

ANNE MATHER

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The Arrogance of Love

Anne Mather

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«HarperCollins»

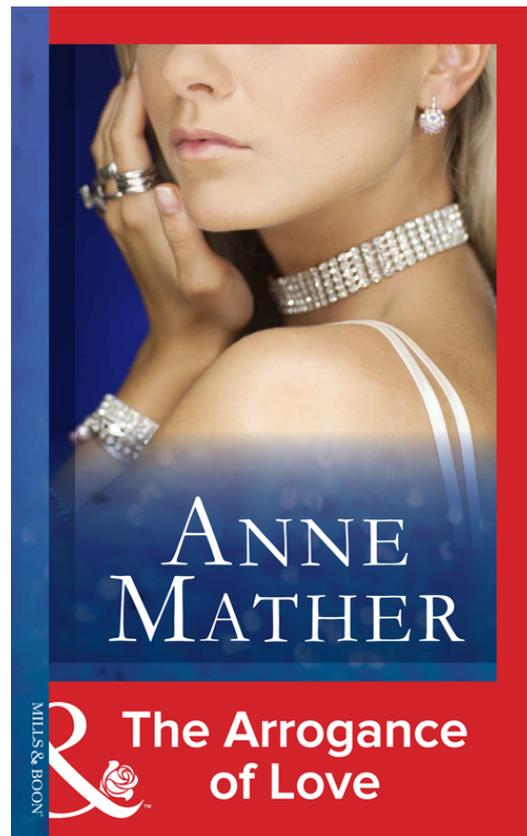
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Mills & Boon are excited to present The Anne Mather Collection – the complete works by this classic author made available to download for the very first time! These books span six decades of a phenomenal writing career, and every story is available to read unedited and untouched from their original release. The Duque's willing captive... Dominic Halstad could just be the most attractive man Susan has ever met! He is tall, handsome, celebrated and rich. It is little wonder that Susan now finds her fiancé David weak, dull and unimaginative! Especially as the seeds of trouble in her relationship were being rapidly sown... But even if her first loyalty were not still to David, what right had Dominic to return her feelings – when he's a married man himself?!

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Mills & Boon is proud to present a fabulous collection of fantastic novels by bestselling, much loved author ANNE MATHER

Anne has a stellar record of achievement within the publishing industry, having written over one hundred and sixty books, with worldwide sales of more than forty-eight MILLION copies in multiple languages. This amazing collection of classic stories offers a chance for readers to recapture the pleasure Anne's powerful, passionate writing has given.

We are sure you will love them all!

I've always wanted to write—which is not to say I've always wanted to be a professional writer. On the contrary, for years I only wrote for my own pleasure and it wasn't until my husband suggested sending one of my stories to a publisher that we put several publishers' names into a hat and pulled one out. The rest, as they say, is history. And now, one hundred and sixty-two books later, I'm literally—excuse the pun—staggered by what's happened.

I had written all through my infant and junior years and on into my teens, the stories changing from children's adventures to torrid gypsy passions. My mother used to gather these manuscripts up from time to time, when my bedroom became too untidy, and dispose of them! In those days, I used not to finish any of the stories and *Caroline*, my first published novel, was the first I'd ever completed. I was newly married then and my daughter was just a baby, and it was quite a job juggling my household chores and scribbling away in exercise books every chance I got. Not very professional, as you can imagine, but that's the way it was.

These days, I have a bit more time to devote to my work, but that first love of writing has never changed. I can't imagine not having a current book on the typewriter—yes, it's my husband

who transcribes everything on to the computer. He's my partner in both life and work and I depend on his good sense more than I care to admit.

We have two grown-up children, a son and a daughter, and two almost grown-up grandchildren, Abi and Ben. My e-mail address is mystic-am@msn.com and I'd be happy to hear from any of my wonderful readers.

The Arrogance of Love

Anne Mather



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CHAPTER ONE

SUSAN looked thoughtfully round the crowded lounge of Amanda Blake's apartment. The cocktail party which had begun at five o'clock showed no signs as yet of breaking up, and already it was six-thirty. She had told her fiancé that she would meet him outside their favourite coffee bar in Chelsea at seven, imagining, foolishly, that she would have time before that to return to the flat, which she shared with a friend in a Chelsea mews, to change. But now she would have to go to meet him as she was in the red velvet pants she was wearing, together with a close-fitting black sweater. Even so, there was no guarantee that she would be on time; Amanda Blake's apartment was in Mayfair, and in the rush-hour traffic on a Friday evening, when everyone who could was leaving the city for the less confining surrounds of the suburbs, the chances of getting a taxi to speed her there were very slight, and she would almost certainly be late. Poor David!

It was all very well, she thought gloomily, being secretary to a famous authoress, but Amanda was apt to forget that Susan had a life of her own, and her working hours often extended late into the evening. Not that Susan often objected. Usually, when they were engrossed upon a new novel of suspense, the kind Amanda Blake was noted for, Susan was as eager as Amanda to get on and discover the plot. But these literary cocktail parties, which always occurred at the publication of a new thriller, had begun to bore Susan, and she was always glad when they were over. Of course, it was exciting meeting the Press and other members of the literary fraternity, but tonight she had wanted to get away early to meet David Chalmers, and now she felt sure it was going to be one of those evenings when nothing went right.

She had been working for Amanda Blake for five years now, since she was a raw teenager of nineteen, and she enjoyed her work immensely. Since her engagement to David, though, things had become a little difficult. David objected strongly to Amanda monopolizing Susan's time. David was an architect, a very junior partner with a well-known firm here in the city, and they hoped to marry in the coming autumn. Amanda, Susan knew, was dreading that time coming. It would mean Susan leaving her, as David would not permit his wife to work at a job which occupied so many hours, and Amanda would have to initiate a new secretary into her ways. This would not be easy. Susan and she had such a grand relationship, and no other secretary would ever take Susan's place entirely.

Just then Amanda approached her secretary. Amanda Blake was a tall broad woman, in her late forties. Un-married, she had devoted her life to her work and her novels were very popular, both in this country and overseas, where they were translated into many different languages. Her work was of the kind which appealed to almost anybody and there had been talk recently of film rights and adaptations. Susan thought it all very exciting and knew that after she was married she would miss the world that Amanda moved in.

Of course, with the money she had amassed and a small private income, Amanda could have retired, but she enjoyed writing her thrillers as much as everyone enjoyed reading them and could not imagine life without a current who-dunnit on the go. Her hair, a mousey-grey, was cut short and straight. She wore tweeds whatever the occasion, and horn-rimmed spectacles completed a picture of stern solemnity. Not so, however, was the real Amanda, as Susan had soon found out. Quite contrary to her looks she had an unending fund of good humour and a dry and clever wit which endeared her to the columnists.

'Enjoying yourself, Susan?' she asked now, looking at the half-empty glass of gin and vermouth in Susan's hand. She was very fond of her young assistant and their association veered nearer to a mother-and-daughter relationship than that of employer and employee.

Susan smiled. 'I thought it would have been over by now, Amanda,' she replied, sighing.

'I expect you've got a date with that young man of yours,' remarked Amanda dryly. 'Let him wait. Good for the soul, you know. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that.'

Susan laughed. 'You always say that,' she answered. 'And David does quite a bit of waiting for me. What time is this likely to dry up?'

'Sevenish,' said Amanda. 'Will that do?'

Susan opened her mouth to reply when an eager reporter beat her to it and bore Amanda off to discuss some aspect of the new novel.

Sighing again, Susan turned and walked into the large modern kitchen which adjoined the lounge, and poured the remains of her drink down the sink. She had had four gin slings already. She did not want to meet David in an intoxicated condition. He was a teetotaler and disapproved of alcohol.

She drew a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of her slacks and lit one and then looked critically at her reflection in the mirror above the draining board. Green, sleepy eyes looked back at her, veiled by long black lashes, while her ash-blonde hair hung loosely to her shoulders where it curved up lightly at the ends. Her hair was thick and silky soft, and did not need to curl to be attractive.

Suddenly, she became aware that someone was watching her from the doorway which led to the tradesmen's entrance of the apartment; someone who was very big and broad and darkly attractive, with raven's-wing dark hair which was inclined to curl on his collar. Dressed in a thigh-length overcoat and a dark suit, he was quite the most physically attractive man she had ever seen; he was so completely *male*, and estimating that he was about thirty-five, she imagined she would not be the first, or the last, woman to think so.

Aware of a kind of breathlessness about her, she managed to say: 'Who on earth are you?'

'A newspaper man,' he remarked, non-committally.

Susan flushed beneath his gaze, annoyed at feeling suddenly so inadequate. Being a tall girl herself, she usually was on eye-level terms with the men of her acquaintance. This man dwarfed her, and immediately put her at a disadvantage.

'The ... the cocktail party guests usually use the front door,' she said, managing to sound cool, though she felt far from it.

He shrugged his broad shoulders and lit a cigar.

'I prefer to see A.B. alone,' he answered smoothly.

Susan ran a tongue over her dry lips. 'Really! And will she want to see you?'

'I think so,' he murmured. 'Amanda and I are old friends. Unfortunately we seldom see anything of each other.'

'Well, if you go through you can see her now,' said Susan, running a nervous hand through her hair.

'I'll wait until the rabble have gone, if you don't mind,' he replied casually. 'I've been abroad for some considerable time, and I'd like to see the old girl alone.'

Susan was shocked. How dare he address Amanda Blake as 'the old girl'? Who was he?

She turned to go intending to tell Amanda immediately that he was here. After all, she only had his word that he knew her employer at all. But he caught her wrist as she passed him and stopped her.

'Don't go,' he murmured. 'Stay and keep me company. How about getting me a drink?'

Susan wrenched her wrist out of his grasp. His touch had sent the blood pounding through her veins, and she realized with horror at her own duplicity that she had enjoyed the feel of those hard fingers gripping her arm.

'If you want a drink, you'll have to go in there for it,' she said angrily.

He grinned. 'If I remember correctly, A.B. used to keep a bottle of Scotch in the cupboard over the refrigerator, for medicinal purposes such as this.'

Susan clenched her fists. She crossed to the cupboard he had mentioned and, sure enough, at the back stood the bottle of Scotch. Really, she thought, he seemed to know an awful lot!

She lifted the bottle out, took a glass from the drainer and poured him a drink. 'Ice?' she queried, in a voice as cold as ice itself.

'Naturally.'

Susan took the tongs and lifted two large pieces of ice out of the ice container and dropped them into the amber liquid. Then she handed him the glass. The man took it, nodding his thanks. Susan stubbed out her cigarette in the near-by ashtray, and he said:

'Won't you join me?'

'No, thanks,' she replied shortly, glancing at her watch. It was almost seven now.

'Got a heavy date?' he asked. 'You're A.B.'s secretary, aren't you?'

'Yes, to both questions,' she answered, acutely conscious of him. She turned to look at him again; she had been avoiding his eyes but suddenly she found her eyes held by his and something seemed to flare in his at the contact. It was fantastic, crazy, and yet she felt drawn to him; something dangerous and exciting and forbidden seemed to be in the room. He must have felt it, too, for his eyes narrowed slightly, and he looked at her through half-closed lids. Susan wondered whether the amount of alcohol she had consumed was clouding her brain. This was all so – so – mad!

She forced herself to look away, and said, breathlessly: 'I must go back.'

All at once the door from the lounge opened and Amanda stood there.

'They've all gone now—' she began, and then stopped in amazement. 'Dominic – Dominic Halstad!'

The man smiled, his eyes dancing, and Amanda rushed across the room and hugged him warmly. Over her shoulder, the man's eyes sought Susan's and she had to steel herself to force things back into perspective.

For, as Amanda made a fuss of the man, chattering volubly, the name she had used caused Susan no little feeling of trepidation.

Dominic Halstad! No ordinary newspaper man as she had assumed. He was the chairman of the board of directors of Halstad Press Limited, one of the largest syndicates of newspapers and magazines in the country.

If she had not felt so strange she would have felt like laughing. And she had thought he was trying to get an inside story! She turned away and lit another cigarette with trembling fingers. Dominic Halstad! *Glory!*

Then Amanda was saying: 'Susan, my dear, come and meet one of my closest and oldest friends, Dominic Halstad. You've heard of him, of course.'

'Of course,' murmured Susan politely, flushing as his firm fingers gripped her hand for a moment and then released it again.

'Miss ... er ...?' he began slowly.

'Stacey,' put in Amanda swiftly, 'but I'm sure Susan will do, won't it, darling?'

'Of course,' said Susan, again, feeling rather ridiculous because she could think of nothing else to say.

'Well, Susan has been looking after me,' said Dominic Halstad lazily. He was completely in control of himself, and Susan thought she must have imagined the look in his eyes a moment ago. Which was just as well, she thought dryly. If his name had told her nothing else, it had at least warned her that he was a *married* man.

Amanda smiled. 'Susan's a real treasure,' she said, putting an arm about her secretary's shoulders.

'Of course we didn't introduce ourselves properly,' continued the man mockingly.

Susan felt uncomfortable and as though sensing it, Amanda said:

'You can get along now and meet that young man of yours, Susan.'

'Thank you,' said Susan, with relief. 'Good-bye, Mr. Halstad.'

She hurried out into the living-room where Amanda's maid and general factotum, Sarah, was trying to create order out of the disorder of dirty glasses and overflowing ashtrays that was left.

‘G’bye, Sarah,’ she called, and, pulling her sheepskin coat about her shoulders, she left the apartment.

She managed eventually to hail a taxi, and giving the address of the coffee bar she sank back against the leather upholstery. Feeling able to relax she found her thoughts turning back to the last few minutes at the apartment and her encounter with Dominic Halstad.

She had treated him like an intruder, and she wondered whether he would tell Amanda how impolite she had been.

He had been attractive though. Susan sighed, and wondered what his wife was like. Although she knew he was married she could not remember ever having read anything about his wife. His name appeared from time to time in the city society magazines, and recently she had read about him in America, but his wife did not seem to accompany him very often.

David was waiting impatiently outside the coffee bar. He was striding up and down, trying to keep warm, for it was a cool March evening. He looked disgustedly at her trews and the sheepskin coat. He did not like to see women in trousers, least of all his fiancée. He was rather old-fashioned, and although at times Susan found it rather endearing, at others it exasperated her.

‘Do you realize it’s seven-thirty?’ he exclaimed, by way of a greeting.

‘Yes, darling,’ said Susan, in a mock-subdued tone. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘And I gather, from the way you’re dressed, that you haven’t been home since this morning.’

‘Correct,’ she murmured. ‘You know I told you that Amanda was having the cocktail party for the new book this afternoon. That’s why I’m so late. It’s only just broken up.’

David snorted. ‘Susan, you’re not paid to attend that woman’s cocktail parties!’

‘I know, David, but she does so like me to be there, and I don’t like to disappoint her.’

‘It doesn’t matter about disappointing me, of course!’

‘Oh, David, don’t be silly. I haven’t disappointed you. I’m here, aren’t I? Come on, let’s go in, I’m starving!’

‘We aren’t going in,’ he said abruptly. ‘Mother has invited us back for supper. She wants to discuss the wedding.’

He ignored the way Susan’s face dropped at this news. Susan and Mrs. Chalmers did not get along very well. Mrs. Chalmers was a widow, and David was her only child. Consequently, she was rather possessive and jealously did not want him to marry and leave her. David was tall and slim and fair, and she had brought him up to despise most of the members of her own sex. He did not smoke or drink and attended church with her twice every Sunday.

When he met Susan, one day in the tube (he accidentally sent Susan’s shopping flying when he bumped into her), he found all his mother had told him accounted for little against his own attraction for the blonde, green-eyed creature who thanked him so merrily for picking up her parcels.

He could hardly believe his luck the following evening when they again travelled on the same train, and when he asked to see her again she agreed eagerly.

But when he took her home a few weeks later to meet his mother, he found things were not going to be as smooth as he had hoped. Mrs. Chalmers spent the whole evening sulking and Susan could hardly wait to escape from the close confines of Medlar Grove.

As time went by, and Mrs. Chalmers realized that David was not to be swayed from Susan, whatever she said, she tried to be a little more friendly, and finally decided that if David was to marry Susan, she might as well make the best of it. After all, they could nicely live with her after the event. The house was old and large for one person and that way she would be able to keep David under her roof. Things would not be so different after all.

But Susan soon realized the way things were going and lost no time in saying that she and David hoped to be able to save enough money to put a deposit down on a small house in one of the new suburban developments.

Mrs. Chalmers, however, was no defeatist, and still would not accept that David would agree to such a thing and leave his mother alone. Thus it was that David was being pulled two ways, and was not yet strong enough to defy his mother and make a stand.

Susan herself was hoping that he would not allow his mother to get her own way, as she knew she could never live with Mrs. Chalmers. They were too different, and it would never work out.

Now, Susan merely sighed, and said: 'Oh, all right, David. But I wish you wouldn't spring these things on me. I've been looking forward all day to this evening alone together.'

David relented a little, and replied, 'Never mind, Sue darling, we don't have long to wait and then we'll be together for always.'

'Y ... e ... s,' murmured Susan, rather cautiously. Their future had never seemed more insecure. What was wrong with her? Why was she feeling so depressed tonight? It could only be this sudden visit to Medlar Grove. What else was there?

She refused to allow herself to think about that moment in Amanda's kitchen. What was she, that she could allow herself, even for a moment, to respond to the message in another man's eyes? A message which she felt she had imagined anyway.

David ran a small M.G. sports car of almost vintage origin, and they drove in it round to David's home in Shepherd's Bush. Mrs. Chalmers let them in. She must have been watching for them from the window, and Susan shivered at the pictures this conjured up. Pictures of their lives in a few years' time if they lived here. No, it could never be. And if love was involved, she realized with a sense of loss that she did not love David enough to submit to such a life.

When she saw Susan's trousers, Mrs. Chalmers exclaimed, 'Dear me, I hope none of the neighbours saw you come in!'

It was on the tip of Susan's tongue to say that if all the street were like Mrs. Chalmers, there was every chance that she had been seen. But respect for David made her refrain and she simply ignored the remark, and walking into the gloomy living-room warmed her hands at the electric fire.

'Susan didn't have time to change before she came,' said David by way of explanation when Susan did not answer herself.

'Why? You're late enough, aren't you?'

David sighed. 'Susan had to work late.'

'And have you been standing around in the cold waiting for her? You'll catch your death of cold one of these days, mark my words.'

'He's not made of glass, you know,' Susan was stung to reply at last. 'And I couldn't let him know.'

Mrs. Chalmers shrugged and left them for a few minutes to prepare the supper. Susan took off her coat and laid the table while David switched on the television and began to watch a quiz programme.

Susan looked at him and sighed. He was not a very romantic person, and it had never occurred to him that he had not yet kissed her, or told her he was glad to see her. Unless he was prized away from his mother's apron-strings he never would. This atmosphere was cloying. It sapped all original thought. Mrs. Chalmers was in evidence everywhere. From the ridiculous 'Home, Sweet Home' embroidered picture on the wall to the swear box on the mantelpiece.

Supper as usual was a concoction of scrambled eggs and bacon and after it was over Susan defiantly lit a cigarette. She did not smoke a lot, but tonight she felt so restless she had to do something to calm her nerves. She drew the smoke deeply into her lungs and then exhaled with satisfaction.

As usual, the conversation veered to the subject of the wedding. As Susan had no relatives of her own, Mrs. Chalmers had taken over the arrangements herself, and, of the forty guests on the list, only about a dozen were friends of Susan's.

The question of the house was raised, and Mrs. Chalmers again made her point about this house coming to David on her death anyway, and that to buy a new house was quite ridiculous and much too extravagant.

‘David doesn't want to be troubled with mortgages at a time like this,’ she said severely. ‘After all, this house is far too big for one person. And if David leaves I shall be all alone.’

‘You could sell it,’ Susan remarked quietly.

‘What! Sell my home! Then what would I do?’

Suddenly afraid that Mrs. Chalmers, or David for that matter, might suggest that she come to live with them should they buy a new house, Susan said quickly, ‘You could afford to buy a smaller house. Or alternatively, you could rent a flat. In fact, a flat would suit you admirably.’

‘A flat!’ Mrs. Chalmers’ face was red. ‘I couldn't live in a *flat!*’

‘Why not?’

Mrs. Chalmers swallowed hard. ‘You wouldn't understand, never having had a home of your own, but a home is something more than three up and two down, you know.’

Susan flushed. It hurt still, when anyone spoke so crudely of her upbringing. Truthfully the orphanage had been a wonderful place, and she still went back there sometimes to see the Matron, but it had not been quite the same as a real home, with a mother and father of her very own. She was sure that this was something else that marred her in David's mother's eyes. She seemed to look down on orphanages, as though the children in them were themselves responsible for their lack of parentage.

David must have felt uncomfortable himself at this, for he suddenly stretched and rose to his feet.

‘Well, Sue, it's nearly ten. Shall we be going?’

Gratefully, Susan rose also. ‘Oh, yes, David. Can you get my coat?’

Outside, the night air seemed inestimably fresh after the dingy atmosphere of the Chalmers house. Susan breathed deeply and was glad for once that the car was an open one. It was wonderful to feel the cold wind tugging at her hair, and clearing her head.

She wished David was not so easily dominated by his mother. For instance, he never chastened her for anything she said to herself, Susan, whatever it might be, and for all she might think that it was because he wanted to keep the peace she knew this was the coward's way out. Mrs. Chalmers might not be so objectionable if she were taken down a peg or two, now and then.

It was a problem, and she did not have any idea how it was to be solved.

When they drew up outside the block of apartments where Susan's flat was situated, she turned to David and said:

‘David, let's get this straight now, shall we? I don't want to live with your mother, however convenient it may be.’

David sighed. ‘I know, Sue, but –’

‘But nothing, David.’ Susan ran a hand over her hair, and David suddenly pulled her to him.

‘Oh, Sue,’ he whispered, ‘I only want to live with you. I don't care where it is!’

Susan allowed him to kiss her, without responding herself. She felt emotionally exhausted at the moment. Then she pressed herself against him, as though willing herself to respond, and he groaned, ‘Oh, lord, I don't know how I'll wait until October.’

‘What would your mother think?’ she taunted him, hating herself for doing so.

‘I don't damn well care,’ he muttered, and kissed her again.

CHAPTER TWO

THE flat which Susan shared was situated in a comparatively new block in a quiet cul-de-sac. There was a bedroom, a living-room and a kitchen, with a bathroom along the passage which was shared with two other couples.

Delia Fulton and Susan had both been brought up in the orphanage and in consequence loved the flat which was the first real home they had had. They had both come to London together to get jobs, Susan to work in a typing pool and take a commercial course during her evenings, and Delia to work in a large store from where she too had taken a course, this time in window-dressing, and she now worked for a large department store in Oxford Street.

It had been a struggle to begin with. The rent of the flat had seemed exorbitant, but now they both earned enough money to afford the flat and a few luxuries besides.

The girls were good friends and did not interfere in each other's lives. The orphanage had taught them to respect privacy, for there there had been little.

The next morning Susan woke to find Delia shaking her, and saying :

'Wake up, Susan. I've brought you a cuppa.'

Delia was a brunette. She wore her hair very long and straight and was invariably dressed in pants and an overblouse or sweater.

'What's the time?' asked Susan, struggling up in bed to take the cup of tea Delia held out to her.

'Eight o'clock,' replied Delia, now relieved of the tea-cup and lighting a cigarette.

Susan blinked. This was indeed a red-letter day. Delia was never up first in the mornings. She was always the one who had practically to push her friend out of bed.

'Couldn't you sleep?' she asked, an amused twinkle in her eye. 'Or is there some other reason for your early rising?'

Delia stretched and grinned. 'Well, honey, Alan is taking me down to meet his parents for the weekend. He's calling for me at nine o'clock and I can hardly contain myself.'

'I see. How wonderful!' Susan was pleased. Alan Huntley was the nephew of the store-manager where Delia worked. His parents were Sir John and Lady Olivia Huntley and they lived in a massive house near Bristol. Although Delia had been working at the store for over eight years, it was only recently that Alan had started taking an interest in her and as she had admired him from a distance for a long time, she was overjoyed. And now he was taking her down to meet his parents and to Susan it sounded very serious indeed in the nicest possible way.

'It is, isn't it?' exclaimed Delia, hugging herself. 'Just imagine! Meeting his parents!'

'Yes, you'll soon be getting married yourself,' said Susan. 'I envy you.'

'Why? You have David.'

'Oh, I know, but I also have David's mother to contend with, and she's a whole mass of problems in herself.' She sighed.

'You do sound gloomy this morning,' said Delia sympathetically. 'You were asleep when I got home last night. Has something awful happened?'

'Awful! Oh, no, not really.' In truth Susan couldn't understand her depressed mood herself. It all seemed to stem from that meeting with Dominic Halstad. It was all most annoying, and most unsettling.

'Then what's wrong? You don't sound very happy.' Delia was genuinely concerned.

Susan smiled. 'Nothing, honestly. I just feel as though it's going to be one of *those* days.'

She slid out of bed and stretched, before crossing to the wash basin to sluice her face with icy cold water.

Drying her face on the towel, she looked speculatively at Delia.

'Delia,' she said slowly, 'have you heard of Dominic Halstad?'

Delia frowned. 'I've heard of him, of course. He's something to do with newspapers, isn't he?'

'Yes. He's the head of one of these big syndicates.'

Delia looked exasperated. 'Come on, then! You didn't ask me that for no reason, just out of the blue. Do you know him?' She looked slightly incredulous.

Susan laughed. 'Not exactly. But I did meet him yesterday at the cocktail party at Amanda's. He's a friend of hers, and very attractive.'

'Is he indeed?' Delia made a moue with her lips. 'You do move in exalted circles, don't you?'

'Amanda does, at least. She apparently knows him very well. They treated each other like long-lost souls.'

'Hmn! He sounds interesting. Is he married?'

'Yes, they always are,' Susan chuckled. 'Why? Has Alan begun to pall already?'

'Of course not. But I can see he made quite an impression on you. Is that the cause of the depression? Did David seem meek in comparison?'

'No, not at all.' Susan felt cross. She ought not to be discussing a complete stranger, and a friend of Amanda's, in this manner. After all, the chances were that she would never see him again. Besides, she somehow felt disloyal to David just talking about Dominic Halstad. But she would not admit, even to herself, the reason why she felt this way.

Shooing Delia out of the bedroom she dressed in a dark-blue jersey shift and emerged to find that Delia had prepared her a slice of toast and a cup of creamy coffee, which were delicious.

Wishing her friend good luck during the weekend, she donned her sheepskin coat, and hastily left the flat. She ran down the flight of stairs and came out into the fresh morning air.

It was one of those slightly frosty mornings, when a faint haze hid the sun and promised a warm and sunny day. Susan breathed deeply and felt her depression leaving her. Who could feel depressed when everything looked so new and fresh and the young shoots were greening on the trees in the parks?

A bus set her down near Amanda's apartment and she opened the door of the lounge as the near-by church clock struck nine.

Amanda was sitting at her desk, studying her correspondence, and smiled as Susan came in.

'Good morning, Susan,' she said briskly. 'You're remarkably punctual.'

Susan chuckled. 'I'm not sure whether I should take that as a compliment or not,' she remarked, taking off her coat and hanging it in the minute entrance hall.

'Sorry, dear,' said Amanda. 'Anyway, there's not a lot for us to do today.' She rose to her feet and, crossing to the kitchen door, called, 'Coffee for two, Sarah, please.'

Then she turned to Susan. 'There are just a few letters to answer, and afterwards I think we'll take a ride into the country. It will make a nice change for both of us.'

While they were smoking cigarettes and drinking some of the continental coffee Sarah had prepared so expertly, Amanda said, 'By the way, what did you think of Dominic Halstad?'

'I don't really know,' replied Susan, flushing. 'He ... well ... he didn't tell me who he was, and I'm afraid I was rather abrupt with him. I treated him like an eager reporter trying to get an inside story.'

Amanda laughed. 'Oh, don't worry about that. I expect he was quite amused. He's used to people hanging on his every word. Do him good to meet someone who didn't treat him like the purple emperor.'

'He did say he was a very good friend of yours.'

'So he is, girl.' Amanda nodded thoughtfully. 'You know it was he who persuaded his father to publish my first novel. They weren't very inspiring stories in those days, but Dominic thought I had promise and persuaded his father to think so, too. Of course, I've known Dominic for years. Long before I took up writing, in fact. His mother and mine were great friends, and when we were

children we used to play together. I was seven years older than Dom, but he led me a terrible life.' She chuckled reminiscently.

'I see.' That accounted for the familiar way he had spoken of her. 'He hasn't been here before, has he?'

'No, he's been abroad for quite a long time,' replied Amanda. 'He seems to do a lot of his work in America, or so I believe; at any rate I haven't seen him for a couple of years or so.'

'He seems very young,' murmured Susan, drawing deeply on her cigarette. 'But he must be nearly forty.'

'He is, darling. But I agree, he doesn't look his age, which is remarkable in the circumstances.'

'What circumstances?' Susan was curious.

'Oh, the problems he has had to face with Veronica.'

'Veronica? Oh, is she his wife?'

'That's right.' Amanda sounded bitter. 'Regrettably.'

Susan stubbed out her cigarette. 'Why so? Are they divorced?'

'No. Nothing so simple.' She smiled, a little forcedly, and then said, 'Well, let's get on.'

Susan picked up her notebook, but as she did so she wondered why Amanda seemed so reluctant to talk about Dominic Halstad's wife. There seemed to be a mystery about the whole affair, but she respected Amanda's confidence and firmly tried to push all thoughts of the Halstad *ménage* from her mind.

But it was not so easy as she thought, and she found her mind twisting back over all that had been said, trying to find some reason for Amanda's oblique comments.

But it was no use. She did not know sufficient about them to be able to form any opinion, and it seemed unlikely that Dominic Halstad should have any problems that he could not handle, when she considered his immense wealth and personal charm.

They lunched at the apartment and afterwards drove out of town in Amanda's Rolls-Royce, Susan acting as chauffeuse. They stopped at a small country pub for a drink, and relaxed in the garden of the inn, sitting at rustic tables on wooden forms.

It was all very olde-worlde and Susan liked it.

'I'm having dinner with Dominic this evening,' remarked Amanda suddenly. 'At least, I should say he's having dinner with me. He's coming to the apartment.'

'Alone?' Susan was intrigued. Where was his wife?

'Yes. Alone. Why? Would you and David like to make up a foursome?'

'Oh, really ... I ... of course we wouldn't intrude ...' Susan felt embarrassed.

'You wouldn't be intruding,' replied Amanda easily. 'It's a grand idea. Why didn't I think of it before?'

Susan's nerves felt as taut as violin strings, and she inwardly rated herself for feeling this way at the mere mention of that man's name.

'I don't think David would want to come,' she murmured truthfully.

'Oh, never mind what that young man says. Would you like to come?'

'I ... I suppose so.'

Amanda screwed her nose up, and looked rather cynical. 'I must say your enthusiasm is overwhelming,' she remarked dryly.

Susan giggled. 'I'm sorry, Amanda. Of course, I'd like to come, but you know what David is.'

'I know,' said Amanda. 'Why don't you give him a ring? I expect he'll be working as usual today, won't he? Tell him Dom is coming. I guarantee he won't refuse.'

'Perhaps you're right,' agreed Susan, sighing. 'All right. I'll go and see if I can use the phone here.'

The bartender was quite willing that she should use the phone behind the bar and in no time at all her call was ringing in David's office. Although occasionally she did contact David in this way,

it was only very occasionally as he did not like her ringing him during office hours. Thus it was that when David answered and found it was Susan he was rather irritable.

'What is it?' he asked brusquely. 'I'm very busy, Susan. Is it urgent?'

'Not exactly, darling, but Amanda has invited us to the apartment for dinner this evening and I didn't want to accept until I was sure you would want to go.'

'I see.' David did not sound enthusiastic, but, thought Susan impatiently, he expected her to visit his mother's whenever he saw fit, so why should he object on the rare occasions when she asked him to go somewhere that she wanted? After all, Amanda was the nearest person to a mother she was ever likely to have.

'It will make a change,' she said, annoyed to find that her voice was persuasive. 'Will you go?'

David hesitated and then said, 'Do I take it Amanda will be alone? Or will there be other guests?'

'One other guest, Dominic Halstad,' said Susan quickly.

'Dominic Halstad!' David sounded astonished now. 'Really?'

'Yes, really.' Susan felt angry. As Amanda had said, the name had caused an immediate and favourable reaction.

'Well, in that case, I think we might go. It sounds interesting. Is he a friend of Amanda's?'

'Yes. Right. What time will you pick me up?'

Susan was glad when she replaced the receiver. She had been conscious of having the attention of the bartender while she was making the call and she hoped she had not sounded too pleading. Thanking him, she returned to Amanda.

'Well?' said Amanda at once. 'What's the verdict?'

'As soon as I mentioned Mr. Halstad's name, it worked like a charm.' Susan sighed. 'I don't know why you and David are so antipathetic to one another.'

The last time David and Susan had dined at the apartment, Amanda and David had spent the whole evening arguing over contemporary painting. Amanda was a devotee of modern art, whereas David could not stand it and, unlike Amanda, he did not think everyone should have their own opinion. He had inherited from his mother the idea that he was right and everyone else must be wrong.

'That young man annoys me,' said Amanda, 'and he knows it. He is also jealous of my monopolizing your time. Are all young men today so sure of themselves?'

'Being sure of himself is the last description I would have applied to David,' said Susan in surprise. 'With me he seems anything but positive. He allows his mother to walk all over him, and me too for that matter. It's infuriating.'

'Well, I should imagine that's why he is the way he is,' remarked Amanda. 'At home he's been repressed and dominated by his mother, that's why when he's with you he tries to dominate you. To prove to himself that he's not a mouse.'

Susan laughed. 'The amateur psychiatrist, Miss Amanda Blake!'

Amanda grinned. 'All right, all right, you laugh. But I'm right. I'm sure of it. What happened to his father?'

'Oh, he died years ago.'

'Probably bullied to death, if you ask me,' said Amanda shrewdly. 'From what you've said, his mother sounds a tyrant.'

Susan sighed. 'Maybe it's my fault. I let her get away with too much. I think that's David's dilemma too. After his father died she turned to him more and more and consequently today things are worse than ever. She needs a daughter-in-law who is as tough as she is and who will answer her back and not allow her to get her own way.'

Amanda frowned. 'That was an ambiguous remark. Do I take it you're having doubts as to whether you'll be her daughter-in-law?'

Susan flushed. 'Oh, no! No!' She lit a cigarette hastily, with hands that were not quite steady. 'It's just that sometimes I wish I were more like that.'

'Is that so?' Amanda looked sceptical, and Susan wondered whether the remark she had made had indeed been triggered by some subconscious desire to be free of the Chalmers family once and for all.

But, she told herself desperately, she did love David, and that was all that mattered. Once they were married she would feel differently about everything. Once they were settled in a home of their own, and perhaps with a family, too, she would find her fears had merely been will-o'-the-wisps, without any substance or foundation. For once she was married to David, she felt sure she would be able to handle his mother in a more positive way.

That evening she dressed with care for their dinner engagement. She wore a dress of heavy black silk which clung to the slender lines of her figure, revealing the curve of her breast and the lithe smoothness of her hips. With it she wore a dark red cape and she was ready and waiting when David arrived at seven-fifteen. He, too, looked smart in a dinner jacket and Susan wondered what he had told his mother about this evening.

He looked very impressed when he saw Susan and said, 'I'm quite looking forward to this evening. Halstad is a very influential man. He may be able to put some work our way.'

Susan stared at him. 'What on earth has a pressman in common with an architect?'

'Well, nothing really, my dear, but Halstad doesn't only dabble in things literary. He has interests all over the world. Why, Mathews was only saying this afternoon what an opportunity this was ...'

Susan gasped. Mathews was the head partner in the firm and a man she both disliked and despised. A married man, he spent his free time at night clubs and strip-shows, taking up with different women to the shame and embarrassment of his wife, caring nothing for his three children, other than that they be provided with a paid education and adequately provided with the material comforts his money could buy. On the rare occasions when he had encountered Susan he had treated her like another of his conquests and she had been horrified that David had done nothing and said nothing to prevent her discomfort.

'If you think this evening is going to be turned into a business meeting, you're mistaken,' she exclaimed hotly. 'Amanda has invited us and you will kindly remember that and give her the consideration she deserves. I will not have you introducing work into the conversation. Good heavens, Dominic Halstad isn't interested in Mathews, Mathews, Graham and *Chalmers*!'

David looked taken aback. 'I say, Susan, don't get on your high horse, old girl. I'm only thinking of us, you know.'

'Are you? Are you?' Susan buttoned her cape. 'Anyway, remember what I've said, and try to be a little more friendly towards Amanda. She's been very kind to me, and I'm very fond of her.'

'All right, Susan, I get the message,' said David, becoming a little annoyed now. 'I don't know why you think I would say anything out of place. I'm sure I have as much discretion as the next man.'

Susan smiled at this and wished wryly that it was true.

They arrived at Amanda's apartment at about seven-forty-five. Sarah admitted them and they removed their coats in the hallway before entering the large lounge.

This room extended the length of the apartment block and was divided by a librenza into two parts; one used for dining and the other as the lounge. It was tastefully decorated with furniture which was neither modern nor old-fashioned. Amanda was not interested in collectors' items and yet there were several good pieces of Sheraton and Chippendale which looked rather out of place beside the Formica-topped occasional table and stereophonic radiogram.

Dominic Halstad was seated on the low couch near the pseudo-log fire, the diffused lighting darkening his already tanned skin and giving him a faintly foreign air. He was sitting forward glancing at the draft of Amanda's latest novel, and he looked at home and very relaxed.

He rose to his feet immediately at their entrance, and smiled. Susan was acutely aware of how her nerves had tensed again, and of how her spine tingled in a most unusual manner. The colour mounted in her cheeks and she was glad that David's eyes were not on her at that moment.

But David himself was walking towards the other man, holding out his hand and saying, 'You must be Mr. Halstad. My name is Chalmers, sir. I'm very pleased to meet you.'

Feeling she was neglecting her duties, Susan hastily joined them and made unnecessary introductions. She felt aware that Dominic Halstad was rather amused by her, and she felt annoyed and altogether uncomfortable.

After they were seated, Dominic said, 'Amanda is fussing over the dinner in the kitchen, so can I provide you with a drink? What would you like, Susan?'

Susan shrugged. 'A Martini, perhaps,' she murmured. 'Thank you.'

'How about you, Chalmers?'

David bit his lip. 'I ... well ... perhaps the same for me, sir.'

Dominic raised his dark eyebrows and walked indolently across to the cocktail cabinet. Susan glanced at David and he shrugged his shoulders defensively. He had never accepted a drink in her presence before.

Dominic returned with two Martinis and a Scotch with ice for himself. After handing them their drinks he seated himself opposite them in a low armchair and said:

'I understand you're engaged. When do you intend getting married?'

'In October,' replied David swiftly. 'We're saving up for a house.'

Susan glanced at David. So they *were* going to have their own house. She wondered whether he had told his mother so definitely. It did not seem likely. It was probably simply bravado away from her domineering attitude.

'Very good. There are some pleasant new developments on the outskirts of the city. I've noticed quite a number of changes since my return.'

'You've been abroad?' David was interested.

'Yes. I only returned this week.'

'Really. Where have you been?'

Susan glanced at the kitchen door, and wondered whether she could make some excuse and go and talk to Amanda in the kitchen. For some reason, Dominic Halstad's presence overpowered her and she found she could not look away from his compelling gaze.

Amanda emerged from the kitchen at that moment, as though in answer to Susan's unspoken prayer, and said:

'Hullo, there. How are you, David?' She smiled round. 'I see you've all been provided with drinks. Good. I thought Dom would look after you.'

The two men, who had risen at her entrance, reseated themselves as Amanda took the chair beside Susan. Then Dominic got up again, and grinned.

'I suppose I ought to offer you a drink,' he remarked laughingly. 'After all, it's your apartment and your liquor.'

'That's right, darling. I'll have a whisky, please, with a little ginger.'

David looked disapprovingly at Susan, and she shrugged almost imperceptibly. Martinis were one thing. Strong stuff like Scotch was for men, not for women!

They lit cigarettes, although Dominic Halstad produced a case of cigars and preferred to have one of them. David refused a cigarette but accepted a cigar, and Susan felt an uncontrollable fit of giggles assailing her. Surely David, who did not smoke, was not going to attempt to smoke a cigar!

But David allowed Dominic Halstad to light his cigar and drew back, puffing furiously.

Susan looked away from him, and turned to Amanda in order to stop herself from laughing, while Dominic Halstad lay back in his seat, an amused expression on his face.

Susan felt suddenly annoyed with him. Did he know how inexperienced David was at smoking? Had Amanda told him he was both a teetotalter and a non-smoker? If he did know, he was being deliberately provocative. Amanda, apparently unconcerned, said, 'How's Jon these days?'

'He's fine, thanks. He's looking forward to seeing you. I told him I would bring him to lunch with you some time next week. I'm sending him to Fay's in a few days. He can stay there for a week or so. I know he doesn't like going, but it will do him good to get with children of his own age. He's far too precocious. That's what comes of always being with adults.'

Susan listened to this conversation with interest. Who was Jon? Her question was soon answered as Amanda said, by way of explanation:

'Jon is Dominic's son. He's fifteen, and he lives in England most of the time. Dom doesn't take him with him on his travels, do you, Dom?'

Dominic's eyes narrowed. 'Unfortunately not. I feel I'm neglecting him at times, but at others I realize that were we together more we would probably get in each other's way.'

Susan looked aghast. 'What a thing to say!' she exclaimed, before she could stop herself. 'Poor boy!'

Dominic's eyes were mocking. 'There's nothing poor about Jon, believe me,' he remarked coolly. He looked at Amanda. 'Is there, A.B.?'

'No, I suppose not. But I can understand Susan's feelings. She has never known a parent's love; she was brought up in an orphanage. To hear you speak of Jon you would imagine he was an encumbrance to you.'

Dominic sighed, and drew deeply on his cigar. 'Let's say Jon and I are too much alike to get along well together,' he remarked. 'We both like our own way too much.'

'Besides,' said Amanda dryly, 'the kind of life you lead is not fitting for a child of that age.'

David, who had not been taking any part in this conversation, looked appalled at Amanda's candid manner of speaking. He was already looking a little green, and had stubbed out the cigar.

Susan, seeing this, said quickly, 'Is that meal ready yet, Amanda? I'm starving!'

The meal was delicious and David soon lost his pallor. After dinner was over they returned to the armchairs, and everyone but David had brandy in delicately cut glass goblets, warmed to perfection.

Amanda began asking Dominic about his travels abroad and for a long while they listened while he recounted anecdotes about the people he had seen and the places he had visited.

He was a fascinating raconteur and Susan sat listening to him as though hypnotized by the sound of his deep, relaxed tones. She avoided looking at him as much as possible, but occasionally her eyes strayed in his direction and she discreetly studied the strong line of his jaw and the thick richness of his hair. His linen was immaculate and accentuated his dark colouring, and the lashes which veiled his eyes were long and thick.

But it was not his looks which attracted Susan. She had seen many handsome men who caused her not the slightest reaction. It was something more; a kind of animalism, which made her aware of the primitive emotions that run just below the surface of modern man. From Amanda's remarks she had gathered that, married or otherwise, Dominic Halstad was no saint, and the knowledge merely gave him an added attraction, a kind of dangerous temptation.

Realizing where her thoughts were leading her, she quickly brought them back to normalities. Why could not she remember she was an engaged woman, and act accordingly? She felt she was behaving, or feeling, like a schoolgirl with a crush on the headmaster.

It was eleven o'clock when David said, 'I think we ought to be going, Susan. It's getting late.'

Amanda stretched. 'It's only eleven, David.' She shrugged. 'But if you must, you must.'

Dominic rose to his feet. 'Can I give you a lift anywhere?' he asked.

'Thank you, but I have my car outside,' replied David. 'And thank you, Amanda. I've enjoyed myself enormously.'

Amanda stood up also. 'I'm so glad. We must do it again, eh, Susan?'

Susan nodded, and allowed David to wrap her cape about her.

'Yes, we must,' she said. 'Mr. Halstad's conversation was quite fascinating.'

'Yes, Dom ought to write a book,' said Amanda, looking playfully at Dominic. 'How about that, Dom?'

'Well, I will if I can borrow your secretary to do my typing for me,' he replied, watching Susan and seeing the hot colour surge into her cheeks.

David, too, saw his fiancée's embarrassment, and hastily drew her to the door.

'We must go. Good night, Mr. Halstad. Good night, Amanda.'

Outside the air was freezing, and Susan shivered. 'Central heating certainly makes you more vulnerable to the elements,' she said. 'Hurry up and let's get home, David.'

David put her into the car and then went to start it, but to Susan's dismay it would not start.

'Oh, lord,' muttered David. 'What a thing to happen on a night like this! It must be the cold air. It seems to have knocked all the life out of the battery.'

Susan saw the funny side and giggled. 'Well, shall I push, or will you?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' snapped David, unable to see anything amusing in their predicament.

'All right, all right. I was only trying to cheer you up.' Susan hunched her shoulders, and waited while David cranked the engine furiously.

'Shall I try and catch it on the accelerator?' she ventured, a few moments later.

'No.'

David was fuming, and Susan sighed. This would have to happen. Just when David was seeming a little more human, this occurred, and now he was sure to find it Amanda's fault in some way.

'If we hadn't spent so long in there, the damn car wouldn't have frozen like this,' he muttered, and Susan sighed again. Here it came! The same old story of recriminations. Anything but the real reason the car had defaulted.

Suddenly, the swing doors of the apartment building opened again, and a tall figure emerged, dressed in a thick fur-collared overcoat. It was Dominic Halstad, and Susan groaned inwardly. This would really settle things. David hated seeming at a disadvantage.

Dominic merely nodded to them and walked across to a dark-green Mercedes saloon that was parked just ahead of them.

David straightened up and looked at Susan. 'Shall I ask him if he will give you a lift?' he asked abruptly.

'No, of course not. I'll wait and go with you. We'll get away soon.'

David looked relieved. 'I'm sorry I bellowed at you,' he said awkwardly. 'I'm a bad-tempered cuss.'

'Don't be silly,' said Susan, smiling. 'Just hurry up and let's get going.'

Dominic Halstad had now opened the boot of his car and was producing a coil of plastic-covered rope which he brought to David, saying casually:

'Would a tow be of any use?'

David lifted his head. 'Why ... yes, it would. It's just the battery, I think. It's a bit flat.'

'Okay. You fasten your end and I'll fasten mine. Give me a blast on your horn when you start up, right?'

'Right.'

David hastily tied the rope to his car, while Dominic connected the other end, and nodded briefly at Susan before sliding into the driving seat and starting up.

It only took a couple of hundred yards before David's engine fired and he tooted his horn to tell Dominic Halstad that he could continue under his own power.

The cars halted, the rope was put away and Dominic raised his hand in farewell, before re-entering his car and driving away.

'Good chap!' remarked David warmly. 'Not many men in his position would have been so helpful.'

'No,' agreed Susan. 'He didn't waste any time either.'

David nodded, and putting the car into gear they drove on to Susan's flat.

After arranging to spend the following day with David, Susan left him to enter the flat, which seemed very lonely tonight, knowing that Delia would not be returning.

She made herself a cup of cocoa, and carried it into the bedroom to drink while she undressed. But once in bed sleep was far from soon in coming. Her thoughts were too chaotic to allow her any peaceful rest, and restlessly she switched on the light again and reached for a half-finished novel she was reading.

As she read the words, however, they meant little to her. She found her mind drifting off at a tangent, and she found herself wondering again where Dominic Halstad's wife could be. He had not mentioned her and neither had Amanda.

Amanda had mentioned the life Dominic led as being unsuitable for a child and that could only mean one thing, surely! It was very puzzling.

Susan felt suddenly angry. It was not like her to indulge in idle speculation about anybody, least of all a man who could not possibly be of any importance in her life.

CHAPTER THREE

THE following week passed uneventfully until Friday. Delia had arrived back from Bristol full of excitement. Alan's parents had been dears, and had made her feel completely at home.

'I'm sure everything is going to turn out right for us,' she exclaimed on Monday morning while they were having their breakfast. 'Alan was marvellous to me and I really felt as though his parents liked me.'

'And why shouldn't they?' demanded Susan. 'You're a very likeable person.'

Delia sighed. 'Yes, but I mean, really liked me. You know ... as a daughter-in-law. I'm sure Alan is going to ask me to marry him. Oh, Susan, wouldn't it be divine?'

Susan herself felt rather envious. If only David's mother had been like that, warm and welcoming. But she was glad for Delia's sake as Delia always seemed afraid that people would not like her.

When she arrived at the apartment on Friday morning, Amanda was not seated at her desk as usual. She always did her correspondence first thing in the morning, and Susan was surprised.

'I've arrived,' she called, before walking over to a radiator and warming her cold fingers.

She had not done much typing this week, apart from Amanda's letters, as Amanda had not yet begun a new novel and there was nothing else for her to do. They had spent most of the week driving in Amanda's car, sometimes with Susan at the wheel and sometimes with Sarah's husband, Bill, driving them. Bill had a regular job but acted as chauffeur for Amanda when she required him.

Amanda appeared just then from her bedroom and said, 'Hello, dear. I'm glad you're early. We've got a lot to do. Now, how would you like a trip to Paris?'

'Paris?' echoed Susan blankly.

'Yes, darling. Both of us, of course.'

'But when?' Susan was puzzled.

'Well, darling, we'll fly out this afternoon, spend the weekend in Paris and return home on Monday.'

Susan was still uncomprehending, and Amanda smiled. 'You know I had dinner with Dominic and Jon last night, don't you?'

'Yes.' Amanda had had dinner at Dominic Halstad's apartment here in town. Apparently he had a penthouse which he used whenever he was in London. Although he had intended bringing Jon for lunch one day, he had not found the time, and consequently he had invited Amanda to have dinner with them instead. Susan had been rather disappointed as she had been looking forward to meeting Jon, and to seeing Dominic Halstad again, although she did not like to admit the latter was true.

'Well,' continued Amanda, 'Jon is flying out to his aunt's today, to spend a week or so with her. Fay, Dom's sister, is married to a French count. They have a château near Fontainebleau, and although Jon is quite capable of conducting himself there, Dom has to be very careful that he's properly chaperoned.'

'Why?'

'Well, occasionally there've been threats of kidnapping and so on, and a man as powerful as Dominic is bound to have enemies, don't you agree?'

'But he has no bodyguard.'

'No, I know. But that's not to say he shouldn't have. At any rate, Dom is rather a different kettle of fish. We're only concerned with Jon here. Well, what do you think?'

Susan sighed. 'I don't know what to think.'

'Why? Don't you find the prospect of a trip to France stimulating?'

'Of course, I do. It's just ... well ... it is the weekend, isn't it? And David is bound to expect me to spend my free time with him. I know he usually works on Saturdays, but there's all day Sunday —'

Amanda shrugged impatiently. 'It's only one day, Susan. Anyway, think it over for a few minutes while I go and help Sarah with my packing, and you can let me know your decision when I return.' She felt the coffee percolator on a nearby table and continued, 'The coffee is lovely and hot. Help yourself. I won't be long.'

Susan poured a cup of coffee, and sank weakly down on to a low chair. Here was her opportunity to get to know Dominic Halstad's son, at least. The prospect was exciting, and she felt her pulse leaping at the thoughts that invaded her head. It was all too tempting and Amanda was well aware of it.

Susan bit her lip hard. But what about David? Truthfully, he would only have one day to fill in, and anyway, last Sunday had been spent mainly in Medlar Grove and she could not face another day there in a hurry.

His mother had found fault with everything she had done, and as David spent most of the day working in the minute garden at the back of the old house, she had not seen much of him. Surely he would not mind if she went away, just this once, when he seemed to find plenty with which to fill time.

When Amanda returned, Susan said, 'I'd like to come. But what about reservations and things?'

Amanda smiled. 'They're already made. Dominic arranged it all last night.'

'You were sure I'd agree,' murmured Susan dryly.

'Well ... yes, darling. After all, if you don't see the world while you have the chance, once you're married to David you won't get a great deal of time. I can see that young man tying you down with an armful of children and then taking himself off to enjoy life. His type always do. He's very possessive, you know, and that way at least you aren't free to go wandering off if the fancy should take you.'

'Amanda, you're incorrigible!' exclaimed Susan helplessly, although she wondered if there was something in what Amanda said. David did tend to dwell often on the prospects of a family, and although Susan wanted children, too, she did not want to start a family straight away. 'Anyway,' she went on, 'why isn't his father travelling with him?'

'Oh, Dom isn't keen on acting as nursemaid.'

'To a fifteen-year-old? Good heavens, he doesn't need a nursemaid!'

'I know, but Dom has his work, too, you know.'

'Excuses, excuses,' said Susan, sighing. 'It seems to me your friend doesn't take his duties as a father seriously.'

Amanda shrugged. 'I wouldn't say that, Susan. Dominic and Jon are great friends. It's simply that Dom can't be bothered with the little things, the trivialities which some men enjoy. When you know him better you'll realize that for yourself.'

'I'm not likely to know him better,' remarked Susan, and sipped her coffee speculatively.

'Well, you'd better contact that young man and warn him that you won't be available until Monday evening,' said Amanda, changing the subject firmly.

'Dear me, I suppose I better had,' Susan grimaced. 'He doesn't like me to ring him at work.'

'Why, for heaven's sake? He's a partner in the firm, isn't he?'

'Yes, but he likes to keep his working life separate from his private life. He says I disturb his concentration when he's busy.'

Amanda raised her eyes heavenward and then turned away. 'Well, get it over with. There isn't a lot of time and you'll have to go home again and pack a suitcase. You'll need a change of clothes and an evening dress of some sort.'

'Why an evening dress? Are we going somewhere in particular?'

'We're flying out today, and spending tonight at Dom's apartment in Paris. Then, in the morning, we'll drive down to Fontainebleau with Jon. We're spending the night there and returning to Paris on Sunday. We might do a little sightseeing in Paris, stay Sunday night at the apartment again, and return home on Monday.'

'Oh! But I can't stay at this château. I mean, I don't know these people at all really, except through you. They won't be expecting me.'

'Yes, they will. Dom phoned Fay while I was there last evening. And he told her that you would probably be accompanying me, and then afterwards I spoke to Fay myself and she was most enthusiastic. You'll like Fay. She's only thirty-four. She was married when she was seventeen, and has three lovely children. Her husband, the Count, is a darling.'

Susan felt completely out of her depth. Going to Paris for a weekend was one thing; staying in a French château with a count and his family was quite another. She would not know what to talk about.

'Oh, really, Amanda, I think I'm going to back out of this,' she murmured self-consciously. 'I thought we were just taking this boy to Paris. I didn't imagine we were going to stay with Mr. Halstad's sister.'

'I know you didn't. But what does that matter? As I've said, you'll like Fay. She's not at all snobbish, if that's what you're afraid of. And the children are terrors. Quite ordinary and all that.'

'But a count ...' said Susan helplessly. 'I wouldn't know how to address him.'

'Knowing Raoul, I should imagine he'll suggest you call him by his Christian name,' returned Amanda smoothly. 'Now come along, get that phone call made, and then get along home for your things.'

Susan felt she was being swept along on a strong tide that would not allow her to get away, and, unable to resist the temptation, she lifted the telephone. She thought, dryly, that Amanda had probably known about this trip earlier in the week, but had not said anything because she knew that, given time to think about it, Susan would certainly have refused, or allowed David to change her mind for her.

To her relief, David did not sound irritable when he answered the telephone and she said, tentatively: 'Darling, do you mind terribly if I go away with Amanda this weekend?'

David's good humour vanished, and he sounded annoyed. 'Away? Where to?'

'Paris. Amanda has to – deliver something to Paris, and has decided to go herself and spend the weekend there. She wants me to go – in case – in case she has any time for working.'

'That sounds rather fishy,' remarked David coldly. 'Now why are you really going?'

Susan sighed. 'Oh, really, David, don't you believe me? It's true. Amanda is taking some – one – to Paris.'

'Not *something*!'

'No. Jon Halstad.' Susan sounded a little weary.

'I thought as much. And is Dominic Halstad going too?'

'Of course not. Just Amanda and me and this boy. Oh, darling, you know last weekend you didn't have much time for me. Couldn't you agree for once that I'll have a much more exciting time there than spending the whole of Sunday with your mother?'

David snorted. 'My mother! I thought she would be brought into this. Just why did you ring me, Susan? Your mind is already made up, isn't it? You've decided to go and you're only letting me know, not *asking* me.'

Susan clenched her fists. David was right, of course. She had decided to go and she was merely going through the formalities by asking him for permission. She was being selfish, too, she supposed, but it sounded such a wonderful experience and spring in Paris was supposed to be quite something.

Aware that David was speaking again, she brought her thoughts back to the present.

'... and when may I expect to see you again? Monday?'

'Of course. We'll be back Monday morning. I'll be able to tell you all about it on Monday night.'

'Very well. But don't make a habit of it.'

Feeling like a prisoner who has been let out of jail on a weekend pass, Susan couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice, as she said:

'Thank you, darling. I'll be good.'

David grunted something in reply and rang off, and Susan replaced her receiver meticulously.

'That's settled, then,' said Amanda, and Susan became aware of her at her elbow.

'Yes, it's settled. But I do feel guilty, Amanda. I can't help it.'

Amanda shrugged. 'That will wear off,' she said bluntly. 'Now, you take a taxi back to the flat and collect your things. It's ten now; be back soon after eleven and we'll have an early lunch before leaving for the airport. Bill will take us. By the way, Jon is lunching here. He'll probably be here when you get back.'

'All right.' Susan rose to her feet. 'My tummy feels as though a rotor has been installed.'

Amanda grinned. 'Good. Bit of excitement is good for the juices. Don't be long.'

Susan packed her suitcase swiftly, then she climbed back into a taxi and drove to the store where Delia worked. She managed to contact Delia in the canteen and explained the position.

'How heavenly!' gasped Delia. 'A weekend in France. It sounds marvellous! Just the thing to tone you up. You've looked pretty fed-up at times this week. I was beginning to get quite worried about you.'

'Were you now? Well, there's no need. I'm fine.'

'You are now. You look as different again. You've lost that bored expression. What did David say?'

'Oh, the usual things. He wasn't very pleased, and I can understand that. After all, I don't suppose I'd like him to go flying off for a weekend on the continent without me.'

Delia linked her hands. 'Is this Dominic Halstad going to be there?'

'Good heavens, no! That's the reason we're going. If he were going there would be no need for Amanda to take the boy, would there?'

'No. I guess not. Well, have a good time.'

'Thanks. Actually, I'm a mass of nerves. How do you address a count?'

'Don't be silly, you'll be all right. If I know Amanda Blake she'll give you a marvellous time. Look at last year when you went to Portugal. You had a terrific time!'

Susan nodded slowly, and then glanced at her watch. 'Gosh, I must go. It's after eleven. See you Monday.'

'Okay,' Delia smiled, and Susan dashed off to find another taxi, feeling recklessly extravagant.

When she entered Amanda's apartment she immediately saw Jon Halstad. She would have recognized him anywhere. He was very like Dominic, with the same dark complexion, and lean good looks. His hair was curly, and he was dressed in a dark-grey suit with close-fitting trousers, and a white shirt. He looked about eighteen, and if she had expected some pale, wan, neglected teenager, dressed in jeans and a sweater, she was much mistaken. Jon Halstad was a strong, self-possessed young man, and he gave Susan a thorough appraisal as she removed her coat and advanced into the room.

His eyes took in the slim-fitting green suit with the fur collar, and the nylon-clad legs. Although he was not as tall as his father, he was still a little taller than Susan and in her high heels their eyes were on a level.

'Jon?' she ventured slowly.

'Yes. You must be Susan.' He smiled. 'My father told me you would be going with us. Tell me, do you know my father well?'

Susan flushed. 'Not very, why? Didn't he explain that I'm Amanda's secretary?'

'Oh, yes, he told me that. But I wondered ...' His gaze slid away, and Susan felt mortified. Did he mean what she thought he was meaning? Surely not? Oh, God, she thought, what have I let myself in for?

She was relieved when Amanda came into the room, smiling cheerfully. 'Ah, there you are, Susan. Have you met Jon?'

'We've introduced ourselves,' said Susan, swallowing hard. 'Is there anything you want me to do?'

'No, I don't think so.' Amanda shook her head. 'Well, Jon, are you looking forward to going to your aunt's?'

Jon shook his head. 'Not particularly. Those kids are a bind.'

Amanda frowned. 'Jeremy is only a year younger than you,' she said. 'You ought to be good friends. And Yvonne is the same age as you, isn't she?'

'Oh, sure.' Jon shrugged. 'There's nothing to do there, though. Except go swimming in the lake.'

'And what thrills do you indulge in here in town?' asked Amanda dryly. 'You're not old enough to go night-clubbing yet, or has your father already initiated you into that art?'

Jon laughed, and Susan found herself laughing too. Amanda's expression was so comical.

'No, I don't go to night clubs. Just strip shows.'

Aware that he was teasing her now, Amanda chuckled. 'All right, Jon, I'm sorry. But please, try and enjoy yourself at Fontainebleau. Your aunt tries so hard to please you.'

'I know. Because I'm like Dad. She thinks the world of him, you know, and she hardly ever sees him.'

'Hmn. Dominic really does neglect his family, doesn't he?'

'All except one member,' replied Jon coldly.

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