonia's milky back, her fingertips sage in touches that would graze and flower the most secretive nerves and bring her pupil to that rapt plateau of overpowering yearning which demands the ultimate fulfillment. Gradually, those slender, knowing fingers descended till they reached the beigh pantie-girdle's waistband . . . and then, while her lips amorously took their fill of Tonia's trembling mouth, she deftly rucked down the zipper . . . and the soft shirring sound mingled with Tonia's startled, half-fainting gasp—"Ohh—Arlette—ahh—n-no . . . Oh d-darling—no—"

Her right hand cupped the back of Tonia's slim neck as her lips insistently wreaked their will upon that panting fresh young mouth, decimating Tonia's last prim resistances; her left nuzzled a shudderingly swelling round breast, palming and rubbing ever so softly over the hardening lovebud, till she felt Tonia tremble violently against her, the girl's knees bumping hers as Tonia's senses rapidly took ascendancy over her reason.

And now, sensing the moment nigh, Arlette moved her right hand to Tonia's shuddering bare breast, her tongue intruding between the brunette's lips and meeting Tonia's tingling membrane in the most delicious of soul-kisses

. . . and then her other hand insinuated itself into the gap made by the devious descent of the zipper and attained . . . the warm secrecy of Tonia's virginal loins.

"Ohh . . . *chérie* . . . oh . . . my dearest . . . Arlette . . . ahh . . . ohh . . . Arlette . . . ohh—" Tonia groaned in a dying voice.

Arlette drew the stumbling, swooning girl to their nuptial couch . . . an instant later, the room was plunged into darkness. And, emulating that evocative verse of Baudelaire's, the two lovers hid themselves in the shadows. . . .

Chapter Sixteen

CARL SCOTT had planned a very special Christmas party in his hotel suite. He had invited only his young playwright John Kammering, that gifted young man's fiancée Gabrielle Saenot, and his own wife-to-be Genevieve Duran.

Genevieve's soft blonde beauty was heightened by the Nile-green satin evening gown which paid tribute to the lush and still youthful beauty of her form; if Marcia had been a Lillith-temptress whose perverse allure had kept him in thralldom long after he had known there was only physical desire to share between them, Genevieve's mature and serene beauty was that of a consoling Juno. And it was set off admirably by the sleek willowy loveliness of Gabrielle, who had chosen a vivid blue satin evening gown to bring out the lustre of her ivory skin, *gamine*-like features and the glossy dark brown hue of her modishly short bob.

A lavish supper was served by the waiters, and vintage champagne cooled in ice buckets as Carl Scott proposed a gay toast, rising with his glass held high: "To Paris and to lovers!"

"I'll drink to that willingly," laughed Kemmering, fondly glancing at his beautiful brunette fiancée who sat beside him. She reached for his hand and squeezed it, her jet-black impudent eyes promising the most thrilling of conjugal delights.

"As will I, *chère amour*," murmured Genevieve, lifting her glass and regarding Carl with tenderness.

"I've a wonderful idea," he burst out jovially, "why don't we make it a double wedding?"

"Say, John, that's terrific, I'm all for it—if Gabrielle will agree," the playwright laughed, turning to the brunette who nodded quickly and then gave him a passionate kiss on the mouth.

"Set the date as soon as you can, so I can make an honest woman out of this forward hussy, will you, Carl?" Kemmering called out joyously, and then returned Gabrielle's kiss with interest.

"I think I'd better. What do you say to—hm—the middle of January? Genevieve, dearest, would you object to having the ceremony on the stage of the *Comedie Francaise*?"

"So publicly, *m'amour*?" the lovely blonde divorcee gasped, flushing prettily.

"Not publicly at all. In the afternoon, with just our very dearest friends and my daughter. And your nephew, of course—I'm anxious to meet him, after all you've told me about him. If he can write show music, it might just be that John and I can work out a real French musical. I'd like that very much. I feel almost more Parisian than American—thanks to you, my dear one."

Genevieve bent her head, her blush of joy deepening.

"And there's a particular appropriateness in having it take place there, my dear," Carl went on fondly, "because if I hadn't accepted the invitation of Marcel Gronoux to adapt John's comedy for his famous theatre, I'd never have met the beautiful young woman who, last night, did me the honor of accepting my love, my name, and my fortune, such as it is."

"Only your love matters, dearest one," Genevieve sent him a kiss from her fingers.

Wonderingly, he shook his head. "I'm humbly grateful, my dearest. It's as if I were coming alive again. Just don't remind me of my real age, or the dream will vanish. When I think of all the years I might have loved an unselfish, gentle girl like you—oh well, God grant me enough years ahead to delight in you as you are, Genevieve."

Kemmering rose, glass in hand, to change to emotion-ridden mood: "To our new musical, may it make all Paris laugh and flock to the box office for tickets!"

"Amen to that, old son!" Carl laughed.

"Carl, isn't it time I met your lovely daughter Tonia?" asked Genevieve.

He clapped his hand to his head melodramatically. What a forgetful, selfish fool I am, darling! But you'll forgive me when I say it's because I've been able to think only of you all these past weeks."

"Of course you're forgiven for a pretty speech like that, *m'amour*," laughed Genevieve.

"Why don't you and I and Tonia spend New Year's Eve together? The poor girl's been working so hard to

learn French well enough to enroll at the Sorbonne in February, I'm afraid she must think she's been shut up in prison."

"That would be divine. We can have dinner at Maxim's, then go to early mass at beautiful Notre Dame, and then to the Club Montmartre to welcome in the New Year," Genevieve suggested.

And so it was agreed.

The lessons preceding Christmas Day were fraught with magic for Tonia Scott. Since that rapturous and passionate night which had united teacher with pupil in the most magical and mystical of unions, the beautiful young brunette had yearningly looked forward to the morning and afternoon sessions with Arlette. And declamations of poetry and famous prose were punctuated and interrupted with tender, sighing kisses, with the squeezing of fingers and the pressure of warm thigh on thigh. Tonia had given herself with joyous abandon, for Arlette's fervent, expert wooing had swept away the last shadowy fears of physical union which Raoul de Monricard had so odiously inflicted on her psyche. Now, she could not bear to let Arlette go back home of an evening, but begged her beautiful tawny-haired teacher to stay so that they might read poetry together . . . and now it was the verses of Sappho they mainly shared, in the empurpled and vividly imagistic translation of Jeanine de Viernois which, at their very first meeting, Arlette had so boldly hinted at as a project destined for Tonia's mastery of the language.

By now, indeed, Carl Scott's exquisite raven-haired daughter was attuned and ready for such intimate poetic avowals, and the words of the French poetess seemed to fall readily to her lips as she and Arlette lay entwined on that soft couch which received and cradled their love-making.

On Christmas afternoon, Carl Scott, after having phoned his daughter in the morning to wish her the happiest of holidays—and finding her drowsy with sleep, not surprisingly, since Arlette had shared her couch all that impassioned night—visited her, his arms laden with presents.

Arlette had left at noon, to pay a holiday visit to Hortense Lastagnet. That calculating beauty was in a

vexatious mood. She had seen all too little of Carl Scott and she suspected the worst. By contrast, Arlette was vivaciously gay.

Hortense eyed her sharply as the two women sat side by side on an ottoman in Hortense's sitting room, sipping cognac. The chestnut-haired divorcee wore a sad satin peignoir which hugged the lush curves of her ample hips and bosom, and her delightfully plump calves and thighs were sheathed in gossamer gray nylon hose, her patrician little feet thrust into fluffy red felt mules trimmed with ermine.

"*Eh bien, Arlette,*" she said crossly, "you seem to have succeeded where I've failed, eh, *ma precieuse?*"

"If by that, dear Hortense, you mean that I have won the love of my charming little pupil, you are quite right. She is a perfect treasure, *une rêve d'amour.*"

"*Diable te prend!*" Hortense hissed irritably, "so now I have lost you too."

"And your handsome, rich American producer?" Arlette wryly hazarded.

"*Tais-toi, imbécile adorable!*" Hortense murmured, a peevish moue making her daintily aristocratic feature unbecomingly shrewish, "he has found another divorcee, also blonde, but an innocent and of no social importance. She runs a little dress salon, *voilà tout.*"

"Perhaps, as a man reaches his change of life—which your hoped-for spouse must surely have done, since he is past his fiftieth year—" Arlette philosophically observed, "he wants innocence and youth more than sophistication and experience."

Hortense's jeweled hand shot out to sting Arlette's satiny olive-sheened cheek.

"*Petite vicieuse!*" she hissed venomously, "she is surely as old as I am, if not older. And I, I am an actress at the *Comedie Francaise* at last—do you dare to suggest I cannot play the role of innocent?"

Arlette, ruefully rubbing her burning cheek, shook her head with a compassionate little smile. She understood Hortense's distraught mood all too well.

And the divorcee was instantly remorseful: "Oh, *ma petite*, I did not mean to hurt you. Say you forgive me, that we are still good friends, *toi et moi, n'est-ce-pas?*"

And leaning forward so that the bodice of the peignoir gaped voluminously to give Arlette a thrilling and boun-

tiful glimpse of those lush, still youthfully firm pink-skinned breasts which the lovely Parisian linguist had explored so many times with evocative hands and ardent lips, she filled her own glass with cognac. Then, sipping from it delicately, she placed a long kiss at the rim of the glass, and handed it to Arlette, her hazel eyes soulfully entreating pardon.

Arlette took the glass and kissed the place where her former lover had touched her mouth. Then, setting down the glass, she leaned to Hortense, her hands gently gliding along the divorcee's round full thighs, as her lips, nearing Hortense's, murmured seductively, "I will show you how well I forgive you, *ma douce maitresse* . . ."

"Baby, you've been working much too hard," Carl Scott was solicitous as he set down the ornately wrapped gift packages on the work table beside Tonia's books. "I don't want you turning into a grind."

Tonia, in her pajamas, robe and sandals, her raven curls still deliciously ruffled from the wayward caresses of Arlette's slim eager fingers, demurely blushed. "But I'm really not overdoing it, Daddy," she protested. "I love studying. Miss Valory's a wonderful teacher."

"I'm glad you two get along so well, dear. She's promised to give me a report after the holidays. Oh, by the way—what would you think if I told you that you might have a new mother very soon, darling?"

"Daddy! Really?"

He nodded with a sheepish grin. "I've been a miserable father lately, baby. Fact is, I've fallen in love, and fallen hard. Wait till you meet Genevieve, and you'll know why."

"Genevieve—what a pretty name, Daddy."

"She's a lovely woman. A few years younger than . . . er . . . well, Marcia . . . but so vastly different. Well, when you meet her New Year's Eve, you'll know why I've been neglecting you these past two months, honey. And I want you to like her. I know you will. She's honest and gracious and not at all overmannered—that's why I love her very much."

"I'm so happy for you, Daddy dear," Tonia hugged him.

"Now you open your presents, baby. How about having

dinner with your old man tonight? And maybe a movie?"

"Oh, that'd be wonderful!"

"All right," he patted her shoulder tenderly. "Take a nice nap. You look a little drawn—why, with those dark circles under your eyes, one would think you'd found a handsome young Parisian boy friend, Tonia honey—"

"Daddy!" she gasped, furiously blushing.

"Excuse the bad joke, sweetie. But you get all rested up, and we'll do Paris tonight. Call for you sevenish, okay?"

"Very much okay, Daddy. And, oh, thank you so much for all these lovely gifts."

"Don't you want to open them now?"

"Not till this evening, so when you call for me I can really thank you properly, Daddy," she kissed him gratefully.

"I'm very proud of you, Tonia. And some day, God willing, you're going to find someone who can make you as happy as Genevieve has made me. Watch and see. Well, I'll be running now—even if it is Christmas, I have to spend an hour or so with young John Kemmering to change some dialogue in our show. See you at seven, then, honey. And . . . God bless you, baby."

Chapter Seventeen

GENEVIEVE DURAN believed in the direct approach. She was sincere about wanting to meet the grown-up daughter of her husband-to-be, but she had an impulse to visit Tonia and meet her alone, without the feverish excitement of a New Year's Eve celebration.

And so, the next to last day of the dying year, she took a cab to Tonia's apartment, quite unannounced. It was mid-afternoon, on a rainy, gloomy day.

The lesson for that afternoon had been concluded half an hour before. Indeed, at the very point Genevieve Duran extended her gloved index finger to ring the bell outside the door of Tonia's studio apartment, the exquisite brunette lay on the couch, clad only in her stockings and garter-belt, with tawny-haired Arlette, equally disrobed, entwined with her, Arlette's lips adoring the milky soft warm cleft between Tonia's swelling, round young breasts.

As the bell rang, Tonia uttered a stifled cry of horror. "Ohh—Arlette—who . . . who could that be—"

"Your father, *probablement, cherie*," hissed Arlette, as she leaped to her feet and swiftly donned a peignoir. Tonia, in provocative disarray, raven curls tumbled, soft pink marks of Arlette's lips and fingers staining the milky purity of her bosom and throat, slid off the couch and as hastily pulled her lovely new bathrobe over her trembling nudity—it had been one of her father's Christmas presents.

Again the bell rang. Arlette, with a nonchalant shrug, lit a cigarette and moved to the door, glancing down to make sure the peignoir covered her properly, while Tonia frantically subjected herself to the same inspection.

When at last Tonia nodded, having belted her robe very tight, Arlette opened the door. Her eyes widened with surprise at the sight of the handsome honey-haired matron.

"Oh . . . h-how do you do—"

"You aren't Tonia Scott?"

Arlette shook her head. "No, no, I am Arlette Valory. This is Mademoiselle Scott. I am her French teacher."

Genevieve extended her hand, and the bemused Arlette shook it limply, her eyes wide with disconcerted wonder.

Tonia came forward hesitantly, nervously biting her moist red lips.

"My dear, I'm Genevieve Duran," the blonde matron introduced herself.

"Oh—you—you're Daddy's—" Tonia blurted. Consternation paralyzed her tongue; she could only stand and stare.

"May I come in? I did so want to meet you, my dear."

"Y-yes . . . d-do, please," Tonia stammered.

Arlette's eyebrows arched, then she shrugged. "I'll leave you two," she murmured, "if you'll excuse me, Mademoiselle—"

"Madame," Genevieve corrected softly, with an indulgent smile, but her eyes were all for Tonia. Arlette, despite her sophistication, could not help blushing as she swiftly retrieved her dress and lingerie from a chair near the couch, and scurried off rather unceremoniously to the bathroom, into which she promptly locked herself.

"Sit down, dear. I didn't mean to disturb you—"

"It . . . oh . . . y-you d-didn't—I . . . we . . . Arlette and I . . . w-were having our l-lesson," Tonia quavered, very ill at ease.

"Yes, I see."

Tonia felt her cheeks flame and sat down on the couch, folding her hands primly, and lowering her eyes.

"Perhaps, when your instructress has gone, we can have a little talk and learn to know each other, ma chérie," Genevieve Duran said gently.

"Y-yes . . . t-that would be n-nice, M-Madame D-Duran."

"Then let us smoke a cigarette and be at our ease, shall we, dear?"

From her alligator-skin handbag, Genevieve took out a silver cigarette case and proffered it to Tonia, who fumblingly withdrew one of the white tubes and put it to her lips. Genevieve took one for herself, procured a silver lighter and lit Tonia's, then her own.

A moment later, the bathroom door opened and Arlette reappeared. She went to the closet for her fur coat and galoshes, and when at last she was ready to leave, she

announced, rather uneasily, "Perhaps, in view of the holiday, chérie, we should skip our lesson. Let me phone you the day after New Year's Day, shall I?"

"Y-yes . . . t-that will be f-fine, A-Arlette . . . and . . . a happy New Year."

"The same to you, *ma chérie*. And to you, M-Madame."

"Thank you, Mademoiselle Valory."

The door closed behind a very flustered and not quite so sophisticated Arlette. Genevieve Duran smiled gently at the quivering brunette on the couch, and then rose and seated herself beside Tonia.

"So this is Carl's little girl. But, *ma belle* Tonia, you are a woman. You make me feel my age—almost, that is, if it were not that your father's love has made me as young and happy as I was at the age you are now. And you are very beautiful."

"Thank you, M-Madame . . ."

"I do not ask that you will ever call me *Maman* . . . I do not think I have that right. But we can be good friends, I'm sure. And I would like it if you would call me Genevieve. I shall not act the stern mother with you, ever, *ma petite*."

"T-thank you . . . M-Ma . . . I . . . I mean, G-Gen-ieve."

Genevieve Duran took Tonia's hands in hers and pressed them affectionately. "You are . . . what . . . darling? Nineteen . . . twenty?"

"T-twenty. . ."

"Yes, already a woman. But you have no young man, no fiance yet, *hein?*"

Tonia shook her head, eyes averted. She felt the fire in her cheeks.

"I see," Genevieve Duran observed quietly. "Yes, I think I see a great deal."

"W-what do you mean, M-Madame?" Tonia gasped, stricken by that meaningful phrase.

"*Ma petite*, I came only to visit you and to meet you for the first time. We were to have been introduced to each other tomorrow evening, when your father will take us all out to a New Year's Eve celebration. But you see, *ma chérie*, Carl has talked so much about you and he has spent so much of the past two months with me, that I felt rather guilty to have taken him away from

coming to be with you as he ought to have been. That is why I wanted to come in advance. And now I am very glad I did."

"I . . . d-don't understand—"

Genevieve Duran still grasped Toni's quivering slim white hands in hers. Her eyes met the brunette's, with a level look of compassion and understanding." Then let me say it, *ma petite*. You have been much too much to yourself, not only here in Paris, but before that and for many years. You see, your father has told me more about you than he knew . . . or, to put it another way, *petite*, I was able to infer much more from what he said about you than he himself could guess. Because I am a woman, I can understand a daughter better than a father . . . in certain matters pertaining to the emotions."

"I . . . I . . . s-still d-don't know w-what you mean—"

"Be frank with me, dear little Tonia, and if I am wrong, I will be contrite in my apologies. I would not misjudge or hurt you for the world; you are dear to me if only because your father has done me the great honor of asking me to marry him. And that will give me certain rights to look after you—though again I say I would never force those rights upon you. Listen . . . this teacher of yours; you are fond of her?"

Tonia nodded, eyes downcast.

"I can understand that readily, *pigeonne*. You are sensitive and sweet and altogether unworldly—and she is far worldier than you. And knowing what you are, she has somewhat used her isolation with you during these long weeks of lessons to influence you and to make you love her—am I not right?"

Tonia tried to draw her hands away jerkily as she stammered, "B . . . but I do . . . that is . . . I . . . I like her very much—"

"But it is perfectly natural, *chérie*. After all, she is perhaps the only friend you have made since you came to Paris, *voilà tout*," Genevieve said with a sympathetic little smile.

"Y-yes . . . t-that's true."

"And because she was kind to you and did not hurt you, you formed an affection for her. You are mature, Tonia, and you are a woman—you need love. So I quite understand your attachment to her. It is very plain, you see."

"I—you—" Tonia gasped, cheeks reddening.

Genevieve Duran's arm slipped round the girl's quivering shoulders. "*Pigeonne*, when I was fourteen, my parents sent me to a school in Zurich. I was very lonely, because I felt I wasn't wanted. They traveled a good deal, you see, just as your father does. But at the school, one of my teachers, who was only eight or nine years older than myself and who had had an unhappy love affair with an unscrupulous young man who betrayed her, was very kind and understanding to me. I fell desperately in love with her—and the consequences were that I was physically drawn to her . . . as you have been drawn to your Mademoiselle Arlette."

"Oh, no, that isn't true, I swear—I—oh—ohhhhh!" Tonia burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

Genevieve Duran crushed out her cigarette, took the trembling girl in her arms, gently kissing away her tears. "Do not think me a prying interloper, *petite*. What your father would not understand—and I give you my word he will never know it from me—I quite comprehend, and I am sympathetic to your feelings. Yes, my dear one, it was natural, almost inevitable indeed, that you and Arlette should have become lovers, lonely as you were and turned in upon yourself. But I am convinced that behind all this, there must have been, at one time, the behavior of a man who offended you, or wronged you—am I not a little bit right, Tonia *chérie*?"

Tonia clung to Genevieve Duran, her tear-wet face buried in the honey-haired matron's bosom, as she gave vent to her pent-up emotions. Tenderly stroking her hair, Genevieve let her cry herself out. Then at last she softly murmured, "Be frank with me, darling. It may be that I can help you, for I wish only your happiness, as I wish it for your father in so far as it is within my power to give it to him."

And the sensitive brunette found herself hesitantly telling her compassionate listener about Count Raoul de Monricard . . . about that terrifying, degrading afternoon in her bedroom . . . about her mother's slanderous accusations which the Count had so mendaciously concocted out of spite for her because she had repulsed him.

"I knew it was something like that, *pauve petite*. My poor child, none of it was your fault. You needed love,

you needed a mother unselfish to you. Then you would have found the right man."

"Oh no—"

"Oh but yes, my darling. You who love the poetry of the romantics so much—for your dear father has told me of your favorites, you see—do you not discover that there is idealistic love between the sexes? Yes, I know very well, and from my own experience as a young girl which I have just related to you—and now this is your secret too, which you must not tell anyone else—I know very well indeed how it happens that a girl believes she finds perfect love with one of her own kind. Because, *ma belle* Tonia, love between women is as old as time itself, and it was once a rare and enchanting communion. It is damned and condemned now, but in times past because of its gentle, tender seeking for consolation and for love that would not mar or hurt or destroy, it was only a preparation for the ultimate union which nature destined all women to experience."

"D-do you t-think so?"

"Very much indeed, Tonia darling. Because, only two years later, after the school teacher in Zurich left to take another post far away, I fell madly in love with a young law student. He was too poor to marry me, but I could not deny him the love I felt for him, and so he was my first lover. And it was beautiful and good, and I found I could give him pleasure and in turn experience it for myself because of what that young woman in Zurich had revealed to me about my body and its emotions. And that is why, dearest little Tonia, I do not condemn your liaison with Arlette. I saw only, give yourself a chance for natural, inevitable love. You will be attracted to it, never fear. There are men who have the sensitivity you so admire in Arlette, men who will put their sweethearts' happiness first before their own and are wise enough to realize that thus their own pleasure is the greater for it."

She rose, and Tonia, sighing deeply, stood up also and took her hands and stammered, "I . . . I'm glad you came . . . and . . . and I think I know already why Daddy loves you so much . . . y-you're so good!"

"*Merci, petite*. Now neither of us is to tell your father that we have already met, *tu sais*? It would spoil his pleasure, and we must sometimes let the man think that he has been first to think of everything, remember that."

"Oh, I . . . I won't say a word, G-Genevieve . . . b-but I'm so awfully glad you came today . . . and . . . and I . . . I feel so . . . so as-ashamed—"

Genevieve Duran reprovingly shook her head. Tilting Tonia's chin with a gloved finger, she murmured, "No, no, and no! That, you must *never* feel, Tonia! It is shame that leads to improper love, to improper thoughts and fears. You have discovered love . . . yes, one form of it, and it will be the preparation for the true love you are one day to come upon, and because you have learned how responsive an instrument of delight and love your body can be, you will experience untold raptures when you make love with him who is decreed to win you. Remember that. And I will say only one thing more, Tonia. I should like very much for you to meet my nephew Jacques. He will be coming to Paris next week, I think. He is a composer of music, and, yes, he writes poetry too. I think you will find a kindred spirit in him. As to the rest, study diligently and prepare for the Sorbonne. But learn also to relax and not to take yourself too seriously. Now I must go—till tomorrow night, *ma belle fille* . . . my Tonia."

Chapter Eighteen

CARL SCOTT was very pleased with life. He couldn't get over it how Tonia had taken to Genevieve, just as if the two had known each other for a long time instead of meeting for the very first time when he brought Tonia over to Maxim's and found his smartly dressed bride-to-be waiting in the luxurious lounge. Now, more than ever, he felt sure he had made a wise choice. There would be no more nerve-tautening scenes between mother and daughter, as there had been with Marcia and Tonia.

And then, the end of that week, Genevieve's nephew Jacques came to Paris to visit his aunt, and eagerly accepted an invitation to her wedding. Carl Scott liked him too. Jacques Nortier was boyishly slim, with pleasant, regular features, frank blue eyes and curly brown hair. He wore glasses, apologetically explaining that it was out of habit, since he used them only when poring late at night over his writing on music paper. He spoke English fluently. In a way, he reminded Tonia of that nice boy, Mark Jorgenson. He was shy too, and diffident about himself when anyone asked him about his music.

"You know, Jacques," Carl said genially, "seeing that the next ten days will be hectic ones, what with getting ready for the wedding and my still having to check things over at the Comedie Francaise, I'd be grateful if you'd take Tonia out to dinner once in a while. She's been keeping her nose to the grindstone getting ready for the Sorbonne next month, and in my opinion she needs to get out and see a little of Paris before she gets tied up with schooling all over again."

"I should like the privilege very much, M'sieu Scott," Jacques chuckled. He had a pleasantly easy-going way of speaking, Tonia thought. She wondered what his music was like.

"Fine, then that's settled. Maybe Jacques can take you to a recital at the Salle Pleyel, or to hear the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra. I know you're a whizbang when it comes to literature, darling, but I'll bet you haven't

heard nearly enough classical music. And Paris is where some of the greatest works were written, isn't that so, Jacques?"

"*Oui*," the young composer proudly replied. "I hope Mademoiselle Tonia is familiar with the music of Debussy and Ravel. And of course, Gounod, Massenet and Saint-Saens."

"N-no, I . . . I don't know too much about them, I'm sorry to say," Tonia stammered.

"Then we shall rediscover them, Mam'selle," Jacques gallantly bowed to her. "Tonight, for example, at the Opera House, they have Ravel's '*La Valse*' and Debussy's '*La Mer*.' I think you would enjoy those two works very much."

"What Jacques is too modest to tell you, dear," Genevieve said with indulgent pride, "is that the orchestra will be playing one of his own tone poems, isn't that so, *mon cher neveu*?"

Jacques nodded with a schoolboy's flush.

"Oh, why, that's marvellous!" Tonia gasped excitedly, "I never thought I'd meet a famous composer."

"Oh, I'm far from famous, Mam'selle," Jacques chuckled. "I warn you in advance, they may even hiss my work. It's a bit modern."

"Well, I shan't hiss, for one," Tonia stoutly declared.

"That's the spirit," Carl Scott smiled. "Now you two run along. Genevieve and I have to talk over our wedding plans. Or really, a double wedding—John Kemmering and that saucy minx of a Gabrielle Sarnot are going to join us on the stage where our show is running. Have fun, you two!"

After Tonia and Jacques had left his hotel suite, Carl turned to Genevieve. "I didn't know I was marrying a born matchmaker," he said with pretended sternness.

"Carl!" What a thing to say!"

"But not so improbable as you might think, you conniving vixen! Come here and give me a kiss. I like that nephew of yours. And unless I miss my guess, Tonia didn't find him too repulsive either. I'd like very much to think that some day she might think about being serious over a nice young man like Jacques. And if she got married here, then I'd really feel I belonged. I've big plans for my theatrical future here, Genevieve darling. And you're going to be a wonderful inspiration, angel."

I can hardly wait to get you down to Cannes for our honeymoon!"

"I think," Genevieve murmured as she came eagerly into his arms and arched on tiptoe to him, "that you are trying to frighten your little bride with bold talk like that—and I am shivering with both fear and love to hear you say it, *m'amour*—mmmmm, how nicely you kiss . . . so possessively, as if you cannot get enough. *Mais justement, cher* Carl, that is the way I feel too—oohh, now you must remember we aren't married yet, you wicked man—ohh, darling—"

Tonia found it hard to remember when she had spent a more entrancing evening. After a memorable dinner at the *Fleur du Lys* where Jacques ordered *canard à l'orange* and vintage Montrachet, they took a *fiacre* to the Opera House. Jacques escorted her to a box where they were alone, saw to it that she had a program, and explained in the most interesting way about the very special music she was to hear and which he hoped she would enjoy. He had been a very model of gallantry and thoughtfulness. Throughout dinner, he had refused to talk about himself, plying her instead with questions on her studies, her life in the United States, her opinions on art and literature. It made her feel flatteringly important; his art of unaffected listening seemed to turn her most trivial opinions into vital judgments. There wasn't the least insincerity to him. And what she liked most of all was that he was ever so modest; why, if she'd written a piece of music and saw it listed on the program to be played by one of the world's great orchestras, she would have been floating in the clouds!

The concert opened with Beethoven's "Coriolanus" Overture, and "La Mer" followed. Tonia sat enthralled at the shimmering beauty of Debussy's musical evocation of the sea in all its mercurial moods. At the conclusion of the section, "Dialogue of the Wind and the Waves," she could not help uttering an ecstatic little gasp, and Jacques smiled and nodded approvingly.

An intermission, they went downstairs to the lavish bar for a *liqueur*, and Tonia excitedly avowed her pleasure in the music she had heard. Jacques smiled ruefully. "I'm afraid you won't care much for the next work, Mam'selle Tonia. It could hardly hope to match the in-

comparable genius of Debussy, who is revered by every French musician. Ah, some day, you must hear his *Pelleas et Melisande*. It is a masterpiece, so subtle and poetic."

"Oh, I want to hear it, Jacques. And all the other things you've told me about. Back home, the kids in school seemed to prefer popular music . . . you know, rock and roll and folk songs and . . . well, nothing like this."

"Ah, but don't disparage folk music, Mam'selle Tonia. It has a simplicity and beauty that have inspired many of our greatest composers, like Bartok and Kodaly. And here in France, Canteloube's setting of the songs of the Auvergne—that too is something I insist you hear. As a matter of fact, a very gifted young soprano whom I met in Rome when I was studying there is to sing those songs next week at the Salle Pleyel—would you do me the honor of coming to her concert?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, Jacques, I should like that very much . . . oh, there's the bell, the intermission's over."

"So it is. Well, just don't expect too much from the next piece you are going to hear."

"Because it's yours? Nonsense—I know I shall love it."

"I hope you do, Mam'selle, it would be reward enough for having written it," he said hesitantly, and on sudden impulse kissed her hand. Tonia blushed—but it was a blush of pleasure. The way he'd done it—she remembered with distaste the fawning hypocrisy of that dreadful Count Raoul—had been so natural and sincere.

Back in their box, she studied the program as the musicians tuned their instruments from the concertmaster's cue. It read: "*La Princess Lointaine*," suite pour l'orchestre, par Jacques Nortier." Turning the pages to the program notes, she read the annotator's comments, then turned to Jacques wide-eyed: "Oh, you wrote this about that lovely little play by Rostand, didn't you, Jacques?"

"*Oui, Mam'selle Tonia.*"

"How very romantic. I was reading that two weeks ago . . . it . . . it's so beautiful, Jacques . . . did you . . . were you inspired by a girl y-you like very much?"

He flushed hotly, shook his head, was about to speak when the appearance of the conductor signalled deafening applause.

The suite was in five movements. Though modern in

tonal coloration and harmony, the music had a delicacy and charm readily communicable even to the musically untutored Tonia. There was, in the final movement, the most exquisitely nostalgic waltz to depict the reunion of the lovers, and Tonia's eyes filled with tears. The applause was generous, and then the conductor turned and pointed his baton to the box where Jacques and she sat, and calls of "*Composeur, composeur!*" rose on every hand. Jacques rose, blushing with grateful humility at this unexpectedly enthusiastic reception, and Tonia found herself clapping wildly to pay her own tribute to his poetic imagination.

"But it's marvellous, Jacques," she exclaimed when at last he seated himself and the conductor turned to the score of "*La Valse*," "And that waltz at the end—it's so beautiful."

"*Merci, chere Mam'selle Tonia . . .* if you would like, I will dedicate the work to you when the score is published."

"Oh, no, Jacques, I don't deserve that, truly—"

"Shh, we will talk of it later, now you must listen to Ravel's concept of a waltz. And this is the way a true composer of genius evokes it."

And again Tonia sat spellbound as this wonderfully impressionistic score unfolded, with its bittersweet nostalgia of past joys swept away by the dissonance of war, with the clamoring rebirth of the waltz rising to thunderous coda. Trembling, eyes shining, she joined in the cheering applause as the orchestra, responding to the conductor's generous signal, rose to acknowledge it.

"Oh, Jacques, thank you, thank you for the most wonderful evening I've ever had. And . . . and for the sweet thing you said—but . . . but honestly, you mustn't dedicate that piece to me. I had nothing to do with it—though I wish I had—I mean—" In her impulsive excitement, Tonia blurted out that last phrase, then gasped at the ambiguous enormity of it, and turned a becoming crimson.

Jacques smiled gently, took her hand and kissed it. "And that, Mam'selle Tonia, is the very nicest compliment I have ever had. Because, you see, I think you are one of the loveliest girls I have ever been fortunate enough to meet. Come, we'd better get out of all this

crowd . . . would you like a *liqueur* or something before I take you home?"

"N . . . no, thank you, Jacques. I just want to go home and dream about all that wonderful music. But I do want you to take me to the Salle Pleyel, just as you said."

"It is a promise, *ma chere* Tonia."

He escorted her to the door of the little apartment building, and kissed her hand a last time as a good night salutation. And Tonia fell asleep on her couch with a happy smile curving her tremulous sweet mouth . . .

Arlette Valory sensed that something had gone amiss since the last lesson. Tonia was as enthusiastic as ever about her work, but the delicious, almost conspiratorial intimacy which had grown between them since that initial night of passion had utterly vanished. The sophisticated Parisian did not comment on what she observed, but she could infer most astutely. That Madame Duran had been a little too perceptive. Doubtless she had said something to Tonia. It was truly a pity, for the charming American brunette was giving signs of becoming the most ardent and eagerly acquiescent partner she had ever won. *Eh bien, tout passe, tout casse, tout se lassee* . . . all good things must one day come to an end. There would be others. Perhaps Hortense would take her back, now that it was evident her *belle amie* was definitely not going to become Tonia's new mother. *Oui*, she and Hortense would have need of consolation, till that future time when again Hortense would decide she wished to set her cap for some attractive man. That was one thing she, Arlette Valory, would never do. Men were importunists and egoists; what could they understand of languor and fidelity and passions and a woman's interpretation of those mystic delights?

And this morning, her pupil seemed to want to learn about composers. Ravel and Debussy and Faure and Chausson and Saint-Saens and Berlioz. And so Arlette brought out her *Larousse Illustré* and documented Tonia all she could. "I didn't know you liked music, *petite*," she ventured.

Tonia demurely lowered her eyes and flushed as she stammered, "I . . . I didn't know it either, Arlette. But you see, I went to a concert last night. I never did pay

much attention to classical music back home, I guess maybe because my governess, when I was a little girl, didn't see fit to teach me anything about it or maybe she didn't like it herself. But I know now what I've been missing. And I'm going to lots of concerts from now on."

So that is the way the wind blows, is it, Arlette said to herself with a sombre smile. I should not be surprised if this *petite fille charmante* has met a young man who has swept her off her feet. She has all the signs. And she has not said a word about why she suddenly does not hug and kiss me during our lessons, as she used to do before Madame Duran paid us that unfortunate little visit. *Eh bien donc*, nothing is permanent in this life of ours except change—except that I myself will not change. There will be others for me to teach.

Two days before her father's wedding, Tonia and Jacques had dinner and then went to the Salle Pleyel to hear the gifted young soprano whom Jacques had mentioned. Her name was Loris Delande, she was not much older than Tonia, and her face had the bewitching *insouciance* of a charmingly quizzical child. She also had the body of a young Venus, a fact amply delineated by her strapless blue taffeta evening gown. Her short glossy black curls were coiffured in helmet style to give her a most *piquante* expression. Jacques sat beside Tonia, beaming, and Tonia felt just a bit annoyed at his lack of attention to her.

But when Loris Delande began to sing "L'Antoueno" from Canteloube's vividly poetic arrangement of the songs of the Auvergne, Tonia forgot that tiny subconscious prickling of jealousy. And by the time the singer had reached that hauntingly bucolic "*Obol, din lo coubelo*" which tells of the prince's three beautiful daughters and how one of them weeps for the souls of all unhappy lovers, Tonia could only sigh raptly in candid admiration for the crystalline-clear sweet purity of Loris Delande's expressive voice.

She was accompanied by a small chamber orchestra, and after intermission sang the Berlioz "*Nuits d'ete*" and Ravel's "*Chansons Medecasses*" and "*Scheherazade*." In that last work, when Loris's golden voice soared dynamically to underline Ravels' superb setting of "*Asie*," Tonia

groped for Jacques's hand to share with him the spine-tingling excitement of the music.

After the concert was over, Jacques asked her if she would like to go backstage, and Tonia hesitantly assented. Loris quite dismayed her when the black-haired brown-eyed singer flung her arms round Jacques and kissed him exuberantly on the mouth, then turned to Tonia and exclaimed, "Forgive me, Mam'selle, but this rascal and I were *camarades* in Rome last summer. And I want to remind him of his promise to write a song cycle for me."

"Oh, how very nice," Tonia said half-heartedly. He seemed to have forgotten all about dedicating that wonderful orchestral piece to her, the way he'd offered. And now here he was kissing an absolutely devastating girl—what a gorgeous evening gown she wore, and she knew what it did for her round pink shoulders too, the coquette!—and promising to write songs for her to sing. Tonia wished suddenly she'd had some great musical talent, maybe as a pianist, so Jacques could write a concerto for her.

"Do come and have supper with me, *chere ami*," Loris gushed, holding both Jacques's hands in hers.

"We've had dinner, Loris, but if Mam'selle Tonia agrees, perhaps we might have *cafe* and *liqueur* while you eat. Would that be all right?" He turned to Tonia. Tonia really didn't want to accept. But on the other hand, she had visions of Jacques's deciding to forget all about his being her escort for the evening and taking Loris off all by himself. "I'd be glad to, if you want me," she said, not without a touch of cattiness, for which she was immediately repentant.

For Loris at once generously volunteered, "But I am being a selfish little *cochon*! It's only that I haven't seen Jacques since summer, and day after tomorrow I have to go to Marseilles for a concert. You two mustn't mind me—and I think Jacques is a very lucky man to have found *une si charmante fiancee*."

This time, both Tonia and Jacques blushed, and he stammered, with an uneasy glance at Tonia, "But you always jump to wrong conclusions, *pigeonne*! I have only just met Mam'selle Tonia, and now you see, you have embarrassed her. You presume too much to think she would accept a mediocre composer."

"Peuhl!" teasingly laughed Loris, "I've never met a more modest man, *crois-tu?* D'you know, Mademoiselle Scott, he is so occupied with his composing and wanting to write something really fine, that the poor darling never gives the prettiest girls a second look. And that is why, when I saw you two together just now, I said to myself that at last he had truly fallen in love." She made a coquettish moue at him: "Last summer I did my best to distract him, but the nearest I came was his promising to write those songs for me. *Eh bien*, I shall hold to you that promise, and I have a witness in Mademoiselle Scott. *Mais allons*, I am dying of hunger! You must come with me, both of you, I insist!"

Tonia couldn't help giggling at the infectiously gay and candid behavior of this lovely singer. And she felt, somehow, inexplicably, vastly relieved to know that Jacques wasn't at all serious about Loris. Over their *cafe* and *liqueur* while Loris consumed a dinner that would have surfeited the driver of a *fiacre*, she and Jacques took equal part in the whimsical and diversified topics of conversation. Loris went on to depict the marvels and customs of Rome, much to Tonia's fascination.

They dropped Loris off at her hotel, and the cab drove on to Tonia's place. Jacques slowly walked her up the stairs to the door, suddenly quiet and tense.

"What a marvelous evening, Jacques," she held out her hand to him, eyes fondly glowing. "Loris is just wonderful, isn't she?"

"Yes," he agreed diffidently. "But she is just a good friend . . . a *camarade*, you know."

He held her hand now, looking down at the steps, not at her. A curious shiver surged through her. "And . . . and what am I, then, Jacques?" she whispered very softly.

"I . . . I would like you to be much more than that, *ma chérie*," he said suddenly, almost fiercely, and then he drew her to him, his hands rising to cup her flushed cheeks and to press on her quivering lips the most exquisitely tender and beseeching of kisses.

"Ohh . . . J . . . Jacques . . . ooh . . . yes . . . my darling," Tonia sighed as her arms slowly enfolded him. It was her first kiss, her first real kiss of love, and it was all the books had intimated it could be. That and so much more. Why had she been afraid of love from a man . . . yes, she knew. But now she could forget that

hateful Count Raoul. Jacques's supplicatingly tender kiss had blotted out from her mind that satyr-like bearded leering face.

"My very dear one," he murmured, "may I speak to your father?"

"Speak to D-Daddy—ab . . . about what, Jacques dear?" Still a little dazed, Tonia looked up at him, wide-eyed, her soft lips parted and quivering from the evocation of that first romantic kiss.

"About his consenting to allow me to pay court to you. I want to marry you, *ma toute belle*."

"Oh—Jacques—I—marry me—I . . . I hadn't ever thought of . . . of getting married . . ."

"I am glad of that, *cherie*. So very glad. You see, I want to be the first man, and the only man, you ever love. I know it is much too soon to speak this way—but . . . but after that chatterbox of a Loris said what she did—I thought you might have misunderstood—and . . . and thought me . . . how do you Americans say it . . . *ah, oui*, a wolf with the girls—"

"You're so very sweet, Jacques. I'm sure you're not a wolf at all. In fact, I think," and now, remembering Loris's teasing commentary, Tonia giggled softly, "I think you're even shyer around girls than I am around men, so there now too!"

"*Mon ange!*" He drew her to him again, and that second kiss was longer, even more delicious, than the first. "But I will say no more about marriage till we have known each other longer . . . only to say, *ma tres douce* Tonia, that for me it was love at first sight."

"Well, I do have to enter the Sorbonne next month, you know, Jacques. And I do like you very very much. But I want to be sure . . . you understand?"

"Of course. I'll call you soon. Good night, *mon amour*."

Chapter Nineteen

THE DOUBLE WEDDING came off flawlessly, and Carl and Genevieve Scott bade farewell to Tonia as they embarked for a month's honeymoon at Cannes. John Kemmering and his Gabrielle, both radiant with happiness, left for the Swiss Alps. Jacques, who stood as best man for his beautiful blonde aunt, promised Carl that he would think about the vein of a musical comedy and perhaps when Carl came back from the honeymoon, he might have some preliminary sketches. John Kemmering, despite his whirlwind courtship of Gabrielle Sarnot and his constant duties as revisionist for the play running so successfully at the *Comedie Francaise*, had given Jacques a synopsis of a story line which he had thought up as a possible vehicle for Carl's production into a musical.

As a result, Jacques and Tonia saw very little of each other the remaining weeks of January. Tonia was engrossed in her final preparations for enrollment at the Sorbonne, and Arlette Valory, however grief-stricken at the loss of a *petite amoureuse* she might have been, had reconciled herself to the inevitable. Tonia had told Arlette of Jacques's proposal the very morning after it had occurred. And to give her credit where credit was due, the chic Parisian linguist prided herself on the professional integrity of her teaching. Indeed, she took perhaps a subconscious vengeance on Tonia to publish the brunette for her fickleness by setting poor Tonia so many extra assignments in writing themes, whose idiomatic correctness she vigilantly supervised, that Tonia really would have had no time for dates with Jacques had they come about.

As for Jacques himself, he set to work with zest on Kemmering's libretto outline. It was a witty drawing-room comedy, Gallic to the core—the young playwright's love for Paris and, particularly, for Gabrielle had given him a rare perception into what would make good theatre for Parisian audiences. It called for music in the witty, satirical manner of an Ibert or a Poulenc. Jacques's own

style was patterned rather more after the unexaggerated idiom of Faure, with the flavorful modern dissonances of the Swiss master Frank Martin. Thus it represented a challenge which he was eager to meet.

And there was an even better reason to want to make this new departure a success. Tonia's father, the American producer, had promised that if he could write an acceptable musical score, it would be produced at the *Comedie Francaise*. Also, it would make money, which his serious classical compositions would probably not, at least not for a very long while. And with success and income, he would then have more right to speak to Carl Scott about the latter's blessing on his paying court to Tonia. He was drawn to her as he had never been to any other girl. The quality of poetic sensitivity, which was latent in his own personality, rang a sympathetic chord.

And so the first week in February, Tonia entered the Sorbonne with Arlette's commendation that she would have no difficulty in speaking and writing French and in fulfilling the demanding curricular requirements of that exalted institution of learning. She bade Tonia a wistful *adieu*, though the brunette urged her to make it rather *au revoir*, as she wished Arlette to keep informed on her progress so as to prove that this intensive three-month project had borne fruitful results.

"Very fruitful, I should say, *ma cherie*," Arlette had smiled ruefully. "Not only do you speak and write French beautifully and with a fine appreciation for all its nuances, but you have found yourself other and still more potent interests. That is as it should be for a very charming and lovely young woman whose father loves her so very much. But do not think badly of your Arlette, *max poupée*. I am not sorry that I loved you."

"I . . . I'm not either, dear Arlette. I shall never forget how kind and good you were to me when I was so lonely," Tonia hugged and kissed her. But even in that kiss, the Lesbian could discern the impersonality of a good friend, not the warmth of a lover. Yes, it was time to say *adieu* indeed.

When Carl and Genevieve returned from their honeymoon the middle of February, their first visit was paid to Tonia at her studio apartment. Genevieve was radiantly, youthfully lovely. It was obvious to Tonia that her father,

too, was deeply in love, a serene and rewarding love such as her mother had never bestowed on him. The trio went out to a little-known but superb restaurant, and Carl animatedly described the scenic beauties of Cannes, every so often reaching for Genevieve's soft little hand and squeezing it ardently over the table, while his wife blushed as becomingly as any new bride ever did.

"Now that we're back, darling," Carl said to his daughter, "I'm anxious to get into the production of a brand-new show. I hope that new nephew of mine by marriage has spent his time profitably while Genevieve and I were billing and cooing."

Genevieve gave Tonia a knowing look. "Well, *petite*, perhaps you could answer that. Has my rogue of a nephew been annoying you with his attentions this past month?"

"Oh, no, Genevieve! I've hardly heard from him at all. Just one or two phone calls. And anyway, I've been so terribly busy getting used to talking and thinking nothing but French at school. It's just thrilling, though, and I'm so awfully glad I learned the language. I like everyone so very much in class. And the professors are so thorough and helpful."

"That's good news, baby," Carl said genially. "Tell you what, tomorrow's Saturday and there's no class. Why don't we invite Jacques out for dinner and a movie or something, and we can find out what he's been up to. Musically, I mean."

Tonia tuned a beet-red at this, and Carl perceived his daughter's delicious confusion. "Well, I'll be—Genevieve, I had a hunch you had matchmaking instincts in your system. Notice how my little girl blushed when I mentioned Jacques's being up to something? She's gone and fallen for that composer, or my name's not Carl Scott. All right, Tonia baby, tell Daddy all about it."

"Daddy! I . . . y-you'll make me want to vanish through the floor if you carry on that way," Tonia gasped, blushing to her dainty ears. "I . . . I do like him very much, and . . . and he said he was going to . . . to ask you if you could p-pay court to me—"

"There, you see?" Carl announced triumphantly to Genevieve, whose eyes shone with affection for the lovely brunette.

"But that doesn't mean I'm going to marry him," Tonia flashed defiantly. "I've spent three hard months of study

just so I could go to college here, and I don't think it would be fair to you, Daddy, to give it all up just to get married—"

"Darling," Genevieve softly interposed, "love doesn't wait on schedules. If you really love him and he loves you, marriage will come when it must come. And as for college, nothing is to prevent you keeping on with your studies, if you wish, even though you get married."

"We . . . we . . . ca-can talk about that later, can't we, Genevieve?" Tonia was flustered.

"Of course, baby. And besides, your young man hasn't officially spoken to me, so I haven't given him any official permission yet, now have I? Now let's have some champagne. I want to toast my brand-new wife. *Garcon!*"

The next evening, true to his promise, Carl Scott invited Jacques Nortier to dine with Genevieve, Tonia and him at Maxim's. Tonia wore her prettiest Balmain gown. It had something of the sleek allure that Loris Delande's concert gown had had, a fact which undoubtedly was taken into consideration.

Jacques was there at the restaurant to meet them, his serious, bespectacled face lighting up at the sight of Tonia. He had with him a portfolio which he was nervously shifting about, and it was obvious he had news for Carl.

"What did you bring along for me in that case, Jacques old boy?" Carl chuckled genially as he turned to the young composer after giving the waiter their dinner order.

"You know, M'sieu Scott, this libretto your friend M'sieu Kemmering submitted has decided possibilities."

"I rather thought so myself. So you think it can be made into a musical?"

"Oh, *decidement!* I've taken the liberty of writing music to some of the scenes. I would like you to hear it, if you've time some day."

"No time like the present. Hmm . . . let's see now . . . I've got it! There's a piano in John's suite; he's at the same hotel I am. Whyn't you come on up right now and give me an audition of what you've got there?"

"That is very generous of you, M'sieu Scott."

"The devil with that M'sieu stuff! Call me Carl. You're part of the family now, you know."

"Daddy!" Tonia murmured, her cheeks again turning very red.

He gave her a broad wink as he added, rather more loudly than necessary, "Well, he is. He's my nephew by marriage, isn't that true, Genevieve?"

"Mais out, mon amour."

"All right then. Genevieve, you and Tonia won't want to spend your evening listening to us two talking business. Why don't you both go on to a movie or the theatre? Then take a cab back to the hotel."

"I . . . I'd like to hear the music . . . if . . . if it's all right with you, Daddy," Tonia shyly ventured.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. What about you, Genevieve honey?"

"But as you said, he's my nephew, and of course I'm interested in everything he does. Besides, I'm not in the mood for the theatre or the cinema, *m'amour*. Let's go listen, all of us. Jacques, I expect great things of you—in every way."

And now it was Jacques Nortier's turn to flush and lower his eyes . . .

"Boy, you've got a show there, I'll stake my reputation on it," Carl enthusiastically declared when the bespectacled young composer finally turned from the piano and nodded to indicate he had finished playing all the original music he had written.

"Oh, yes, yes, it's just marvellous, so witty and gay and happy. It . . . it's Paris to the core," Tonia excitedly agreed. And Genevieve was daubing at her tear-misty eyes, a tribute more eloquent than words and one which made Jacques blink his own eyes rather rapidly in his gratitude for it.

"All right, then," Carl Scott rose from his armchair, lit a cigar. "Monday morning, Jacques, I want you and Kemmering to get to work in real earnest. After all, you haven't seen the dialogue yet, and I've no doubt we'll have to edit some of those scenes before we actually stage it. But over-all, there's a sparkle and a lilt to this music of yours that's going to register big at the box office. And after Paris, don't forget I've a Broadway reputation to keep up, too. Wouldn't surprise me any if we translated this little opus into English and brought it back to Broadway in a year or so. Oh, there you are—"

John Kemmering had just walked into the living room of the hotel suite, his beautiful Gabrielle clinging dotingly to his arm. Carl had phoned him from Maxim's and caught him just before he was going out to dinner, asked him to let him use the piano, though he hadn't told the playwright why.

"Good evening, Madame Scott—I mean 'Mrs.,'" young Kemmering laughingly corrected himself. "I've become so Frenchified, I'm even forgetting all my American slang. That's Gabrielle's doing."

"And are you sorry, *mon cher epoux?*" the willowy ex-soubrette teased him.

"Not on your life. Now what's this secret little music-making up in my apartment, Carl?"

"No secret any longer. I was just telling Jacques here that first thing Monday, you and he are going to knuckle down, lock yourselves up for weeks, and produce a musical that'll knock all Paris on its collective ears. This boy's gone and written some of the wittiest music since Cole Porter, so help me!"

"Terrific!" John groaned. "But I'm not so sure about the locking myself up for weeks, if that's meant to exclude Gabrielle. She won't allow it."

"You can say that again," Gabrielle startled them all with a deliciously Parisian-accented version of that inimitably American slang phrase.

After the convivial laughter had died away, Jacques offered to take Tonia home. Carl and Genevieve kissed her goodnight, then Carl repeated, "Now remember, Jacques, first thing Monday, I want you over here with John and myself. We're going to work as you've never worked before, either of you. I'd like to have this musical ready for May, you hear?"

"Impossible!" Jacques gasped, looking to Kemmering for confirmation, but the playwright only rolled his eyes and lugubriously offered, "He means it, Jacques."

"Of course I mean it! Nothing's impossible to an American, and specially a Broadway producer, don't you forget it. Anyway, Monday bright and early."

"Not too early, I hope, *mon ami,*" Gabrielle purred, slyly pinching her husband's ear. And even Tonia laughed this time without being self-conscious. Seeing Jacques again after so long, and hearing his gay vivacious music—

He was very silent in the cab that drove them back to

her apartment. And before he walked her up the flight of steps to the entrance, he dismissed the cab, somewhat to her surprise.

"Tonia . . . *chère petite amour*," he whispered hoarsely as he took her hands in his, "did you think I'd forgotten all I'd said? All these weeks, shutting myself up in my room and writing this gay music, it was always you I thought of, you to whom I dedicated all my work. The heroine in this comedy of John's, she was you; every bar, every melody I created, had you in it."

"Jacques . . . I . . . loved your music tonight. B-but I . . . I can't believe I was your inspiration."

"Shall I show you how very much, *ma toute précieuse et délicateuse* Tonia?"

And before she could reply, his arms enfolded her tightly, crushing the very breath out of her, and his lips came down on hers, not with a shy, awkward tenderness that had been so sweet, but this time with the full, fervent, uninhibited avowal of passion.

Tonia was shaken to the fibres of her being. Inarticulately, she moaned, "Oh, n-no . . . J-Jacques—" but his lips insisted, and his hands moved down to her sleek hips through her coat, demanding, declaring all his desire for her. Her lips burned from the fiery verve of his kisses. It had never been like this . . . no, not even with Arlette. . . .

And she was left trembling and breathless as at last he released her mouth, to mutter almost impatiently, "Monday, do you hear, when I meet with your father, I am going to ask him if he will give his consent to our marriage."

"Jacques—wait—dear—you—I . . . I . . . d-don't know yet . . . if . . . if . . . I I-love you—"

"Yes, that's true, my sweet little one. And you have never known a man. I want you to be sure, so very sure, my little Tonia. I want all my life to be spent making you sure."

Again he kissed her, and Tonia closed her eyes, groaningly clung to him, abandoning herself to this exquisitely torturing new sensation for which Arlette's sage caresses had only partly attuned her.

"Oh . . . n-no . . . n-not out here . . . in the street . . . it . . . it's not p-proper—" she gasped at last. And then, hardly knowing what she said, she heard her-

self stammering, "Dear, please . . . n-not here . . . l-let's go u-upstairs . . . p-people will see us . . . please, dear Jacques—"

Tremblingly, he nodded. Hand in hand, they ascended the flights of stairs to her little apartment, and to Tonia, their creaking seemed to be the knell of her shy maidenhood.

Once inside the spacious living room, he helped her off with her coat and hat, and then, before removing his own, kissed her very gently on the lips. And it was that kiss which reassured her, for his eyes were tender and loving, not glittering as had been Count Raoul's that horrible afternoon . . .

He led her to the couch. Outside, the multicolored lights of Paris cast their kaleidoscopic, iridescent glow through the half-drawn shutters, but inside, there was darkness and silence, those indispensably romantic aides to *l'amour*.

"My very dear one," he whispered, his arm slipping round her waist, "I know I'm sure that you're the one I want to marry. And I don't ask yet that you love me too. But let me hope, Tonia—unless there's someone else?"

"Oh no! There's no one else . . . dear Jacques."

"Then I tell you what, my very sweet one. Your father wishes me to write this musical for him so it will be ready by May. So be it. And perhaps by then, if I promise to see you during each week—but not too often so as not to disturb your studies—you will tell me yes or no?"

"I . . . I think so . . . b-but, J-Jacques—"

"*Oui, ma jolie brune, mon trésor?*"

Hiding her face against his chest, she heard herself whisper, "Teach me . . . how to l-love you . . . so . . . so I can say yes . . . dear good Jacques . . . teach me . . . now!"

"Tonia—you don't mean—my sweet darling!—but no, I would never demand such a thing!"

Blushingly, she lifted her face to his, and put a finger over his quivering lips—how soft and gentle they were, how sensitive, like her own, she thought—"But it's I who am demanding. Unless, of course, you don't want to love me, after all those pretty speeches?"

"Tonia! *Mon Dieu!* Don't want to love you, indeed—when I've dreamed of nothing else—"

He cupped her flaming cheeks, his mouth gently merging on hers, and Tonia sighed with delirious content as the waves of tingling anticipation of bliss throbbed through her lithe young body. Oh, but with such difference in sensation—not as it had been with Arlette, not the languorous dalliance and attunement, but rather with a hungry impatience, a mounting need that must have assuagement vastly encompassing, absorbing and dominating, one that would leave her no time for re-creations or regrets.

His lips clung to hers, and it was with a nectared sweetness that she gave him back shy kiss for kiss, and now her sole thought was not the indrawn aloofness of her being, but rather that in this new and mystic experience there should be no unfortunate awkwardness that would deter him from teaching her that which her body yearned to know . . .

His hands had begun to adore her body, lingeringly and with a joyous gratitude for her incalculably divine gift, not with the brusquely cynical expertness Count Raoul would have shown her. For an instant her thighs clenched in spasmodic revulsion at that memory, then shuddered as he gently raised her to her feet and began to remove her dress . . . and she found herself helping him with inchoate murmurs and worldless sighs. The slip fluttered to the floor. She was glad for the darkness, but the flickering of the colored lights outside the room painted the milky satin of her half-nudity with bewitching tints.

"How beautiful you are, *ma mie, ma colombe exquisite,*" he was murmuring as his fingers hesitantly unhooked the band of her brassiere. Tonia's head fell back against the couch, and instinctively, in a last maiden access of sweet shame, her hands hid those panting milky rondures.

His lips kissed her trembling fingers, and his own stroked her naked shoulders and throat. And in the miracle of transfiguration, in that prelude of ecstasy which all her flesh now so clamorously sought, overriding all her fears and inhibitions with its warmly wholesome sensuality to which all her past intimations of physical desire had been a passionate preface, Tonia let her hands drop. Kissing her palms tenderly, he pressed them to his

lips, and then, kneeling down, his hands gently took hold of her quivering hips and he leaned forward to revere her white naked bosom with ardent lips and tongue.

Tonia stiffened, eyes widening in startled maidenhood, but as without haste Jacques covered her swelling warm breasts with gentle, amorous kisses, as his lips and tongue traced the dusky circles of the aureoles and evanescently attained the crinkly peaks of her nipples, her senses began to reel with a wondrous new delight. Almost sobbing with the bliss he was wakening in her, she clutched his cheeks with her moist soft little hands, whispering brokenly: "Yes . . . ohh . . . my love . . . yes . . . I do love you . . . ohh, Jacques . . . I . . . I know . . . I do . . . ohh . . . my . . . d-darling . . . how gentle and tender you are . . . I never dreamed . . . it would be like t-this . . . oh, my b-beloved . . . take me—take all of me and—let me be—y-your wife . . . w-who loves you too . . . t-teach me . . . h-how to please you, my darling—"

And with her own fingers, now suddenly fumbling with impatience, she discarded of her own accord the final veil that hid from his reverent eyes and hands and lips that sacrosanct secret of her womanhood, and her head sank back on the top of the couch as she surrendered herself to this miraculous attunement . . .

How gentle, how evocative were his hands and how much more his lips! Now she felt neither shyness nor shame, only the insistent surging of her blood, only the tremoring impatience of her rounded thighs whose satiny columns his lips and fingers had begun so delicately to explore and to revere . . .

And then with a hoarse cry, she felt him impose his maleness upon her as she fell back, swooning, on the couch, and yet even in this final dread of crossing that final Rubicon from which there could now be no turning back, her arms rose up to pinion him to her sweet bondage and to share with him the most imperishable of all those adventures by which man and woman are eternally united. Her flesh felt at last the impact of the male, but it was neither brutal nor destructive; oh, how beautiful and natural and tender it was now with Jacques.

She hardly felt the stab of pain which heralded her maiden sacrifice; she knew now only the flaming urgency of her naked young body, the feverish intensity of all

her emotions coalescing into the prayerful and almost agonized will to be unleashed. And as his lips drank in her sighs of rhapsodic delight, as his hands grasped the turbulently writhing promontories of her warm young hips, she knew at last that Joan and Arlette had been only initiatory handmaidens along this pathway whose dark mysteries she had at last divined.

And then there was idyllic silence as their commingled bodies and lips and hands took glory in each other's unselfish yielding. And for Tonia, the temptations turned into tempestuous fulfillment.

May had brought the warm sun and the gaiety of spring to Paris. It had brought Tonia's wedding day, which took place exactly twenty-four hours after the acclaimed success of Jacques Nortier's effervescent score to "*Tout le Monde Aime des Amants*" (All the World Loves Lovers), after the witty and charming libretto by John Kemmering and the sophisticatedly swift-moving production by Carl Scott. Tonia and Jacques were leaving for the Italian Riviera on their honeymoon. Genevieve whispered into her stepdaughter's ear that it was not unlikely Tonia's days of being an only child were drawing to an end, as she was expecting her own child by Carl. And the radiant young brunette blushingly whispered back, "Well, now, who knows, you may become both a mother and a grandmother before another year's over. That nephew of yours insists on a son to carry on the line. And I love him too much to say no to him, ever!"

May also brought Marcia Dalis, formerly Scott, to Paris. Bored and jaded, Marcia had decided that the Jacoby Art Gallery could get along very well without her patronage for a time. Let Gloria Delgado support it from now on. Besides, she had read in the New York papers of the marriages of her ex-husband and her daughter. She felt lonely, and she was in her forties now—her vanity of hiding back some of the years did not assuage that loneliness. A vacation in Paris would lighten her spirits. Perhaps there would be some attentive Frenchman, not like that gigolo Raoul, but a man who would recognize in her those attributes which she was sure she still possessed. No, she had no intention of visiting Carl or Tonia. The pages of that volume had been turned

forever. She'd lost Carl for good, and Tonia—well, perhaps she'd been wrong in accusing the girl. She'd been so jealous and infatuated over Raoul, she hadn't had good sense. But there was no use crying over spilled milk.

And she might spend some time in Paris. Or at Antibes or Nice, she wasn't sure yet. One thing, though, she was going to study French. Tonia had learned French and it had got her a famous husband. Everyone was talking about Jacques Nortier's music. You could hear the cab drivers whistling some of the hit tunes from "*Tout le Monde Aime des Amants*" wherever you went. Now there was an artist who had amounted to something. Maybe she could find one like that for herself, especially if she spoke the language fluently.

It was four in the afternoon when she finished unpacking and decided to visit one of those charming sidewalk cafes for some refreshment. She would wear her smartest cocktail dress and her new fur cape. Thank heavens Carl had been generous in the settlement. She could still indulge her taste for luxury.

She seated herself at a vacant table, glancing out towards the imposing archway of the *Champs Elysées*. A waiter appeared at her side.

"*Madame desire?*"

She frowned. Now what the devil was the French word for brandy? She needed something strong to drive away the nostalgic, lost mood she was in. Maybe coming to Paris where Tonia and Carl were hadn't been such a good idea after all.

"Er . . . I . . . do you have—"

The waiter shook his head. It was one of those cafes indigenous to the Parisian, where only French was spoken. Let the tourists go elsewhere, Monsieur Leon Travel, proprietor, steadfastly believed. And he had trained his waiters accordingly.

"Perhaps I can be of service to Madame." A chic tawny-haired young woman, wearing a simply divine little toque and the most elegant brown silk dress, seated herself beside Marcia. "I speak several languages."

"Oh, thanks, you've saved my life. I wanted brandy."

"*Eau de vie, garcon. Pour deux, s'il vous plait,*" the young woman directed. The waiter inclined his head and disappeared into the cafe.

"It's very good of you, Miss—Miss—" Marcia groped.

"Arlette Valory, at your service."

"I'm Marcia Dalis. Nice meeting you. Did you say you speak several languages?"

"*Mais oui*. It's my profession. You see, I am, as you would say, a tutor in languages."

"You could teach me French, then, couldn't you?"

"But it would be a pleasure for me, *chère Madame*—it is Madame, is it not?"

"Er, no . . . Miss. Miss Marcia Dalis."

"*Incroyable!* You are so lovely, I was certain you were married. But then, men are often blind to real beauty, don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes. You're so right. I can see we're going to be friends. Now I'm staying at the Croydon. Suite 604. I'd love to start lessons as soon as possible. When could you begin?"

"But I have begun already," Arlette gave her an arch smile. "We shall start this very moment. I will translate from English into French, so that you will have an idea of the pronunciation. Now then, give me your hand—"

Wonderingly, Marcia obeyed.

"*J'ai dit en Francais, donnez-moi la main*. Repeat that, Mam'selle Marcia."

Marcia stumblingly repeated what Arlette had just said.

"But that is not too bad. Ah, you will be surprised to see how quickly and how much I can teach you, if you put your mind to it," Arlette murmured huskily, as she retained hold of Marcia's creamy fingers.

Their eyes met, and Marcia shivered. "I'm sure I shall be," she replied, and her fingers trembled in Arlette's gently persuasive grasp.

♡♡
THOU
SHALT
NOT
LOVE...

Tonia's passions and desires were strong ...but forces she couldn't control drove them into strange, twisted channels.

The seed was planted by a mother who had too many lovers. It blossomed in a girls' finishing school where Sappho was the major subject. It reached full flower in a passion-drenched Parisian love-nest, where Tonia's lush young female tutor coached her in the ultimate delights...

It was all forbidden, all sinful. But Tonia couldn't stop...