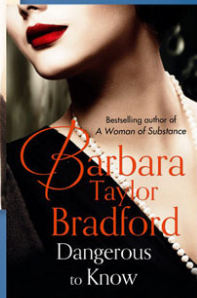
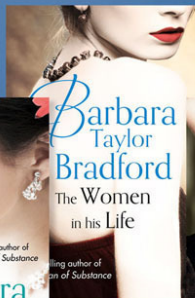
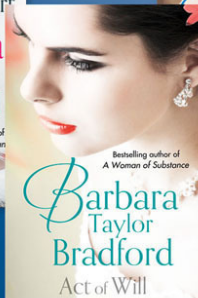
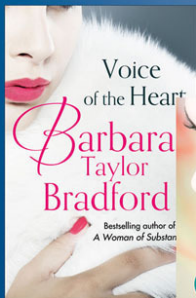


Barbara Taylor Bradford



Four-Book Collection

Barbara Taylor Bradford

Barbara Taylor Bradford's

4-Book Collection

Аннотация

Four novels from the master storyteller, Barbara Taylor Bradford, bestselling author of *A WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE*. *VOICE OF THE HEART* tells the story of two brilliant women and the men to whom they ransomed their hearts. With her stunning beauty, brilliant talent, and almost magical allure, irresistible Hollywood legend Katherine Tempest has the world at her feet. But Katherine irrevocably changes the lives of her closest friends: the two men who love her, and the woman who trusts her implicitly. She never looks back until she needs the one thing they alone can give her – forgiveness. *ACT OF WILL* tells the story of three generations of beautiful women and their journey from rags to riches. Moving from the bleak Yorkshire Dales, through London, to the glamorous world of haute couture, this classic novel sparkles as it entertains. *THE WOMEN IN HIS LIFE* is a glittering tale of a billionaire tycoon and the women that define him. Maximilian West appears to have everything. But in reality Maximilian is riven with internal conflict and torn apart by personal doubts. Many women have strived to reach his fortress heart, but only one woman holds the key that will unlock Maximilian's secret – and set his soul free... *DANGEROUS TO KNOW* is a compelling story of

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**Barbara Taylor Bradford's
4-Book Collection**

*Voice of the Heart Act of Will The
Women in His Life Dangerous to Know*
by
BARBARA TAYLOR BRADFORD



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BARBARA TAYLOR BRADFORD

Voice of the Heart



HarperCollins*Publishers*

Dedication

For my husband Robert Bradford with love

Epigraph

‘That voice of the heart, which, Lamartine says,
“alone reaches the heart”.’

MARCEL PROUST

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Overture 1978

‘How like the prodigal doth she return.’

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Chapter One

I came back because I wanted to, of my own free will. No one forced me to return. But now that I am here I want to take flight, to hide again in obscurity, to put this vast ocean between myself and this place. It bodes me no good.

As these thoughts finally took shape, assumed troubling proportions and jostled for prominence in her mind, the woman's fine hands, lying inertly in her lap, came together in a clench so forceful that the knuckles protruded sharply through the transparent skin. But there was no other outward display of emotion. She sat as rigid as stone on the seat. Her face, pale and somewhat drawn in the murky morning light, was impassive as a mask and her gaze was fixed with unwavering intensity on the Pacific.

The sea was implacable and the colour of chalcedony on this bleak and sunless day, one that was unnaturally chilly for Southern California, even though it was December when the weather was so often inclement. The woman shivered. The dampness was beginning to seep through her trench-coat into her bones. She felt icy, and yet there was a light film of moisture on her forehead and neck and between her breasts. On an impulse she rose from the seat, her movements abrupt, and with her head bent against the wind and her hands pushed deep into her pockets she walked the length of the Santa Monica pier, which was now

so entirely deserted it looked desolate, even forbidding, in its emptiness.

When she arrived at the farthestmost tip where the turbulent waves lashed at the exposed underpinnings, she paused and leaned against the railing. Once again her eyes were riveted on the ocean curling out towards the dim horizon. There, on that far indistinct rim, where sea and sky merged in a smudge of limitless grey, a great liner bobbed along like a child's toy, had been turned into an object of insignificance by the vastness of nature.

We are all like that ship, the woman said inwardly, so fragile, so inconsequential in the overall scheme of things. Although do any of us truly believe that, blinded as we are by our self-importance? In our arrogance we all think we are unique, invincible, immune to mortality and above the law of nature. But we are not, and that *is* the only law, inexorable and unchanging.

She blinked, as if to rid herself of these thoughts. The winter sky, curdled and ominous, was littered with ragged ashy clouds which were slowly turning black and extinguishing the meagre light trickling along their outer edges. A storm was imminent. She ought to return to the waiting limousine and make her way back to the Bel-Air Hotel, before the rain started. But to her amazement she discovered she was unable to move. She did not want to move, for it seemed to her that only out here on this lonely pier was she able to think with a degree of clarity, to pull together her scattered and disturbing thoughts, to make sense out of the chaos in her mind.

The woman sighed with weariness and frustration. She had known, even when she had first made her decision, that to return was foolhardy, maybe even dangerous. She was exposing herself in a manner she had never done before. But at the time – was it only a few weeks ago? – it had seemed to be the only solution, in spite of the obvious hazards it entailed. And so she had made her plans, executed them efficiently and embarked for America with confidence.

I took a voyage towards the unknown. Was it the unknown which was the source of her distress? But the unknown had always tempted and beckoned her, had been the spur because of its inherent excitement and the challenge it invariably offered. But that was in the past, she told herself, and thought: I am a different person now.

Panic rose in her like a swift tide, dragging her into its undertow, and she gripped the railing tighter and drew in her breath harshly as another truth struck at her. *If she stayed she would be risking so much. She would be endangering all that she had gained in the past few years.* Far better, perhaps, to go, and if she was going it must be immediately. Today. Before she changed her mind again. In reality it was so easy. All she had to do was make a plane reservation to anywhere in the world that took her fancy, and then go there. Her eyes sought out the liner, so far away now it was a mere speck. Where was it bound for? Yokohama, Sydney, Hong Kong, Casablanca? Where would *she* go? It did not matter and no one would care; and if she left today, whilst

it was still safe, no one would be any the wiser, no harm would have been done, least of all to her.

The idea of disappearing into oblivion, as if she had never set foot in the country, suddenly appealed to some deep-rooted instinct in her, to her innate sense of drama, and yet ... Is it not juvenile to run away? she asked herself. For most assuredly that was exactly what she would be doing. *You* will know you lost your nerve and *you* will live to regret it, a small voice at the back of her mind insisted.

She closed her eyes. Her thoughts raced, as she considered all the possibilities open to her and weighed the consequences of her actions, whatever they would ultimately be. Thunder rattled behind the blackening clouds, which rolled with gathering speed before the force of the gale blowing up. But she was so immersed in her inner conflict, so rapt in her concentration as she strived to reach a final decision, she was oblivious to the hour, the weather, her surroundings. Eventually she came to grips with herself and recognized one fundamental: she could no longer afford to procrastinate. Time was of the essence. Suddenly she made up her mind. She would stay, despite her misgivings and her sense of apprehension. She must, no matter what the cost to herself.

Large drops of rain began to fall, splashing onto her face and her hands. She opened her eyes and glanced down at her fingers still gripping the railing, watching the water trickling over them. Like my tears, she said to herself, and then, quite involuntarily,

she laughed out loud, and it was a rich amused laugh. There would be no more tears. She had done all the mourning she was going to do. You're such a fool, Cait, she murmured softly to herself, remembering Nick's old nickname for her, borrowed from the Welsh Caitlin because he had said she had a Celtic soul, all poetry and mystery and fire.

She pulled herself up straight and threw back her head with a proud and defiant gesture, and her extraordinary eyes, not blue, not green, but a curious unique turquoise, were no longer opaque and clouded with uncertainty and fear. They sparkled brightly with new determination. Soon, in a few days, when her courage had been completely reinforced, and she had gathered it around her like a protective mantle, she would go to Ravenswood.

That would be her first step into the unknown. The beginning of her new life. And perhaps, finally, the beginning of peace.

In the Wings 1979

‘Look for a long time at what pleases you, and longer still at what pains you ...’

COLETTE

Chapter Two

Francesca Avery had long ago ceased to regret her actions, having years before reached the conclusion that since regrets could not undo what had been done, they were generally unproductive.

But as she inserted the key into the front door of her apartment and stepped into the silent and shadowy hall, she experienced such an overwhelming sense of regret at having returned to New York without her husband that she was momentarily startled. The heavy door slammed shut behind her, but she hesitated before moving forward into the apartment, thrown off-balance by this unfamiliar feeling, and one so unprecedented in her that she found it disconcerting. Harrison had not wanted her to leave Virginia ahead of him, and she had done so only out of a sense of duty to the charity committee of which she had recently become chairwoman. Ten days earlier, the secretary of the committee had telephoned her in Virginia, to say that an urgent provisional meeting had been called, because of unforeseen difficulties with their plans for the summer concert to be held at Avery Fischer Hall. Only *she* had the power and connections to get the benefit back on the track, the secretary had gone on to point out, adding that no one else could rally the support that was necessary. In short, her presence was imperative.

Francesca knew Harrison thought otherwise, although he

had not actually come out and said so. Years in the Foreign Service had refined his innate ability to get his point across by subtle implication, in his usual diplomat's manner. He had gently intimated that he thought the committee members were panicking unnecessarily, and had made a quiet reference to the fact that the telephone service was as efficient in Virginia as it was in Manhattan. Francesca tended to agree that anxiety was prompting the committee to act prematurely, and she was about to decline, but then the matter of the interview had come up and she felt obliged to comply with both of their requests.

Francesca sighed. Duty had been inculcated in her since childhood and to shirk it would be unthinkable, even shoddy, and quite alien to her nature. Nevertheless, she wished she was back at the rambling old house with Harry and his boisterous and unruly grand-daughters, surrounded by the spontaneous love and camaraderie of that special, if somewhat unpredictable and unorthodox, clan. Resolutely she quenched the rising impulse to turn around and go back to La Guardia Airport to catch the next shuttle for Washington.

Francesca groped for the light switch and snapped it down impatiently. She blinked in the sudden brightness. The immense antique French chandelier, with its cascading slivers of crystal prisms and blades and elongated teardrops, flooded the black-and-white marble hall with a blinding blaze. It threw into bold relief the Gobelin tapestry soaring high on the staircase wall, the Rodin busts and Sèvres palace vases in their respective

niches and the Louis XV commode, once owned by Madame de Pompadour, upon which reposed a Ming Dynasty vase containing a lovely arrangement of yellow roses, their sweet scent bringing the nostalgic fragrance of a summer garden to the wintry stillness.

Once again her eyes swept over the splendid hall with its priceless objects of art, a setting which never failed to impress with its perfection and timeless beauty, and then, quite involuntarily, she shivered despite the warmth of the hall. Somebody walked over my grave, she thought. How silly she was being, yet there was no denying the fact that she felt curiously alone and lost without Harrison. She was baffled by her reaction. She often came to New York on her own. There was nothing unusual about that, but today she felt decidedly odd, vulnerable, and exposed in the most peculiar way. Oh, it's just the aftermath of Christmas and I'm tired, she decided.

She walked in determined, measured steps across the hall to the library, the high heels of her boots resounding with a sharp metallic ring against the cold marble, the echo disturbing the silence. She stopped in her tracks abruptly. Perhaps that was it – the quietness after the bustling activity of the house in Virginia, with the continual comings and goings of the servants, Harry's grandchildren and guests. The apartment seemed so still, so deserted and devoid of life. Of course, that was undoubtedly the explanation. She was simply missing the girls, their whoops of joy and excitement, their running feet and constant laughter.

She would call Harrison later and suggest they all come to the city for a few days. This thought gladdened her heart, and her face brightened as she pushed open the door and went into the library. Although this room was, in many respects, just as imposing as the entrance hall, it was much less intimidating. It appeared welcoming and intimate with its ash-panelled walls, English antiques and comfortable sofas and chairs covered in a cheerful floral chintz. A fire burned brightly in the grate and several lamps had been turned on; and the combination of this warming light cast a lovely glow throughout, one that was both cheerful and reassuring.

Francesca sat down at the English Regency desk and read the note from her housekeeper, Val, who had apparently gone shopping and would return within the hour. She glanced at a number of telephone messages received that morning and then turned her attention to the mail, quickly flipping through it, discarding unopened several invitations, her bank statement and bills. The last envelope had a Harrogate postmark and she recognized her brother's handwriting. Picking up the gold and malachite opener, she slit the envelope and leaned back in the chair, reading Kim's letter eagerly. It was mainly about his children and their Christmas activities, along with bits of news of their mutual friends. There were a few complaints about the burdens of running the estate, but she knew these to be justified. By nature Kim was not a whiner and, God knows, managing the ancestral Langley lands and making them pay was no mean

feat these days. He ended the letter with a reminder that he was expecting to see her now that all the seasonal festivities were out of the way. There was a postscript. *Happy New Year, darling. And let's hope 1979 is going to be better for both of us.*

A strand of her blonde hair fell across her face and Francesca pushed it aside quickly, looping it over one ear in her habitual way. Thoughtfully, she perused the letter again, endeavouring to read between the lines, to truly assess Kim's mood and disposition. She detected a certain wistfulness there – no, it was sadness really – and it bespoke his unhappiness, despite the cheerful tone he had adopted in an obviously conscious effort to reassure her. Francesca put down the letter, which troubled her, and stared into space, frowning deeply. Her hazel eyes, soft and transparent, were suddenly reflective, and they betrayed her concern.

Kim was two years older than she, yet she always thought of him as her baby brother, for she had looked after him and shielded him all through their childhood and youth, after their mother's death when they were small. These days she was more protective of him than ever, anxious about his well-being and state of mind. He had simply not been the same since Pandora had left him, and Francesca understood the reasons why. She, too, had been completely astounded by Pandora's extraordinary behaviour, for it had been the perfect marriage, and outwardly the happiest union she had ever encountered. Kim's stunned shock, his heartbreak and profound hurt had been hers, for she

had felt them just as acutely.

Will he never recover from that blow? Francesca asked herself, and she did not like the resounding 'no' that reverberated in her head. A proud young woman, and infinitely more pragmatic than her brother, Francesca had long since come to believe that broken hearts were the stuff of romantic dreams and bore no relationship to the true reality of everyday life. You picked up the pieces, glued them together, and went on living as best you could, until the pain receded. That was exactly what she had done years before, and she was fully convinced that no one was irreplaceable. Despite these beliefs, and because she was blessed with considerable intelligence and insight, she realized Kim was different, knew intuitively that he would mourn Pandora, not replace her, as most other men would have done.

She shook her head sadly. He was so isolated in Yorkshire, and lonely with his two elder children away at boarding school. She wished he would spend more time in London with his friends, but then had to admit this was not always feasible. His responsibilities kept him tied to Langley for most of the year. On the other hand, if she were in England she might conceivably be able to exercise some influence over him, persuade him to lead a more active social life than was his custom.

Francesca decided she must go home to England at the end of the month. Harrison would not object, she was certain of that, and perhaps he would accompany her if he was not overburdened with work in Washington. Since his retirement from the Foreign

Service a year ago, her husband seemed to be busier than he ever was as an ambassador. He was the country's foremost elder statesman, and consequently he was constantly being sought out by senators and political bigwigs and members of the cabinet; and then again, his role as an adviser to the President on Foreign Affairs was time-consuming and exceedingly tiring. Although he had fully recovered from his two heart attacks and was enjoying good health, Francesca watched over him like a hawk, for ever stricturing him to slow down and take things at a gentler pace. Harrison always readily concurred, and then did exactly as he pleased, caught up in the complex machinations of politics and thoroughly enjoying every exciting minute of it. A trip to England would be a tonic for Harry, as well as an enforced rest, and she resolved to take him with her, was determined to brook no argument from him.

Francesca took out her engagement book and opened it. The meeting of the charity committee had been arranged for one o'clock, and then at four she had the interview with Estelle Morgan of *Now Magazine*. She grimaced as she contemplated this. There were so many other more important obligations to be dealt with, but Estelle had pressed hard for it, and Francesca remembered from past experience the woman's unflagging persistence. It had been far easier on the nerves, and more expedient, to agree immediately.

Also Francesca had wisely acknowledged, when she took on the charity, that she would have to submit to a certain number

of interviews. She did not delude herself into thinking the charity needed her solely for her practical turn of mind and her organizing ability. They also wanted her because they felt she had a certain cachet and glamour – how she hated that word – and was, in their minds, the ideal candidate for their publicity purposes. She was dedicated to the charity and took her responsibilities seriously, and refusing to see Estelle would have appeared churlish and even mean-spirited to the committee. Well, it was in a good cause and she *had* made the date. The simplest thing would be to deal with Estelle quickly, and with the best possible grace. Her thoughts shifted to her engagements for the remainder of the week. She glanced at her book to refresh her memory. Francesca walked across the room to the window, thinking again of her brother. She parted the curtains and looked out across Fifth Avenue to Central Park, an absent-minded expression on her delicately-etched face.

It was a very cold, very January day. Portions of the window had iced up and the frost made funny little patterns composed of diamonds and stars and circles on the surface, so that the glass was opaque in parts, and her view of the park was faintly blurred. The patterns and the opaqueness produced a strange optical illusion, one of dreamlike diffusion. It had apparently snowed hard for the past few days, and huge banks drifted over seats and railings and rambling paths, obscuring the familiar landscape with an unbroken sweep of glistening white, like an ocean of rising waves, their crests frozen into rigid immobility;

and the skeletal black trees were festooned with crystalline flakes that transformed the branches into fragile feathered plumes.

Behind them, the skyscrapers on the West Side merged to form an indistinguishable grey mass of granite that rose up like a rugged mountain range into a vaulted sky. Images ran together in her head ... the snow-scape of the city became the soaring pristine mountains above Königssee ... changed into the high-flung Yorkshire fells which overshadowed her childhood home ... those were the familiar places that took shape as she stared through the frosty tracery of the glass. She squinted through half-closed lids, and saw in her mind's eye the famous oil by Monet, which he had painted on a trip to Norway around 1895. It was called 'Mount Kolsaas', and she knew it well, for Harrison had always wanted it. But it was owned by another collector and unlikely ever to be his. This fact did not stop him hankering after it. That which is beyond our reach is always the more desirable because of its very unattainability, she thought. Just as Pandora is out of Kim's yearning reach.

Francesca touched the icy window with a polished pink fingernail and abstractedly scratched at it, her thoughts returning to her brother. She had not been able to suggest a cure, at the very least an antidote for what ailed him.

Perhaps one doesn't exist for Kim, she reflected forlornly, unless, quite simply, it *is* time. The passing of time had worked miracles for her, but she was uncertain of the effect it would have on him. It struck her then that her going to England was hardly a

solution to Kim's problems. Might it not be infinitely better if he came to New York? The more she thought about this, the more Francesca was convinced it was the most effective and practical solution. She would remove him from his normal environment and propel him into a round of social activities on this side of the Atlantic. Francesca was nothing if not decisive and she hurried to the desk, picked up the telephone and dialled her home in Virginia.

'Hello, Harrison. It's me,' she said when her husband answered.

'Ah, darling, so there you are. I was just going to call you. Why didn't you awaken me before you left? You know I like to say goodbye. Creeping off like that was grossly unfair of you. Ruined my day, I don't mind telling you.'

As he was speaking Francesca was, as always, conscious of the rich timbre of his voice, and touched by the warmth and love it exuded. He was such a dear man. How lucky she was. She smiled into the telephone. 'You were sleeping so soundly, my darling, I didn't have the heart to disturb you.'

'Did you have a nice trip? How are things at the apartment?' he asked.

'Smooth trip, and everything is fine here.'

'I forgot to tell you last night, I'd like you to stop by at the gallery and chivy Leclerc about the Utrillo, if you don't mind. I'd really appreciate it, and I think a personal visit would be more effective than a 'phone call. Any time this week will do, whenever

you can fit it in.'

'Of course, darling. Actually, Harry, I called you for a couple of reasons, apart from wanting to say hello. I wondered if you'd like to come up for a couple of days? Perhaps on Wednesday. You could bring the girls. They would enjoy it, and so would I, and we can all fly back to Virginia together, on Friday.'

'I'd love to, Francesca, but I can't. I have some special meetings in Washington, which I must attend, and a Democratic dinner. So sorry. Next week maybe. If you're going to New York again,' he said, regret echoing in his voice.

'Fine,' she said, suppressing her own disappointment. 'There's another matter I must discuss with you, Harry dear. I've received a rather disturbing letter from Kim.' She went on to tell him about its contents and her dismay about Kim's depressed mood.

'So I thought it might be a good idea to invite him here to New York, Harry. And then I thought we might all go to the estate in Barbados for a week or so. That would be more beneficial to you than going to England. After all, you'd only get embroiled with your political cronies in the British government, and it wouldn't be a rest at all.'

Harrison Avery chuckled. How well she knew him. 'You're correct there, my sweet girl. And Barbados does appeal to me. Can't say I fancy London in winter. Too damned cold and damp for these old bones. And I agree with you wholeheartedly about Kim. I think you should invite him here immediately, Francesca. I've been a little concerned about him myself. Why don't you

give him a call right now?’ he proposed.

‘It’s so easy to refuse on the telephone, Harry, and he might just do that, without giving it any real thought. I’d prefer to write to him and then telephone him next week when he’s had the letter. To persuade him, if necessary.’

‘You know best, of course, darling. But I hope he comes over at once, if he can get away from Langley. You know I’ve always had a soft spot for that brother of yours, and I think he needs us both right now.’

‘Yes, he does. Thank you for being so understanding and supportive, Harry dear. I’d better go. I must write the letter, and I’ve got rather a busy day. I’ll speak to you later in the week.’

‘Fine, darling. Goodbye.’

Since the plans for Kim’s trip were uppermost in her mind at this moment, that sense of regret Francesca had experienced on entering the apartment earlier was entirely forgotten. Yet only a few weeks later she was to remember it, and with a sudden surge of clarity, wondering if it had been some kind of premonition of impending disaster, and not regret at all. Ridiculous as it was, she even entertained the notion that events would have progressed differently, the consequences been averted, if she had followed her original impulse and returned to Virginia. But hindsight was meaningless. By then it was already too late. Her life and the lives of others had been changed irrevocably, and so profoundly they would never be the same again.

Now, this morning, preoccupied as she was with her brother’s

well-being, her speculation about the future revolved solely around him. She picked up her pen and began the letter. When it was finished she sealed it quickly, addressed the envelope and found an airmail stamp in the desk drawer. There, it was done! She leaned back in the chair and regarded the letter propped up against a malachite bookend. It was articulate and persuasive and so lovingly couched, Kim would be unable to reject her invitation, of that she was absolutely convinced. She thought then of the postscript at the end of *his* letter, and she made a solemn vow to herself: 1979 was going to be a better year for him, no matter what was entailed or what she had to do to ensure this outcome.

Francesca pushed back the chair, filled with a sense of purpose and renewed energy. She smiled happily to herself as she hurried upstairs to change her clothes and refresh her make-up, in readiness for the day's appointments. Kim would come to New York and she would help him to recover from his hurt and pain and melancholy. She would help to make him whole again. Everything was going to be all right.

Chapter Three

Estelle Morgan was too early for her appointment with Francesca Avery, and as the taxi sped up Madison Avenue she decided to alight a few blocks away from the apartment, and walk the rest of the way. She paid off the cab at Seventy-Fourth Street and Madison and stepped out into the crisp afternoon air. It had stopped snowing at lunch time, and a watery sun was trying to penetrate the bloated etiolated clouds with scant success.

As she turned onto Fifth Avenue and approached the palatial and imposing building where the Averys lived, a self-congratulatory smile slipped onto her face, giving her a smug look. How right she had been to wear her mink coat. The doormen of these apartment buildings where the very rich lived were invariably snootier than their privileged inhabitants, and she wasn't going to have even one of them look *her* over with disdain and treat her dismissively.

Estelle had hesitated about the coat at first, because it was snowing hard at eight o'clock and she did not want to get it wet. But it looked far better than her raincoat, and so she decided to take a cab to the office. It had been a worthwhile investment. The coat made her feel chic and bolstered her self-confidence. It was her pride and joy really. To complete the outfit Estelle had chosen a red dress, black patent knee-high boots and a large black patent shoulder bag, a copy of a famous Italian design.

Earlier that morning as she had surveyed herself in the mirror, she had nodded at her reflection with complete gratification. She thought she was the epitome of a glamorous, successful international journalist. Sadly, Estelle Morgan did not think very deeply about anything, and so it never occurred to her that an outfit could not transform her into all the things she believed herself to be.

She glanced at her watch as she waited for the traffic lights to change at Seventy-Ninth Street. It was a few seconds to four, but she was almost there and would arrive exactly on time. Punctuality was not one of her strong suits, but she recalled that Francesca Avery, the cold bitch, was a stickler about time and, not wanting to start off on the wrong foot, she had made a concerted effort not to be late. After giving her name and being announced, she was permitted to enter the grandiose building at Eighty-First Street.

She was greeted at the Avery apartment by a middle-aged woman in black, undoubtedly the housekeeper, who asked for her coat, laid it carefully over a chair, and then ushered her across the hall. Estelle had been to many elegant homes during the course of her career, but she had never seen anything quite as impressive as the Avery entrance hall, particularly in New York City. Jesus, it looks as if it's been transported lock, stock and barrel from Versailles, she thought as she followed the housekeeper in silence, her eyes popping.

After she had shown Estelle into the library, the housekeeper

gave her a small cool smile and said, 'I'll tell her Ladyship you're here.' Estelle murmured her thanks as the housekeeper departed.

She crossed the room to the fire, her boots sinking into the deep silken pile of the antique Chinese carpet. Her eyes flicked around yet again, curiosity glittering in them. They took in the antiques, and moved on to regard the paintings gracing the panelled walls. She was not particularly well informed about art, but Estelle had acquired a smattering of borrowed knowledge about innumerable subjects. And so she was able to recognize at once that these were not merely good copies, nor hardly likely to be in *this* apartment. They were originals and quite famous enough to identify, masterpieces from the Post-Impressionist period. That's undoubtedly a Van Gogh on the far wall, she decided, hurrying over to examine it, delighted with her accurate guesswork when she saw the signature. She scrutinized the others with lightning speed. A Seurat. A Cézanne. A Gauguin.

A moment later the door swung open and Francesca Avery was standing there, her eyes sparkling with vitality, a smile on her tranquil face. 'Estelle!' she exclaimed, moving forward with grace and elegance, swaying slightly on the precariously high heels that drew attention to her fine ankles and long slender legs.

As she approached the fireplace, Estelle noted that the English-rose complexion was still quite flawless and the burnished amber-blond hair as silky and luxuriant as it had ever been. Why, she hasn't changed at all, Estelle commented to herself in astonishment, and with a stab of annoyance.

‘Do forgive me for keeping you waiting,’ Francesca apologized. ‘But here I am. And it’s so nice to see you again.’ She stretched out her hand.

The journalist arranged a pleasant smile on her face and grabbed Francesca’s long cool fingers clumsily. ‘I’ve only been here a few minutes, my dear. I didn’t mind waiting at all. And especially in this lovely room. What marvellous taste you have.’

Francesca extracted her hand, wincing inside. Estelle had always been something of a sycophant and time had apparently not tempered her obsequiousness. Although this was nauseating, she supposed it was harmless enough. Francesca moved away from the fireplace and murmured, ‘How kind of you to say so. Now I think we might be more comfortable over there.’ She indicated the sofa and chairs grouped against the back wall underneath the Gauguin painting of a Tahitian girl. Estelle followed her hostess’s suggestion and bounced over to the seating arrangement. She took her time settling comfortably and then she looked at Francesca, smiled with a fraudulent sweetness and said, ‘And I must say, my dear, it’s lovely to see you too, after such a long time. It seems like centuries.’

‘Not quite that,’ Francesca responded with a dry laugh. ‘About five years. I think the last time we ran into each other was in Monte Carlo, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, at Grace’s benefit. She’s such a lovely person, and Rainier is quite the charmer. I’m so fond of them both,’ she gushed.

Francesca was astounded at this blatant boasting of friendship with the Grimaldis, knowing it to be utterly false. Estelle was no more on intimate terms with the Prince and Princess of Monaco than *she* was with the Queen of England. Reluctant to embark on a conversation that could only prove embarrassing to Estelle, she refrained from passing comment, and asked in a brisk tone, 'Can I offer you something? Tea, coffee or a drink perhaps?'

Disappointment flooded through Estelle, was quickly replaced by aggravation. But she caught herself in time. 'Tea would be very nice, thank you.' And then in an effort to conceal her annoyance at being deprived of an opportunity to show off, she went on, 'With lemon please, and a sweetener if you have it. Must keep my figure, you know.'

'Of course,' said Francesca. 'I'll go and ask Val to make it, and then we can catch up, and get on with the interview. Please excuse me.' She hurried to the door, wondering with dismay how she would cope with Estelle for the next hour.

Estelle's narrowed gaze followed Francesca as she glided out. Why is it she always seems to float not walk? she wondered sourly. And how has she kept her looks? She's got to be at least forty-two, yet she looks ten years younger.

Francesca returned almost immediately, interrupting Estelle's thoughts. 'Val already had the kettle boiling,' she explained, placing the Georgian silver tray, with its matching tea service, on the coffee table. She sat down on the chair opposite, poured the tea and went on: 'The last time I saw you I believe you were

working for one of the newspapers. How long have you been writing for *Now Magazine*?

‘Oh, about three years and I’m the Features Editor actually.’

‘Why that’s marvellous, Estelle. It must be a very important job, although I should imagine it’s rather hectic as well.’

‘It is. But it’s exciting. I lead a very interesting life, you know, jetting all over the world, staying in the best hotels, or with the best people, doing my in-depth interviews with famous personalities.’ Puffing up with self-importance, she continued, ‘I also have quite a large staff working for me. But I make sure I get the best interviews for myself, especially those abroad.’

Francesca thought: Well, at least she’s honest, and said, ‘How very smart of you.’

‘Just one of the many tricks of the trade,’ Estelle said and reached for her handbag. She took out a small tape recorder and placed it on the butler’s tray table between them. ‘You don’t mind if I use this, do you?’

‘No, whatever you prefer. I’d like to tell you something about the charity. I assume you’re going to mention it, since you went through my committee to arrange our meeting, and they’re expecting it, you know. Now —’

‘We’ll get to that later,’ Estelle interjected so brusquely Francesca was taken aback. The journalist hurried on without pause, ‘First I want you to talk about *you*, your life style, your personal life, your career, that kind of thing. After all, you’re the subject of my interview, not the charity. My readers are

interested in personalities, and how they live, not organizations or institutions.' She threw Francesca a look that seemed somehow challenging.

'Oh. I see,' Francesca replied softly, wondering what she had so foolishly let herself in for, albeit with the best of intentions. She also found the sharp rebuff rather discourteous and then dismissed it as insensitivity, or perhaps simply enthusiasm for the job. Estelle had always been a graceless person and never intentionally meant to give offence.

Francesca leaned forward and reached for a cigarette in the onyx and gold box on the table. She lit it and sat back in the chair, waiting patiently as Estelle fiddled with the machine, experiencing acute embarrassment for her. Estelle had obviously dressed in a manner she thought appropriate for the occasion, and even smart, but the red wool frock, although expensive, was a most unbecoming choice. The colour was disastrous with her florid complexion and flaming red hair. Francesca was aware this was the natural colour, but Estelle seemed to be resorting to the bottle these days. It was several shades too bright, and harsh.

Drawing on her cigarette, Francesca glanced away quickly, chastising herself for her lack of generosity, and suddenly, being compassionate, she was touched by pity for Estelle. They had first met years ago in London when they were in their twenties, but the intervening years had not been kind to the woman sitting opposite her. Francesca was unexpectedly saddened. Poor Estelle. Her life was probably not half as glamorous as she

pretended. It might even be a terrible struggle in so many different ways. Yet Estelle was a clever writer, and had been full of talent and promise in those early years. What had happened to her dreams of becoming a novelist? Quite clearly they had gone by the wayside. And then she thought: But who am I to criticize Estelle? Everyone did what they could in life, and hoped for the best. She had a particular distaste for those who constantly wanted to play God and passed judgment on their peers. She had always chosen not to indulge in that gratuitous pastime.

‘There, I’m all set,’ Estelle exclaimed and settled back comfortably.

And so the interview began. Where did she get her clothes? Did she prefer French or American designers? What kind of entertaining did she like best? Did she give large or small dinner parties? Or cocktail parties? How did she cope with homes in New York, Virginia and Barbados? How many servants did she have? Did she decorate her own homes? Did she have any hobbies? What was it like being the wife of an ambassador? Did Harrison enjoy his new role as a presidential adviser? What was his state of health? Did she go to the White House frequently? Who were the people she entertained? Did she enjoy a good relationship with Harrison’s grandchildren? Did she prefer living in America to England, or other countries? And why? Did Harrison have any hobbies? How did they relax? What were their leisure activities?

It seemed to Francesca that the questions were interminable.

She answered honestly and with cordiality, pausing from time to time to freshen their tea or light a cigarette. But as Estelle probed and probed she grew steadily weary and a trifle impatient with this cross-examination of her life, began to see it as an intrusion into her privacy, and certainly not exactly what she had bargained for when she had agreed to the meeting. Furthermore, to Francesca's growing unease, Estelle had not mentioned the charity once. She was just about to tactfully introduce this subject when the questions changed in character.

'Do you think Teddy Kennedy will run for the Presidency in 1980?'

Surprise flickered in Francesca's eyes. 'I never discuss politics. I leave that to Harrison.'

'But you must have an opinion, and I'm interviewing you, not your husband. Come on, Francesca, you're a bright, liberated woman. What do you think? Will he try to run?'

'You really must respect my wishes, Estelle. I don't want to discuss politics on any level.'

'Well then, on to other subjects. Let's touch on your career. You haven't written a book lately. Is that because the one about Edward IV and the Wars of the Roses didn't do very well? I really *felt* for you when I read the reviews. Personally, *I* didn't think it was dull, long-winded or verbose.'

Francesca stifled a gasp. Estelle's expression was smoothly bland, revealing nothing. Maybe she doesn't know she is being inflammatory, Francesca thought, and then laughed inwardly at

her own *naïveté*. This was the new style of journalism. Being provocative to elicit angry or unthinking responses inevitably made for a better story. She was not going to fall into that trap. Conscious that journalists always had the last word when they sat down at their typewriters, she refused to take offence or to be chivied into losing her composure.

‘The reviews weren’t all bad. In fact, I had some excellent ones,’ she said. ‘And contrary to your impression, Estelle, the book did sell, both in hardcover and paperback. Of course, you’re right in one sense, in that it wasn’t a runaway bestseller like my books on Chinese Gordon or Richard III.’ She shrugged nonchalantly. ‘You win a few and lose a few, I suppose. Anyway, to answer your question, the real reason I haven’t written another book in the past few years is simply because I haven’t found the right historical figure to focus on, but I expect I will come up with something eventually.’

‘I love your historical biographies, and I happen to think you’re equal to Antonia Fraser any time, even though she is a much bigger name. You know, in my opinion, you really are rather a good writer, my dear.’

Although this was uttered with pleasantness there was a patronizing undertone to the words, which Francesca could not fail to miss. And she thought, with sudden acuity: Hostility is implicit in this woman. *She* may not be conscious of it, but *I* know she does not like me at all. Her guard went up.

Estelle, who was so self-involved she was fundamentally

oblivious to other people's feelings, went on unperturbedly, 'Oh dear, I see the tape's run out. I'll have to change it.' Obviously the session was far from over in Estelle's mind. It was almost six and it had grown dark outside, and the concert had not yet been broached. Francesca's good manners were bred in the bone, and to be impolite or inhospitable to a guest in her home would go against the grain. Nevertheless, she felt disinclined to extend herself any further. She tightened her lips in aggravation and admitted she would have to endure Estelle's presence until she had talked about the charity, otherwise the whole afternoon would have been a disgraceful waste of time.

Against her better judgment, Francesca now felt obliged to ask: 'Would you care for a drink, Estelle? I thought I might have a glass of white wine, but there's plenty to choose from, if you'd prefer something else.' She waved her hand in the direction of the console table in the far corner. This held a large array of bottles, decanters and crystal glasses.

'Oooh! What a lovely idea, my dear. I'll have white wine too, please.'

Francesca nodded, retrieved the tea tray and escaped to the kitchen. Within minutes she was back, carrying a silver bucket containing a bottle of white wine. She took this over to the console, poured two glasses and rejoined Estelle. She felt as though she was on the verge of screaming.

'*Santé*,' Estelle said. 'I do appreciate good wines. After all my trotting back and forth to France I guess I'm spoiled. What is

this? It's delicious.'

'Pouilly Fuissé,' Francesca replied with a thin smile, marvelling at her considerable patience, But it was dwindling fast.

In the kitchen Francesca had finally resolved to seize control of the situation and bring the interview to its conclusion as rapidly and as diplomatically as possible. Adopting a businesslike tone, she plunged in: 'I must talk to you about the charity, Estelle. It's getting late and I have a dinner engagement. I'm sure your time is precious too.'

'But I have more questions about –'

'Please, Estelle, let's be fair,' Francesca interrupted firmly. 'I have given you two hours already. I only agreed to this interview because I felt your story would be beneficial to a good cause, and help us with the concert, and this was made quite clear to you at the time. Normally I don't give interviews of this type. I loathe personal publicity.'

Estelle had her glass halfway to her mouth. She put it down and gaped at Francesca. 'Don't like publicity! You're *always* in the columns.'

'I can't help it if I'm constantly being mentioned in the newspapers. It's none of my doing, I can assure you of that. But don't let's digress.' Francesca glanced pointedly at her watch. 'I'll have to bring our visit to a close very shortly, I'm afraid.'

'Oh sure, that's all right,' Estelle responded affably. 'Please go ahead, Francesca dear. I'd just *love* to hear about your charity.'

Relieved that she had turned the discussion around to her advantage, Francesca launched into all the salient details of the elaborate star-studded concert she and the committee were planning. She spoke quickly, but articulately, for about fifteen minutes. Finally she concluded, 'That's about it. What can I add, but to say again that it *is* for a truly worthy cause, and naturally we'd appreciate any mention you can give.'

'There's no problem. I'll give the charity a nice fat plug, right up front in the story.' Estelle cleared her throat and added quickly, 'I'd like to have a photographer come up next week and take a few candids of you, whenever it's convenient. Can you give me a date and time, please?'

'Oh dear!' Francesca stopped, and began to finger her pearls. 'I hadn't realized you'd want to take special photographs,' she said with a degree of hesitance. 'Would next Wednesday at two o'clock be suitable? It's really the only time I have free.' She was not especially enamoured of this new development, but she knew herself to be trapped.

'That's fine. I'll book our very *best* photographer.' Estelle leaned forward and snapped off the tape recorder.

Sitting back in the chair, Francesca permitted herself to relax. She felt exhausted and longed to be alone, but it seemed that Estelle was determined to finish her drink, and at her own leisure.

'I have something to tell you,' Estelle began, lifting her glass and regarding Francesca closely over the rim. There was a small pause before she said, 'Katharine's coming back to New York.'

Francesca sat up swiftly and threw her an astonished glance, frowning. 'Katharine?' she echoed.

'Yes. Katharine Tempest. The one and only Katharine,' Estelle smiled. 'Don't tell me you didn't know who I meant!'

'Naturally I knew. I was a little surprised, that's all. Actually, I'd lost track of her. Why are you telling me anyway? It's of no interest to me.'

'Katharine wants to see you.'

Francesca tensed. She felt her face stiffening and her eyes, opening very widely, brimmed with shock. She did not believe Estelle, but as she studied the other woman's face in silence she knew from her gloating expression that it was indeed true. She was momentarily speechless. She managed to say, 'Whatever for? Why would she want to see me?'

'I can't imagine,' Estelle replied sardonically. 'But she wanted me to request a meeting. Lunch, dinner, tea, drinks, whichever you prefer. Just give me a date. She'll be arriving in about a week or ten days, and she expects me to have arranged it by then. When can you see her?'

Anger was fulminating in Francesca. And she, who was never rude, said with unusual vehemence, her voice rising, 'I cannot see her! I will not see her! I think you have -'

'I know you two became drawn enemies,' Estelle exclaimed peremptorily. 'That's why I can't understand Katharine. She's being very foolish, in my opinion. I don't -'

'I was about to say, when you interrupted me, that I think

you have behaved in the most despicable manner!’ Francesca cried. ‘How *dare* you wangle your way into my home, on the pretext of doing an interview, when it’s patently obvious the real reason you’re here is to carry messages for Katharine Tempest.’ Francesca’s anger now spiralled into cold fury. ‘How devious and underhanded of you! You’re a disgrace to your profession. But then I suppose I shouldn’t have expected better behaviour from you, Estelle. You always were *her* lackey. I think you had better leave.’

Estelle did not budge. She was enjoying Francesca’s discomfort. She gave her a slow derisive smile, and triumph flicked into the small brown eyes. ‘My, my, I never thought I’d see the day when *you* would display so much emotion.’

Dismay had lodged like a stone in the pit of Francesca’s stomach, but she took firm control of herself. Recovering some of her self-possession, she said, in a steadier voice, ‘You may tell Katharine Tempest I have no wish to see her. Ever again. I have nothing to say to her.’

‘It’s no skin off my nose either way, and although I don’t understand Katharine’s motives, I did agree to help.’ Estelle crossed her legs and lolled back in the chair, regarding Francesca with quizzical eyes. She shook her head wonderingly. ‘I’m surprised at you, Francesca. Why don’t you give a little, for once in your life, and get down off your pedestal. Let bygones be bygones. We’re all a bit older and more mature. I think Katharine expected you, of all people, to be more understanding.’

‘More understanding!’ Francesca gasped. ‘After what she did to me! You must be as demented as she apparently is. I absolutely refuse to continue this ridiculous discussion. I would appreciate it if you would leave my house. I think you have not only overstayed your welcome, but abused my hospitality.’

Estelle lifted her shoulders in a gesture of resignation, picked up the tape recorder and dropped it into her handbag. She could not resist a final attempt at effecting a reconciliation. ‘She only wants to be friends again. With everyone. That’s why she asked me to contact all of you. Come on, be generous, change your mind.’

‘I will not. *Never*. The others can do as they wish, but *I* will not see her.’ Francesca’s face had paled and her eyes blazed. ‘I don’t want anything to do with her. There’s nothing to be gained by a ... a ... reunion.’ Francesca drew a quick intake of breath. ‘And *I’m* surprised at *you*, Estelle. Why do you permit her to use you in this way?’

‘Use me! Good God, that’s a laugh. If ever she’s used anyone, it’s been you!’ Estelle regretted this remark the instant it left her mouth. Katherine had warned her not to let her antagonism towards Francesca get in the way, and she had done just that in the heat of the moment.

A bone-chilling coldness had settled over Francesca. She nodded her head slowly and with deliberation. ‘You are quite correct, Estelle. And I do not propose to be used again. *Ever*,’ she intoned with such icy finality that the journalist shrank back

in her chair.

‘I will show you out,’ Francesca continued in the same glacial voice. She rose and, without giving Estelle another glance, walked to the door. She opened it and stood aside. ‘Please leave.’

Estelle cleared her throat. ‘I’ll see you next Wednesday then, with the photographer.’

‘I hardly think the photographs will be necessary, since you are not going to write the story. You might as well admit it, Estelle, the interview was just a ruse to see me,’ she snapped in an accusatory tone. ‘You could have told me this on the telephone, instead of wasting hours of my time doing a bogus interview.’

Estelle’s florid face filled with darker colour. ‘I *am* going to write the story, so you see, I will need the photographs.’

‘Obviously I must refuse.’

Even a woman as intrinsically obtuse as Estelle could not fail to understand that she had destroyed herself irrevocably in Francesca’s eyes and, knowing she had nothing to lose, she now exclaimed heatedly, ‘Seemingly your precious charity is not that important to you after all.’ She pushed herself out into the hall, grabbed her coat from the chair and flung it over her arm. She then swung around to face Francesca, who was watching her from the doorway of the library, a look of distaste flickering in her eyes.

The jealousy and envy at the root of Estelle’s antipathy for Francesca surfaced. Self-control and all rationality left her. ‘You always were a stuck-up, rotten snob!’ she almost screamed.

‘Whatever Katherine did to you is not half as bad as the things you did to her, and when she needed you the most. It’s because of you she has been isolated from everyone all this time. You’ve added to her suffering. The least you could do is see her. You cold unfeeling bitch!’

The mask of affability had been ripped off to reveal a face that was malevolent with hatred. Estelle headed for the front door. When she reached it she flung herself around and laughed an inane laugh. ‘I do believe you are *afraid* to see Katharine!’

With this final strident statement Estelle flounced out and slammed the door so ferociously behind her, Francesca flinched. She leaned against the door and closed her eyes. Her head was swimming and a sick feeling of dismay lingered. Vaguely she heard Val’s step in the corridor and with some effort she pulled herself together, moving towards the staircase.

‘My goodness, whatever was that?’ Val asked.

‘Miss Morgan. Leaving in a huff,’ said Francesca, turning around on the stairs.

‘I thought the roof was falling in,’ Val exclaimed, glancing about, suspecting damage to the more fragile art treasures. She shook her head, and her tightened lips signalled her immense disapproval of such undignified goings on. ‘Dear, dear, all that yelling and screaming like a fishwife. So common, M’lady.’ Val, who was the youngest sister of Melly, Francesca’s old nanny, and had known her since she was a child, was motherly and protective. Now she peered closely at Francesca and said, ‘I hope

she hasn't upset you unduly, M'lady. You look a bit peaked.'

'No, Val, she hasn't. I'm all right, really I am. I'm also late for Mr Nelson's dinner party.' She smiled weakly. 'I'd better go upstairs and get ready.'

'I'll come and help you, M'lady.'

'No, you don't have to, Val,' Francesca murmured, desperately wanting to be by herself. 'Thank you, but I can manage.' She smiled again and retreated up the stairs.

Chapter Four

The bedroom of the Avery duplex overlooked Fifth Avenue and the park. It was large, airy and light, an oasis of pale green highlighted with white. Cool and restful, the room was accented with touches of yellow, pink and blue, all fresh bright colours that might have been plucked from a bouquet of English flowers.

Apple-green watered silk covered the walls, and framed the two windows with long tied-back draperies and handsome matching valances. There were several Louis XVI *bergères* and a small Louis XVI sofa grouped in a semi-circle in front of the white marble fireplace.

It was a cheerful, happy room, one that reflected Francesca's naturally sunny, outgoing personality and her serene disposition, as well as her good taste. But her demeanour was less tranquil than normal as she closed the door firmly behind her and hurried across the floor. She sank gratefully into one of the chairs near the fireplace and leaned back, waiting for the trembling of her limbs to subside. She was unaccustomed to such flagrant displays of emotion, whether by herself or others, had an abhorrence of turbulent scenes, which she found uncivilized and distressing. She was not only horrified by Estelle's duplicity and her virulent tirade, but aghast at her own loss of control, finding this to be immature, and also demeaning. She closed her eyes, attempting to gather her disordered senses, to restore her equilibrium and

calm herself in readiness for the evening. No sooner had she begun to relax when the telephone on the bedside table began to ring, making her start. Reluctantly, she roused herself from her reverie, and went to answer it. 'Hello?'

'Francesca darling, Nelson here. It's a very bad night. Snowing like the devil. I've sent a car for you. Dayson just left.'

'Oh, Nelson, that's so thoughtful of you.' Her hand flew to her pearls and she played with them nervously. 'I'm afraid I'm running terribly late. I haven't changed yet. I was awfully delayed by an appointment. I'm so sorry. I'll be as quick as I can –'

'What's wrong, Francesca?' he interrupted. They had been friends for a number of years before she had married his elder brother, and he knew and understood her with a precision and insight that was rare.

'Nothing. Truly, Nelson. Just a rather troublesome afternoon with a difficult journalist who came to interview me.' She sat down on the bed and kicked off her shoes, flexing her toes.

'Oh! From which publication?'

'*Now Magazine*. She was a little hostile, but I'm sure there is nothing to worry about. Honestly, it's all right.'

'That's owned by Everett Communications. Tommy Everett is one of my oldest friends. Spent all of our summers together in Bar Harbor when we were boys. Tommy is also a client of the bank. And it just so happens I'm a major stockholder of Everett Communications.' He chuckled and, taking control in his usual masterful manner, continued: 'So you see, there's no problem. I'll

talk to Tommy right now. Call him at home, in fact. I'll have the story killed and the journalist fired immediately. I'm not going to have you hounded by that particular magazine and disturbed in this way. It's perfectly outrageous. What's the name of the journalist?"

Francesca hesitated and, ignoring the question, said, 'No, don't do anything, Nelson. Please. At least not at the moment. I'm not really worried about the story. I'll discuss it with you this evening, and then we can decide.'

Nelson sighed, knowing better than to press the point with her. 'Just as you wish, darling. But I don't like you to be so perturbed. And don't deny it either, because I can tell from your voice that you are.'

'Nelson, there's something else –' She took a deep breath and said, 'Katharine Tempest wants to see me.' As she spoke Francesca acknowledged to herself that this was the real reason for her distress.

A prolonged silence at the other end of the telephone. And then, 'I knew she would turn up again one day, like the damned bad penny she is. She's a troublemaker, Francesca. I sincerely hope you are not going to see her.'

'No, I'm not.'

'The right decision, darling. Now, if you hurry, you'll arrive before the other guests and we can have a quiet chat about all this. Dayson should be there in about twenty minutes to half an hour, depending on the traffic. It was bad earlier, when I came up

from Wall Street. See you shortly.' As an afterthought, he added quietly, 'And don't dwell on Katharine Tempest. She's not worth it. Dismiss her from your mind.'

'Yes, I will. Thank you, Nelson.'

There was no time to waste if she was to be ready when the car arrived and Francesca did as Nelson suggested, turning her thoughts away from Katharine Tempest as she went into her dressing room. She undressed quickly, slipped into a towelling robe and sat down at the dressing table to attend to her face and hair, working with concentration on her appearance.

At one moment she did pause to think about Estelle, and discovered, much to her amazement, that her anger had abated considerably. Her mind strayed back to the interview, and she ruminated on the outcome. Estelle had protested her innocence of any deviousness, arguing that she fully intended to write the story. But Francesca was not entirely convinced of the veracity of this statement, still believing the journalist had connived, and had entered her home under false pretences. On the other hand, she might be genuinely sincere about doing the piece. It struck Francesca then, and with an uneasy jolt, that it would be relatively easy for Estelle to do a vicious hatchet job on her, simply by making her appear to be the spoiled, pampered and indolent wife of a very rich and powerful man, who took up charities out of perpetual boredom. Estelle could make her look ridiculous, and there was no more devastating weapon than ridicule, especially in print. All those questions about her clothes, her home, her

servants and her life in general, apparently so meaningless on the surface, now gained greater significance.

Worry clouded Francesca's eyes. Undoubtedly Estelle was not very bright in certain areas, and she was obviously living in a world of fantasy. Yet she was also a clever journalist with a flair for words, and there was no denying her fervid hostility. She might be motivated by sheer maliciousness to dip her pen in venom, and that could prove to be embarrassing to Harrison, not to mention the charity. She bit her lip, attempting to outguess Estelle, and then gave up, knowing it to be a fruitless task. And, of course, there was always Nelson, ready to interfere.

Over the years Francesca had acquired a sense of irony about life, and now she thought: Poor pathetic Estelle, playing out of her league again. How little she knows about the power brokers in this town, the most influential of whom is Nelson. Not only in New York, but from coast to coast. He could demolish Estelle with one telephone call. But Francesca was too big a woman to be vindictive, and she had no wish to deprive anyone of a livelihood, particularly an unfortunate creature like Estelle. And so, for these reasons, she now decided she must exercise prudence, speak with the utmost caution to Nelson when he questioned her about the interview later. Otherwise he would act with lightning speed, out of fierce protection and love for her, wielding his immense power to Estelle's detriment. Perhaps she was being foolish and soft-hearted in view of Estelle's reprehensible behaviour, but for the moment she thought it wiser to keep her own counsel. She wanted

to analyse the situation before making any moves and enlisting Nelson's help. And if she did resort to the latter, it would be with the understanding that the only action to be taken was the suppression of the story.

Francesca brought her gaze back to the selection of cosmetics in front of her. She picked up a pot of silver eyeshadow and smoothed the merest trace of it on her lids, added several layers of brown mascara to her lashes, and then outlined her mouth with soft peach lipstick. She sat back, looking in the mirror with a critical eye and decided Val was right; she did seem peaked. Rectifying her pallor with a light stroking of rouge on her high cheekbones, she then lifted the silver-backed brush and ran it through her hair several times, and finally completed her toilet with a few sprays of Joy perfume. As she rose the intercom buzzed. It was Val, announcing the arrival of the car.

'Thank you, Val. Tell Dayson I'll be down shortly. I'm not quite ready.'

Having selected her clothes for the evening earlier in the day, Francesca was dressed within seconds, and she added the two strands of opera-length pearls she invariably wore, along with the other jewellery she had taken out of the safe that morning. As with the necklace, none of these pieces was ostentatious or elaborate, just plain pearl studs for her ears, a simple pearl bracelet with a coral clasp, and a coral-and-pearl ring she slipped on next to her platinum wedding band. A peach silk evening bag, identically matched to her high-heeled silk pumps, lay on the

dressing table. She put in her keys and a few items she required for the evening, picked it up and moved towards the door.

On an impulse she turned, and walked back to the far end of the dressing room. Here it widened into a more spacious area and became a deep, relatively large alcove. This was lined with closets running from the floor to the ceiling on all three walls, and they were entirely sheathed with mirrors that created a glittering cocoon of shimmering light and reflections, this effect intensified by hidden spots in the ceiling.

Francesca paused in the centre of the alcove to view herself full length. After a moment's consideration she frowned and shook her head, suddenly dissatisfied with the way she looked, although she was not quite certain why. Unless it was the dress which was new and had never been worn before. Like all her clothes this was understated and simple, a rippling column of peach-coloured panne velvet, cut like a Roman tunic and falling to the floor in straight fluid lines. The long wide sleeves helped to soften its basic severity, the square-shaped neckline beautifully emphasized her slender stem-like neck, and the off-centre slit in the skirt revealed enough of her right leg to lend a dash of sophistication. There was no question in her mind that the dress was elegant, and perfectly suitable for Nelson's intimate dinner party. And yet there was something she was not sure about, something which troubled her, and she wondered whether to change into another gown, even though she was running late.

She turned from side to side, looking at herself appraisingly

from all angles, and finally made a long slow turn. It was then that Francesca saw her reflection doubled, tripled and quadrupled. An infinity of images in an infinity of mirrors assaulted her eyes, and she was confronted by a dizzying number of Francescas encased in a sliver of supple peach velvet. Peach from head to toe. *Peach*. She caught her breath and drew closer to the central mirror, staring intently, and a look of surprise mixed with dawning comprehension spread across her face. It was not the style of the dress that disturbed her, but the *colour*. Of course that was it. She had not worn peach for years, over twenty years to be exact.

And as she continued to gaze at herself, mesmerized by the peach dress, up from the inner recesses of her mind there was dredged a memory, a memory so carefully, so deliberately and so deeply buried it had lain dormant for years.

A scene enacted two decades before leapt out of her mind, was projected onto the mirror with such blinding accuracy and clarity that Francesca was propelled instantly backwards into the past. And she saw herself from a long distance, as she had once been.

A night sky. Smooth. Still. Flashed with brilliant stars. A perfect Mediterranean sky. A balmy breeze. The brinish smell of the sea mingling with the scent of honeysuckle and night-blooming jasmine and eucalyptus. Candlelight glowing. Francesca sitting on the long white marble terrace of the Villa Zamir, on the promontory at Cap Martin. Francesca weeping. Katharine hovering solicitously. Katharine apologizing over and

over again for being clumsy. Katharine doing nothing to help, but hovering, always hovering. Francesca barely listening. Francesca gazing in stupefied horror at the wine Katharine had spilled on her. Watching the stain seep down from the bodice on to the skirt, a red and violent stain, like fresh blood on the peach organza evening frock. A floating, romantic, dreamlike frock her father could scarcely afford. Ruined before the dance had even begun. Kim, handsome in his dinner jacket, hurrying to her with salt and soda water. And Nick Latimer arriving. Nicky mopping up Francesca's tears, trying to be jocular and making a bad joke about tragic heroines. Her father. Sweet, consoling, concerned, but quite helpless. Doris Asternan. Her face cold with anger. Doris camouflaging the damage with a trailing spray of honeysuckle entwined with roses quickly picked from the garden. The flowers. Hardly covering the stain and wilting too soon. Francesca's tears. Dripping on to the dress to mingle with the stain. Francesca weeping inconsolably because she had wanted to be beautiful for Victor. Francesca waiting. Waiting for Vic, who did not come. Francesca's heart breaking ...

Francesca snapped her eyes tightly shut to block out the scene, not wanting to remember any more about the past. The past was irrelevant, it no longer mattered to her. An instant later she opened her eyes and stepped swiftly away from the mirror, and she saw again a woman of forty-two, the woman she had become in the intervening years. Attractive, elegant and coolly poised. And infinitely wiser than she had been then.

She turned on her heel and left for Nelson's dinner party.
Sleep eluded her.

Since her return from Nelson's house several hours ago she had restlessly tossed around in the bed, unable to find repose, her eyes wide open and staring into the filtered greyness of the room. Finally, in exasperation, she sat up, turned on the light and got out of bed. Slipping into her robe, she went downstairs to the kitchen. She made herself a cup of hot milk and carried it back upstairs to the bedroom, where she sat drinking it, huddled in a chair near the fireplace, enveloped in introspection, unaware of the time or the chill in the air.

Slowly, and with some deliberation, Francesca reviewed the events of the afternoon, carefully weighing and analysing all that had happened, all that had been said. And inevitably her mind came to rest on Katharine Tempest, for she had begun to realize, during these long dawn hours, that she had over-reacted to the news of the woman's impending return to New York and request for a meeting.

She did not want anything to disrupt or threaten her orderly and contented life. The life she had so painstakingly created with Harrison and his family. A life she enjoyed, and was comfortable living, and one she was determined to protect at all cost. Nelson was correct in his assessment of her former friend. Wherever Katharine Tempest went she dragged trouble in her wake. No, Katharine could not be permitted to enter her life again.

A sigh of deep sadness broke the heavy silence in the

shadow-filled room. She and Katharine had been so very close once, inseparable for years, until that ugly denouement when everything had erupted so explosively and the loving friendship had ended abruptly, and with acrimony. They had not seen each other since that day, over ten years ago, and during this time Francesca had schooled herself not to think of Katharine, and eventually, as the years passed, she had succeeded in achieving her goal. And she had forgiven Katharine long ago, forgiven her for so many things, in the wisdom of her own growing maturity. But seemingly she had not forgotten. She understood that now.

Memories began to assail her. Memories of other times, other places, other people. She endeavoured to push them aside, clearly recognizing that memories were ineluctably treacherous. Particularly memories of Katharine, for they were shrouded in a web of turbulent emotions and raw feelings, and they evoked pain, the pain of Katharine's own treachery and betrayal of her. But Katharine had not always been like that. Not in the beginning. She had been different then. They had all been different at that point in time.

At that point in time. Francesca repeated the phrase to herself, and she thought: There is no past, no present, no future. Time is not circumscribed. Albert Einstein proved that time is a dimension. The fourth dimension. Therefore all time exists *now*.

The decades dissolved. It was a gradual dissolve, like a film running in slow motion before her eyes, and everyone was in perfect focus, and brilliantly captured on the film of her memory

– the way they were then. And the year 1956 was as real to Francesca as it had been twenty-three years ago.

It was now.

Act One Downstage Right 1956

‘The most decisive actions of our life ... are most often
unconsidered actions.’

ANDRÉ GIDE

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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