Elizabeth Edmondson

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Be swept away by The Villa in Italy, the perfect escapist readFour very different people are named in a will. All are summoned to the Villa Dante, home of the late Beatrice Malaspina. But who was she?While they wait to find out, the villa begins to work its seductive magic. With its faded frescoes and magnificent mediaeval tower, it's unlike anywhere they have been before. Slowly, four characters who have gone to great lengths to hide their troubles find that change – and even hope – is possible after all. But the mysterious Beatrice has a devastating secret to reveal that will change everything . . .The perfect holiday read for fans of Rosanna Ley and Santa Montefiore, The Villa in Italy is a beautiful evocation of Italy in the aftermath of World War Two.

Содержание

The Villa in Italy
ELIZABETH EDMONDSON

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For Teresa Chris Thank you!

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PROLOGUE

The package from the lawyers arrived early one foggy April morning. It was wrapped in brown paper, tied with string and sealed with red wax.

The postman came whistling through the door to the offices of Hawkins & Hallett, bringing with him a gust of cold, damp air, and greeted the thin-lipped, middle-aged receptionist with a cheery, 'Good morning.'

Miss Jay looked at him over the top of her half-moon spectacles, her eyes cold and disapproving. 'What's this?' she said, as he handed her the package. Her mouth tightened as she saw the seal, complete with crest; really, these authors did give themselves airs. She turned it over, and saw the sender's name: Winthrop, Winthrop & Jarvis.

'Lawyers, I reckon,' said the postman. 'What have you lot been up to? Or maybe it's the juicy memoirs of a judge. Anyhow, it's to be signed for. The rest will be along later, same as usual.'

She signed the slip in neat, upright strokes, and handed it back to the postman. Then she drew the post book out of her drawer and made an entry. As she did so, the door opened again, letting in another blast of chilly air and a girl in a duffel coat.

'Good morning, Miss Hallett,' the receptionist said icily, and looked pointedly at the large clock. 'Five minutes late again.'

The girl grinned and heaved herself out of her coat, which she hung on the hatstand behind the door. 'What's five minutes between friends, Miss Jay?'

'Please take this package upstairs to Miss Hawkins. Right away.'

'Okey-dokey,' and the girl bounded up the brown lino stairs two at a time, her pony tail swinging as she went.

Miss Jay winced. Susie Hallett might be a partner's daughter, but taking on a girl like that was a mistake, even if she only came in two mornings a week.

Susie swung herself round on the polished curve of the banister rail on the first floor and skidded to a halt outside a panelled door with 'Miss Hawkins, Publishing Director' written on the name board in bold gold letters. She knocked on the door, and went in without waiting for a reply. 'Hello, Miss Hawkins. Post.'

'Good morning, Susie. Why has Miss Jay sent it up to me unopened? What's got into her?'

'Dunno. She just told me to bring it up. Looks important, string and sealing wax.'

Susie lingered, curious, as Miss Hawkins snipped the string and unwrapped the parcel. Inside was a manuscript, and on top a covering letter.

Olivia Hawkins read the letter swiftly, and then put it down. She said nothing, but looked out of the long, elegant sash window, not seeing the raindrops dribbling down the panes, or the dingy light of a bleak spring morning, but instead, brilliant sunlight on an Italian landscape; in her mind, she was in Italy, sitting under the colonnades, laughing, drinking a toast with a woman no longer young, yet every bit as full of life as young Susie.

She blinked, and reached down into her handbag for a handkerchief.

'Is something the matter? Is it a book?'

'Yes, it's a book. The memoirs of Beatrice Malaspina.'

'What a lovely name.'

'The letter is from a firm of lawyers, who had instructions to deliver the book to me after Beatrice Malaspina died.'

'Is she dead? Was she a friend of yours? I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. I shall miss her, but she was born in 1870, so she had a long life. And a very full one.'

'Eighteen seventy, goodness, so she lived to be eighty-seven.' Susie tried to add seventy years of life to her own seventeen; she couldn't imagine it. 'Was she an Italian?'

'No, she was English, but she married an Italian. Her own family had Italian connections, they owned a house in Italy called the Villa Dante, which she inherited. It is the most beautiful house, magical, a place of enchantment.'

'How did you know her?'

'We met during the war. She was a compelling personality, and she'd led a fascinating life. Rather a bohemian in her way; you would have liked her. She moved in artistic circles and knew most of the great painters and writers of her time. Many of them were her friends, and came to stay with her at the Villa Dante. She was a complex woman, and a great organiser. It annoyed her that people's lives were so muddled; she used to say, "It only takes clear thinking and energy to change a life for the better, to set it off in a new direction." '

'She sounds fun.'

'She was.'

'And these are her memoirs? Are we going to publish them?'

'Oh, yes. What she'll have to say about all those artists will make good reading, quite apart from the story of her own adventurous life.'

Susie was standing by the window, looking down at the dismal street, slick with rain. A rag and bone cart was going by, the horse's back covered with an old sack to protect it from the wet, the driver shouting out his incomprehensible Londoner's cry.

'Oh, I meant to tell you, there were a couple of shifty-looking men hanging around when I came in. They're still there, look, lurking outside number nine. Do you think they might be casing the joint?'

Olivia got up from her desk and joined Susie at the window. One glance was enough. She laughed. 'You read too many thrillers, Susie. Those aren't crooks—well, not the kind you were thinking of. Those are reporters. The man in the tweed coat is Giles Slattery of the *Sketch*. The one in the grubby mac with a camera is a photographer.'

'Giles Slattery, the gossip columnist?'

'Yes. I wonder who they're waiting for.'

'Somebody famous, do you think?'

'What, here in Bloomsbury? I doubt it. Not the kind of famous Slattery goes for, at any rate.'

The Journey

ONE

Delia Vaughan was hanging on to the steering wheel as if to loosen her grip would be to admit defeat. The wind had risen to a deafening shriek, coming in wild gusts that made the canvas top of the car bang and flap as though at any moment it would fly off.

They had stopped two hours before, to put up the hood, when the wind had whipped Jessica's hat off, and Delia had only just stopped her silk headscarf going the same way.

'We should find a hotel,' Jessica said. 'The weather's getting worse.'

Delia didn't want to stay at a hotel. In her mind, the Villa Dante had come to represent a refuge, a haven from the storm, a destination that was more than journey's end. It was irrational, but she was determined to press on, despite her exhaustion, her hacking cough and Jessica's urgings for her to be sensible and get off the road and out of the storm.

'We're only about thirty miles away, let's keep going.'

'Let me find something to wrap round my head, then,' said Jessica. 'This car is full of draughts, and I can't hear myself think with all the noise in my ears. When I get back to England, I'm going to sell it, and buy a saloon.' She extracted a silk scarf from her bag and put it over her head, tying it under her chin. 'Come on then, if you must.'

It was slow going, and Delia was as relieved as Jessica when they came to a sign that read San Silvestro. 'We take the road going south, the lawyer said, and turn off immediately after we've gone under the railway bridge. Then it's uphill, and we'll see the gates and the villa.'

'How can we see anything in all this?' said Jessica.

Miraculously, as they went up the hill, the skies lightened for a moment, and they could see a pair of tall, wrought-iron gates silhouetted in the blazing wind.

'It's astonishing,' yelled Delia, an unreasonable surge of excitement rising in her as she caught a glimpse of the classical façade of a large house. Then it was gone, and she pressed her foot hard down on the accelerator, hoping the strange noises the engine was making didn't mean it was about to conk out.

They made it to the gates, and stopped the car, although Delia left the engine running, 'Just in case,' she shouted to Jessica.

The gates were shut, with a rusty chain looped round the bars to hold them together. The wind was rising by the minute, and now the air was full of flying sand: that was the sound like hail that had rattled against the hood of the car. 'Are you sure this is the right place?' Jessica said. 'There's no name anywhere.'

'It's where the lawyer said it would be, and we didn't see a sign of any other house in the vicinity. Do you think this sand is blowing off a beach? I never asked how close the villa was to the sea.'

'Do Italian beaches have red sand?'

'I don't know.' Delia's hair was whipping about her eyes, and she pushed it ineffectually back from her forehead, trying to wedge a strand behind her ears.

'Is there a bell?'

'Only this.' Delia pointed to a brass bell attached to one of the stone gateposts. A frayed rope with a knot at its end swung from it in the wind.

'Give it a tug,' Jessica said.

They could hear a faint clang from the bell, but the sound was carried away by the wind.

'It's so hot,' said Jessica. 'Like a wind from the desert.'

'Villa Dante or not,' Delia said, 'we're going in. Or we'll be flattened by this blasted tempest, and I hate to think what'll happen if any more of it gets into the engine of your car. Stranded is what we'd be then.'

She gave the gates an impatient shake, and let out a cry of triumph, carried away in the wind, as the chain slithered to the ground. A sudden gust tore the gates apart, driving them inwards to land with a crash against the stones set alongside the driveway.

'Watch out,' cried Jessica, as the gates began to swing back towards them with squealing ferocity.

Delia flung herself against the left-hand one, and, hanging on to it, looked around for a stone to wedge it open.

'There, on the grass,' shouted Jessica, who had got back into the car and started to edge it forward.

Delia kicked the stone into place, then forced the other gate back and held it as Jessica drove the car through.

Jessica was gesturing at her to get into the car, but Delia first picked up the chain and waited for the moment when the gates clanged together to wrench it through and twist it round the bars.

'It won't hold,' she yelled, as she got back into the car.

'The gate's the least of our worries,' said Jessica. 'I just hope there's someone here to let us in.'

They drove up to the house, not noticing anything about it, intent only on getting the car and themselves under shelter, out of the terrifying, sand-laden wind.

'This is the back of the house,' yelled Delia. 'Look for somewhere to put the car.'

'There,' Jessica said. 'A stable, or is it a garage?'

'It doesn't matter, it's shelter.'

The doors were banging to and fro in the wind and Delia struggled to hold them back while Jessica drove the car in.

Delia leant against the stone wall, blinking the sand out of her eyes. 'What a relief to be out of that ghastly hot wind,' she said.

'We can't stay here,' Jessica said. 'How do we get inside the house?'

In fact, Delia was perfectly happy to stay there, out of the wind, the engine switched off, every nerve in her body throbbing. Even a single step seemed beyond her, but Jessica was at her side, forcing her out once again into the maddening wind, so strong now that the sand stung her cheeks, and then, oh miracle, Jessica found a door, and opened it, and they were inside, out of the wind, and heat, and sand.

Wherever they were, it was blessedly cool, and the air was breathable.

Delia heard a crash and a muffled oath. 'Are we in a kitchen, do you suppose?' said Jessica, her voice seeming to Delia to come from a great distance. 'There are shutters, but I shan't open them, or everything will blow in from outside. Besides, there isn't much light to let in. But I've found a sink, and I think I collided with a kitchen table. Can you see anything?'

Delia blinked. 'I've still got sand in my eyes.' She began to cough, a deep racking sound. 'I think the sand's got into my lungs, too, blast it.'

'Hold on.'

The sound of running water, and then Jessica was beside her, wiping her face with a wet handkerchief. 'Don't you dare faint on me.'

'I'm fine,' said Delia untruthfully, her head spinning. 'I never faint.'

'Sit down.' Jessica, miraculously, set a chair under Delia as her legs crumpled. 'Put your head down between your knees. Go on. Blood to the head is what you need.'

The dizziness receded. 'I can't think what came over me.'

'It's that bronchitis,' said Jessica. 'It's pulled you right down, and this wind and the blowing sand, it hardly makes it easy for anyone to breathe. You could do with a glass of water to drink, but I wouldn't drink anything out of the tap. Feeling better? Then let's see if anyone's at home.'

No one was. They walked through shadowy rooms, accompanied by the sudden, distant roars of the wind. Shutters rattled; somewhere a door or window was banging.

'Deserted,' said Jessica.

'Not for long,' said Delia, running a finger over the surface of a marble-topped table and inspecting it by the meagre light filtering through the shutters.

'Do you think it's always windy like this?'

'I think this is a sirocco,' said Delia. 'We did it at school, with Miss Pertinax, don't you remember? She took us for geography, and was mad about the extremes of nature. Floods and tidal waves and hurricanes, and the wicked winds of Europe. The Föhn that drives you mad, and the mistral in the south of France, and the sirocco, a blinding southerly wind that blows up from the desert into Mediterranean Europe, bringing half the Sahara with it.'

'How on earth do you remember all that?'

'Winds are dramatic. You won't remember it, because you never paid any attention in geography, and I used to do your homework for you.'

'I did your maths,' said Jessica. 'Does this sirocco happen often?'

'Quite rare, I think.'

'Then why does it have to blow on the day we arrive?'

'Fate,' said Delia. 'Angry gods.'

'There is electricity, here are the light switches, but nothing happens when I press them.'

'Switched off at the mains, or it could run on a generator.'

'Now isn't the time to investigate. There are bound to be oil lamps or candles somewhere. And if there's been dusting done, perhaps there's food in the house. And a wine cellar. Safer than water for drinking. You stay here; I'll find a light.'

Delia could make out little of her surroundings, although she could dimly see a pillar, and judging by the smoothness of the stone under her hand, the bench she was sitting on was marble.

Jessica came back bearing a candle aloft, the small flame sending little shadows to and fro as it flickered in a draught. They were in a large marble-floored room, with fluted columns and enormous doors set in classical architraves.

Delia sat up, sudden alarm rising in her. Faces were looking out at her, a girl peeping round a door, a woman in flowing robes strumming at a lyre—was she hallucinating?

'Good heavens,' said Jessica, equally startled. 'What the dickens …?'

Delia went over to take a closer look. 'It's all painting,' she said. 'The people, this door, the columns. Trompe l'oeil. It's amazing!'

'Thank God,' said Jessica. 'It gave me quite a fright, thinking the place was full of people. Anyway, good news—I found a mesh cupboard with some food, and a bottle of wine, and bottles of water on the floor. And there's an oil lamp—see if I can get it to light.'

'Do you know how to work an oil lamp? I do, so hand it over,' said Delia. She sat down, with the oil lamp on the marble seat beside her, and removed the glass globe to get at the wick. 'We used them at Saltford Hall when there were all those power cuts after the war.'

They retreated to the kitchen, where they sat at the scrubbed table and ate the bread, cheese and cold meat that had been left in the kitchen. Fortified with food and a glass of wine, Delia yawned. 'What a day,' she said. 'I'm whacked. What we need is beds, which means upstairs.'

Jessica tidied the remains of the food away into the food safe. 'Washing up can wait until the morning,' she said. 'Wasn't there a staircase at the end of the hall with the wall paintings?'

They went up the stairs into a gallery and then came to a wide landing, with several large, polished doors leading off it. Opening them one after the other, they found four rooms ready for guests, with the beds made and clean towels hung over the rails at the washstands in the bathrooms.

'They seem to be expecting us,' Delia said.

'Someone, anyhow.' Jessica still wasn't sure they were in the right place. 'What if we wake up and find we're at the Villa Ariosto, or the Villa Boccaccio?'

Delia said, ‘Then our hosts will be in for a surprise. It doesn’t matter; here we are, and here we stay, and if a claimant to my room turns up in the middle of the night, he or she can jolly well go and sleep somewhere else.’

‘I can’t see anyone being mad enough to be out in this wind.’

‘You have this room, and I’ll take the one next door. You have the oil lamp, I’ll have the candle.’

From what Delia could see by the light of her candle, she was in a large and grand room, the sort of room that would belong to the master or mistress of the house. Perhaps she shouldn’t be in here at all, but she was too sleepy to care.

The bed had an elaborate headboard, on which, in the flickering, shadowy light, Delia could make out the entwined initials, B M.

Beatrice Malaspina, she said aloud. Well, here I am at the Villa Dante. I do wonder what you want with me.

TWO

Until a week ago, Delia had never heard of Beatrice Malaspina, nor of the Villa Dante. She had been in her London flat when the postman's whistle was followed by the bang of the letter flap and the thud as the post hit the doormat.

She went into the small hall and picked up the letters. A brown envelope from the electricity company. A white envelope, with a handwritten address. She knew who that was from, her agent Roger Stein's wild scrawl was unmistakable. Her heart sank. He only wrote when he had something nasty to say, otherwise he'd be on the phone with a breezy, 'Delia, dear girl …'

And what was this? She looked at the long envelope. It had to be a lawyer's letter; why did lawyers feel the need to have different-sized stationery from everyone else? She turned it over. It was from Winthrop, Winthrop & Jarvis, the family solicitors—or at least, her father's solicitors; they were nothing to do with her these days.

Was her father communicating with her now through his solicitors? Had things got that bad?

She began to cough, and cursed at the stab of pain in her chest. She took the post into the kitchen and put it down on the table. Then she went to the stove and turned on the gas under the kettle. Coffee would clear her brain and give her strength to open the letters.

She had her back turned to the window, and hadn't seen the figure that was standing there, on the other side of the glass.

Jessica tapped on the window, softly at first, and then more loudly. Delia whirled round, startled and alarmed, then relaxed as she saw who it was. She hurried to the window, threw up the sash, and hauled Jessica in over the sill. A small black and tan dog jumped in after her, trailing its lead.

'Jessica, for God's sake, you nearly gave me a heart attack,' she said, grabbing the dog's lead and unclipping it from its collar. 'What on earth are you doing climbing up my fire escape?'

'I tell you what, it's a miracle burglars aren't in and out all day long. It's hardly difficult.'

'There's an alarm I put on at night and when I go out,' Delia said. 'It makes a terrific racket, like an air raid siren. Good thing it wasn't set, or you'd have had the heart attack and plunged to the ground. Oh, Lord; I can guess why you're on my fire escape. Reporters?'

Jessica nodded.

'Here?'

'Staked out at the front, two of them, would you believe it? They know you're a friend of mine; honestly, wouldn't you think they had something better to do than follow me around?'

Delia went into her sitting room, edged round the Schiedmayer grand piano which took up nearly all the available space, and peered down into the square.

'You're absolutely right, there they are, bold as brass, not even bothering to lurk or look inconspicuous. The neighbours will be complaining, and pointing out that this is a nice area.'

'Is it?'

'Not really, or I couldn't afford to live here. Respectable is what they mean. What's up? You look all in. I can see your ghastly husband hasn't agreed to give you a divorce. What's he done now?'

'Haven't you seen the papers?'

'Not that foul Giles Slattery again?'

'No, although he's one of the reporters hanging round the front door downstairs. No, this is important news, headlines in *The Times* kind: Richie's been appointed a junior minister at the Foreign Office.'

'Hell,' Delia said. 'That'll make him even keener to stay respectably married, won't it?'

Delia was Jessica's oldest and best friend, and the only person who knew and understood her predicament, the only person whose advice she trusted. Despite the fact that their lives had taken such very different paths, and despite the fact that Jessica's husband, Richard Meldon, disliked Delia

almost as much as she did him, Delia and Jessica had remained the closest of friends. It was inevitable that if Jessica was in trouble she would come to Delia for refuge, advice, sympathy, good sense, and, Delia not being one to mince words, the truth.

'How long have you got before he gets back from Hong Kong?'

'One of the reporters outside my house shouted out something about him being back next week. Because of the new job, do you think? Or maybe just fed up with China.'

Jessica threw herself down on Delia's large and comfortable sofa, and her dog jumped up beside her.

Delia's sitting room was like Delia herself: exotic, larger than life and full of bright colours and untidiness. Delia, who was taller and had more curves than Jessica, liked bold colours on herself as well as in her surroundings, and she was dressed today in a huge scarlet sloppy joe jumper, with red sneakers on her feet and large gypsy hoops in her ears.

She looked at Jessica with affection tinged with anxiety. Jessica used to be a colourful dresser herself, favouring the blues and greens that suited her silvery blonde hair and the deep blue eyes set in a long Plantagenet face, but since her marriage she had become more and more neutral, camouflaging herself in camels and beiges and pale greys, none of which suited her colouring or her personality.

'Come on, what else did the damned reporter say?'

'Oh, he asked if Richie would be joining me in the Chelsea house.'

When Jessica had stormed out of the matrimonial home, a house in Mayfair, she had moved into a tiny house in Chelsea that belonged to friends who had been posted abroad, and Delia knew how happy she had felt there, in a place untainted by the husband she so hated.

They looked at each other in silence. 'You're welcome to stay here,' said Delia. 'Any time. You and Harry the pooch.'

Jessica's dog, named Harry because he had come from Harrods, had been Delia's wedding present to her. 'So that at least there'll be someone for you to love,' Delia had said with savage percipience.

Richie had disliked the little dog from the start.

'What is he, some kind of mongrel?'

'He's a Heeler.'

'A what? Never heard of any such dog.'

'They come from Lancashire. They nip at the heels of cattle.'

'You believe that, you believe anything. What a stupid little tail, curled over like that. Why didn't you ask me? I'd have bought you a proper dog.'

'Thank you, Harry's perfect.'

Delia knew that Richie wasn't a man who could easily be kept out of anywhere he wanted to be; her Chelsea house would no longer seem safe to Jessica.

'Talk about not wanting to take a hint,' she said. 'Why doesn't he accept that the marriage is over, that it's been a failure?'

'Why ask? Nothing Richie does can be a failure.'

Delia had her own opinion about that. Richie was a failure as a human being, and not all his glowing war record as an ace fighter in the RAF, the brilliance as a speaker that had taken him into Parliament, his dashing good looks, his wealth, his connections or his influence made up for the fact that, deep down, 'He's a shit,' she said.

'I know that, and you know that, but he's no such thing in the eyes of the world, and that's why I'm now the demon woman for daring to leave him. My loving husband, so wonderful, how could I want to divorce him?'

'Yes, it's tough on you that the press eat out of his hand. Did you know that he and Giles Slattery go back a long way? They were at school together.'

Delia saw the flash of anxiety in Jessica's eyes, those eyes that always showed when a sensitive spot had been touched.

'I had no idea,' Jessica said. 'That's an unholy alliance, if you like. Oh, God, do you suppose Richie sicked Slattery on to me? Just to torment?'

'I expect so. It's a good way of keeping tabs on you, while keeping his own nose clean.'

'I'm going to have to get away. Go abroad. Only do you think the reporters would follow me there?'

'What, send out search parties all over the Continent? You aren't that much of a story.'

'I wish I weren't any kind of a story at all. Oh, why didn't I listen to you? If I had, I wouldn't be in this fix now.'

Delia had never really got to the heart of the reason why Jessica had married Richard Meldon. On the surface, it seemed a perfect match, but to one who knew Jessica as well as she did, it was doomed to disaster. Her reaction to Jessica's engagement to Richie had been openly unenthusiastic.

'Marry that man? Jessica, you can't be serious. Go and take a cold bath, or hop on a banana boat to South America, anything to make you come to your senses.'

'What's wrong with Richie? He's handsome, successful—'

'And rich. Is he in love with you, or the fact that your family goes back for nine centuries? And what about his liking for older women?'

'What older women?'

'He has a reputation, that's all. He's discreet about it, but I heard from Fanny Arbuthnot that—'

'Fanny's a tedious gossip and always has been.'

'Maybe, but she stayed with some people in the south of France and your Richie was among those present, and spent a good deal of his time in the company of Jane Hinton, who must be quite twenty years older than he is. And Fanny says he's known for it.'

'As it happens, I don't care. My past is past, and so is his. Neither of us is coming virginal and innocent to the bridal chamber, why should I mind who he's slept with before me?'

'It's who he'll sleep with after you that you should worry about,' Delia muttered.

'Make me a cocktail,' Jessica said. 'A strong one.'

'You're drinking too much.'

'It keeps the goblins at bay.'

'Yes, it's a pity you ever married the wretched man,' Delia said. 'I still don't understand how you came to do anything so stupid. It wasn't as though your friends didn't warn you.'

'Oh, trust me to make a mistake,' Jessica said. 'When you get into scrapes, you somehow manage to wriggle out of them, don't you? With my scrapes, I end up having to live with the consequences.'

'Richie's more than a scrape.'

'Unfortunately, he is. And marriage—God, what a colossal mistake that was. A few words said in front of an indifferent clergyman, and bang! you're bound in chains.'

'He's still adamant about no divorce?'

'Of course he is. He won't hear of it, just shouts me down. I always thought divorce was quite simple. Didn't you think, as I did, that the man of honour hops off down to Brighton to be found in bed with the chambermaid or whoever he's paid for the privilege, and bingo, six months later you're a free woman?'

'Only Richie won't do the honourable thing.'

'Has Richie ever done an honourable thing in his life?'

They adjourned to the kitchen, where Delia rescued the coffee and they sat on either side of the kitchen table, with Harry between their feet.

'Abroad isn't such a bad idea,' Delia said. 'Where could you go? It would have to be somewhere Richie couldn't track you down. It's tricky, because even if you book yourself into some *pension* in

a remote French village, you have to fill in all those forms for the police. And what officials know, Richie will be able to find out.'

'I know,' said Jessica. 'Christ, what a mess.' She looked down at the table. 'You haven't opened your letters. That's me barging in and distracting you.'

'They're hardly important. An electricity bill, a moan from my agent and a lawyer's letter.' Delia began to cough again, and Jessica silently rose and got her a drink of water.

'It doesn't sound as though you've got rid of your bronchitis.'

'No, it just lingers. The dreadful weather doesn't help, and there's nothing I can do except wait for it to clear up, which the specialist says it will, eventually.'

'You've seen a specialist, then?'

'Of course I have. All we singers rush to our favourite man at the hint of a sore throat or a chest infection.'

Delia was an opera singer, still too young at twenty-seven for the really major roles, but she was considered a rising star, booked for Glyndebourne, Sadler's Wells, the Royal Opera House—and due to make her Salzburg debut that summer.

'That's what my agent's moaning about,' she said, opening his letter with some reluctance. 'Yes, here we go, fatal to get a name for unreliability, can I give him a firm date when I will be well enough…' She scrunched up the letter. 'And this one is from my father's lawyers,' she went on. 'God knows what he's up to.'

She slit open the envelope and took out a single sheet of paper. 'What on earth?' She picked up the envelope again—yes, it was addressed to her, and the letter began 'Dear Miss Vaughan'. Beneath the salutation was typed in capital letters, THE ESTATE OF THE LATE BEATRICE MALASPINA.

'What is it?' said Jessica. 'Bad news?'

'No,' said Delia, passing her the letter.

'Who's this Beatrice Malaspina? Was she your godmother or something?'

'I have no idea. I've never heard of her.'

They stared at one another. 'How odd,' said Jessica. 'And yet she must have left you a legacy of some kind, otherwise why the letter? What do they say—please call at their office at your earliest convenience? How exciting. Get changed, and off you go.'

Delia had no intention of going to the offices of Winthrop, Winthrop & Jarvis, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, and she said so. Jessica took no notice, and half an hour later Delia found herself sitting in a cab, wrapped up in a scarlet coat, 'Like a matador's cape,' Jessica said, 'but perfect for keeping out the cold,' with a headscarf wound round her head.

Jessica had insisted on her taking a cab. 'Walk, with that cough? Certainly not, and mind you come back by taxi, as soon as ever you can; don't you see that I shall be dying of curiosity to know what it's all about?'

Delia climbed the steep, ill-lit stairs which led to the sombre chambers of Winthrop, Winthrop & Jarvis, where the clerk eyed her with disfavour.

'There's no need to look at me like that,' Delia said. 'I've come to see Mr Winthrop. Tell him I'm here, please. Miss Vaughan. No, I don't have an appointment, but I'm sure he'll see me.'

'I'm not sure whether—'

'Just tell him I'm here.'

Reluctantly, the clerk disappeared through a dark door, to return in a few moments and, even more reluctantly, show her into the handsome panelled room which was the lair of Josiah Winthrop, senior partner of the firm.

Mr Winthrop greeted Delia with a formal, chilly courtesy that made her indignant. He was not a man ever to show much warmth, but he had known her since she was a child and there was no need to treat her as though she were one of his criminal clients. Bother him, Delia said inwardly; I know he wishes I weren't here at all, but he could try to hide the fact.

‘Okay,’ she said deliberately, and watched him wince at the slang, so out of place in these surroundings where every word was weighed and considered. She took off her headscarf and shook her dark hair loose before sitting down on the hard wooden chair with arms that Mr Winthrop had moved forward for her. An uncomfortable chair, which ensured that undesirable clients didn’t outstay their welcome.

‘Spit it out,’ she said. ‘Who is this Beatrice Malaspina, and what has she to do with me?’

THREE

Jessica listened with rapt attention as Delia reported on her visit to the lawyers. Delia was sitting on the piano stool, while Jessica stretched out on the sofa, Harry curled up beside her.

'So this lawyer is claiming they don't know anything about her? But they're representing her, they must know,' Jessica said.

'I don't believe they do. I could tell from Mr Winthrop's expression that he thinks it's all most irregular. Mind you, he's hardly a talkative man at the best of times; he's the sort of lawyer who says as little as possible, as though every word came at a cost. Apparently, the instructions were from a firm of Italian lawyers, and they're simply handling the English end.'

'Are you sure there isn't some connection with your family? After all, Winthrop is your father's lawyer, isn't he? And they're a stuffy firm. Look how they've treated me; they won't represent anybody who walks in off the street.'

'I asked him, but he merely looked even more thin-lipped and said that his firm handled the affairs and estates of a great many clients. Which is true enough.'

'Are you going to ask your parents if they know who Beatrice Malaspina was? Or have ever heard of the Villa Dante?'

'No. Mother won't have known her—she hates all foreigners. And you know how things are between my father and me. We haven't spoken for over a year, and I'm not going to get in touch with him about this.'

'It's about time your pa faced facts and realised you've chosen your career, and are doing very well at it, and he's not going to be able to drag you into the family firm, however much he wants to.'

'Father never sees what he doesn't want to. Anyhow, if he got wind of a will, he'd winkle the facts out of Winthrop and the Italian lawyers, or get his horribly efficient hornrimmed secretary to do it for him. Then, if he knew I was thinking of going to Italy, he'd want to organise it all. Aeroplane? Far too expensive; he'd have all the continental timetables out, to look up the cheapest possible route, and I'd end up trundling across the Alps on some old bus.'

Lord Saltford's thriftiness was too notorious for Jessica to be able to argue with Delia about that.

'And he's never mentioned any Beatrice anybody. I don't see any reason why he should know her.'

'Maybe it's all a trick, to lure you away. Perhaps the oh-so-respectable Mr Winthrop is a secret white slave trader?'

'What, and I'll find myself being shipped out to Buenos Aires in a crate? Oh, very likely!'

Jessica fiddled with a cushion tassel.

'Are you really thinking of going to Italy? Will you follow the instructions in Beatrice Malaspina's will, and go to this Villa Dante?'

'I don't know,' said Delia. 'It's tempting, and I have to say I am curious about the whole thing.'

'Perhaps she's left you the house, the Villa Dante, and a fortune.'

'Italians leave property to their families, always. Maybe a piece of jewellery, a brooch or a ring. Only why? Why me?'

'And why make you go all the way to Italy for a brooch? No, whoever she was, and why ever she wanted you to go to Italy, it must be important. And the only way you'll find out is by going. Would you ever forgive yourself if you passed on this?'

'Mr Winthrop doesn't like all the mystery, I could tell; he looked as though he had a bad smell under his long nose.'

Jessica sat up. 'Why don't we go together? It would suit me to go abroad, and it would do you good to get away from this dreadful, everlasting fog and rain and wind.' She paused. 'No, I suppose you

can't really spare the time. You're hardly ever able to get away, what with rehearsals and performances and so on. That's what having a successful career is all about.'

Delia dropped her hands on to the keys of the piano, picking out the notes of 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star' with two fingers, then weaving an ornate variation as she spoke. 'As it happens, I'm thinking of taking a bit of time off. I'm not due to start rehearsals for a few weeks. Everything's rather in the air at the moment,' she added. 'With this cough of mine. And Italy might have better weather than we've got here.'

Jessica's mind turned to practicalities.

'What's the best way to get there? We could fly to Rome, I suppose, but we'd be followed by those damn reporters, and then Richie would know exactly where I was.'

'Let's go by car,' said Delia. 'You didn't leave your car at Richie's house, did you? It's a long way, but we can share the driving, and, according to the lawyers, as long as I'm there by the end of the month, that's okay.'

'Doesn't it need a lot of arranging, going abroad with a car? It won't just be a matter of driving to Dover and nipping on the next ferry, will it? There's insurance and green cards and all kinds of formalities when you want to take a car across the Channel.' Jessica knew that if she went near a travel agent or the RAC, the hounds would be on her heels. 'Oh, Lord,' she said with a sigh. 'Why is everything in my life so difficult just now?'

'I have a friend who works at Thomas Cook,' Delia said. 'Michael will fix it all up for us. What's the number of your car?'

She scribbled down the details. 'We have to be inconspicuous, or the reporters will be on our tail. How can we drive away unnoticed if the press are camped on your doorstep? They must know your car.'

'They do. I've been taking taxis everywhere to try to throw them off the trail. Pity we can't take a cab to Italy. Do you think I should try to hire a car?'

'To take abroad? I doubt if you could. No. Who looks after your car? Is it a local garage? Can you trust them?'

'Do I trust anyone?'

'You'll have to, that's all. Get them to collect the car from your house. If the reporters start nosing round, they can tell them it needs some work because you're driving north at the weekend.'

'By which time, we can be in France.'

'If Michael gets a move on, yes.'

FOUR

‘Climbing in and out of windows, I ask you,’ Jessica said to Delia, as she clambered in through the kitchen window once more. ‘I just hope that my daily locks up securely tomorrow.’

‘Does your daily know where you’re going?’

‘She does not. She thinks I’m going north, to my parents’ house. She’s going to look after Harry for me. She knows he fights with Mummy’s dogs, so she won’t wonder why I’m not taking him. Are you packed, is that suitcase all you’re taking?’

‘I’m used to travelling light,’ said Delia, attempting to stuff a slip down the side of the case.

‘Let me,’ said Jessica. ‘Honestly, with all the travelling you do, why haven’t you learned to pack properly?’

‘It all comes out creased, whatever I do.’

Jessica was unfolding and refolding and tucking everything in with swift and expert hands. ‘There, plenty of room if you pack it right.’ She shut the lid and clicked the catches into place. ‘Ready?’

‘Do we really need to use the fire escape? Surely no one will be outside at this time of night?’

‘They know I’m staying with you; don’t you think they might be out there in a parked car, with the windows steaming up? We can’t risk it.’

They manhandled Delia’s suitcase down the metal fire escape, Jessica wincing at every sound they made. The back way from Delia’s flat led into a quiet street of Victorian houses. There was a shimmer of frost in the air, and Delia began to cough.

‘Control yourself, or you’ll wake the neighbours, hacking away like that,’ Jessica said.

‘Can’t help it. Where did you leave the car?’

Jessica’s racing-green MG was parked near the corner of a silent street that was inhabited only by a tabby cat slinking home after a night on the tiles. They squeezed Delia’s suitcase in beside Jessica’s case. Jessica got into the driver’s seat and put the key in the ignition. ‘There’s a road atlas in the glove compartment,’ she said. ‘Are we heading for Dover?’

‘No, we’re going to Lydd airfield, in Kent. I’ll map-read for you. We’re flying the car over to Le Touquet. Expensive, but it’s worth it. Michael suggested it. The papers have stringers at the ports, but they won’t bother with a small airfield like that. And they won’t be expecting you to flee the country, not if they think you’re going up to Yorkshire.’

FIVE

Dawn was breaking as a weary Delia and Jessica drove the last few miles to the airport. It was hardly more than a landing field, with a man so clearly ex-RAF in charge that Jessica said in an appalled whisper to Delia, 'Let's hope he didn't know Richie.'

The plane was waiting on the runway, heavy-bellied and stubby-winged. A laconic mechanic took the key and ran the MG up the ramp and into the dark space inside. He clattered back down the ramp and directed them to some rickety steps set against the side of the plane.

'Hardly luxury travel,' Delia said, as she stooped to enter the plane. They sat down on one of the two benches that were placed on either side of the fuselage. Opposite them, a man in a grey suit was reading a newspaper, and beside him were a pair of sleepy-eyed Frenchmen who said good morning; one was smoking a French cigarette that filled the narrow space with strong, foreign fumes.

The plane lumbered along the runway and heaved itself into the air. The sound of the engines was too loud for any conversation; Delia twisted herself round and looked out of the small window. She could see the whirring propeller, and, looking down, the crests of white peaking on grey waves. They flew low across the Channel, so low that, as they approached the French coast and flew over a fishing boat straggling back to harbour, Delia could see the face of the man at the tiller.

The flight only took half an hour, and by mid-morning, refreshed with black, bitter coffee, they had left Le Touquet and were motoring along straight French roads towards Paris. A slight mist lingered in the air, and it was no warmer than England, but to Delia it felt as though she'd landed in a new world.

'Oh, the relief of getting away,' Jessica said. 'I'm so grateful to you. I hope you meant it about the work.'

'I did. You know me, I'm a pro. If I couldn't spare the time, I'd have said so, even though you are my oldest friend.'

Jessica looked over her shoulder. Behind them the road stretched away between two neat lines of plane trees; the only other person visible was a cyclist in a beret, pedalling slowly and deliberately.

'Do stop looking round,' said Delia. 'We haven't been followed—we'd know by now if we had. Or do you think Giles Slattery will be after us, disguised as a Frenchman on a bicycle?'

'You may joke, but you've no idea how persistent those ghastly reporters can be.'

'Did you tell anyone you were coming to France?'

'Only Mr Ferguson. My lawyer. I think that was all right, don't you?'

'As long as he doesn't spill the beans to any prowling reporters.'

'He won't,' said Jessica, with certainty. 'He's not that sort of man.'

'What's he like? Is he going to put pressure on Richie?'

Mr Ferguson had startled Jessica on her first visit to his offices. Winthrop, Winthrop & Jarvis had refused to act for her, not caring for messy divorce cases, and had recommended Mr Ferguson, of King's Bench Walk. 'He has a reputation for handling such cases with skill and discretion,' Mr Jarvis told her.

Short, stocky Mr Ferguson was altogether a different kind of lawyer from the grim-visaged Mr Jarvis. No grey striped trousers and black jacket for Mr Ferguson. He wore a crumpled grey suit that had seen better days, favoured loud ties and, Jessica was sure, never wore a bowler hat.

'A foxy man,' Jessica said. 'But very clear. There's no such thing as divorce by consent, although they did try for reform after the war, so he told me. The politicians wouldn't have it. Too risky for the stability of family life. So there have to be grounds.'

'Such as adultery.'

'Or mental cruelty or intolerable conduct—actually, isn't that the adultery bit? Or insanity.'

'You've said that Richie is crazy.'

'He is, but no judge would accept that for a moment. Then there's desertion.'

'Well, you've deserted him.'

'That doesn't count, not if he doesn't want to bring an action. Which he doesn't.'

'Anything else?'

'Rape, sodomy, bestiality.' Jessica laughed. 'Can you imagine stuffy old Jarvis saying those words in front of me?'

'Has Richie been unfaithful?' said Delia.

'Yes.'

'Then you've got grounds.'

'Not grounds I can use.'

Jessica had refused to give any details to Mr Ferguson. 'They say, never lie to your lawyer or your accountant,' he said, giving her a shrewd look.

'I'm not lying. I'm simply telling you that, yes, he has committed adultery, and no, I can't cite the other person.'

'Pity. Of course, any case you brought, especially if it were contested, would be headline news. So if there's someone whose name you don't want to see dragged through the pages of the gutter press…'

'Richie knows I won't bring the other woman into it,' Jessica said to Delia. 'So he's sitting pretty. And I get all the opprobrium for walking out on him, and he preserves a hurt and dignified silence.' She fiddled with a thread on her glove. 'Oh, why did I marry him? Theo says…' She gave Delia a swift look and changed the subject. 'Heavenly countryside.'

SIX

The newsroom at the *Sketch* was a blaze of lights on a dark morning, and a hive of activity and noise, with phones ringing, messenger boys running in and out, and people having shouted conversations with one another across the room.

'Mr Slattery,' said a brassy blonde in a tight skirt, as the swing doors opened and Giles Slattery came in. 'Telephone message. Your bird's flown the coop.'

'Mrs Meldon?'

'Yes.'

Giles Slattery swore.

The blonde, who had heard much worse, took no notice. 'Her char says she's gone to the country, to her family in Yorkshire. Jim's checking that end.'

'Tell Jim to see what he can find out, but my bet is that she hasn't gone home. Doesn't get on too well with Mummy and Daddy right now; they adore Richie Meldon and are very angry with her.'

'The Meldons are in Scotland,' called out a lissome young man, who was perched on a window sill and twirling a pencil in his fingers. 'Staying with those rich cousins of theirs, the Lander-Husseys. There are a few lines about it in William Hickey's column this morning.'

Giles Slattery hooked his mac on the hatstand and tossed his trilby on to a dusty head of Karl Marx that some office wag had placed on top of a filing cabinet. He sat down and drummed his fingers on the desk.

Where could she have gone? he said to himself. His mouth screwed up at one side as he thought. 'Put Sam on to checking the ferries. Since she's driving, she could be anywhere, but I have a hunch she's heading abroad. Easier for her to hide out on the Continent, out of reach of hubby and the press, that's what she'll think. Well, she thinks wrong.'

Slattery rammed one of his thin cigars into his mouth. He struck a match and lit it, then shook out the match and dropped it on the floor.

'Tell Sam to get on to that airstrip in Kent, what's it called? Lydd. You can fly your car over to France from there, if you've got the money. She'll have gone to Paris; these bloody women escaping from their husbands always head for Paris. God damn the woman for slipping through our fingers. And get me Mr Meldon on the phone.'

'Is he back in the country?'

'How the hell should I know? Just get him, okay?'

SEVEN

Delia drove on in silence, the name Theo sounding in her ears. Theo, Theo. His name still gave her heart a jolt. Theo, Jessica's older brother, the love of her life, now married to her sister, Felicity.

'So you haven't told Theo you're off to Italy?' she said.

'Absolutely not, he'd pass it on to Richie in a flash, don't you think?'

'I'm sure he wouldn't.' Delia couldn't keep the indignation out of her voice. 'You malign him.'

'No, you idolise him. For goodness' sake, Delia, surely you're over him now? He and Felicity have been married for more than two years.'

'Of course I'm over him,' Delia lied.

They drove the next few miles in silence. Then Jessica asked, 'Where are we going in Paris?'

'I thought we'd go to the hotel I usually stay in. It's on the left bank, not smart or opulent, but clean and comfortable, with a little courtyard where one can sit out and have breakfast, if the weather's kind.'

The weather in Paris was kind. For the first time in weeks, Delia felt the tightness in her chest relax. She relished the green bursting out on the trees, the warm spring sunshine, and envied the young lovers who strolled, arms round each other, along the banks of the Seine. She and Jessica walked over the Pont Neuf, and stopped to watch the barges passing beneath them, waving to a girl sitting on the roof of one of them, and then they walked along the quais, passing artists at their easels, a girl sitting with her back against the wall, a typewriter on her knees, a group of boys fishing.

Delia knew Paris much better than Jessica, and they spent two blissful days exploring, shopping and eating.

'You've no idea how wonderful it is not to be constantly avoiding reporters,' Jessica said, after another delicious meal.

'We should drink a toast to Beatrice Malaspina, otherwise we wouldn't be here.'

'I just hope they won't trace me.'

'Madame Doisneau is holding on to the forms we filled in until the day we leave; she says she has no time for the *flics*. Besides, the reporters will be prowling around your parents' place.'

'Yes, but they'll ask questions in the village, and someone's bound to tell them that Mummy and Daddy are away, and that I'm not there either.'

'All that takes time, so while the going's good, just don't think about it. Now, if I'm going to be on time for my appointment with the French lawyer that Mr Winthrop told me to see, I'd better get going.'

The French lawyer turned out to be a Gallic equivalent of Mr Winthrop, dry and lean in a dark suit, but he did unbend enough to tell Delia that she would be joined at the Villa Dante by three other people named in Beatrice Malaspina's will. 'If they agree to make the journey,' he added.

'He wouldn't tell me anything else about them. Clams, all these family lawyers, whatever nationality they are, let's just hope the Italians have more to say,' she said to Jessica afterwards.

'So you haven't found out anything more about Beatrice Malaspina?'

'Nope, nor about the Villa Dante. You do realise that it might turn out to be a boarding house, and Beatrice Malaspina some old dink who took in English guests?'

'It could be. Or a house in an Italian suburb.'

'He showed me where it is on a map. It's near a small town called San Silvestro. Historic and picturesque, he said, but I don't know if he meant the villa or the town.'

'And no details of your fellow legatees?'

'None. I did ask when they'd be arriving at the Villa Dante, but he just said that we all had to be there by the end of the month.'

'Which gives us plenty of time to enjoy a few more days in Paris,' said Jessica happily. 'Let's go back to that shop where we saw those heavenly silk pyjamas.'

'And aren't you going to buy some new summer clothes? It could be warm in Italy.'

Jessica was surprised at that. 'Isn't it always warm in Italy?'

'No,' said Delia. 'I remember singing in Florence one March, I've never been so cold, and there were six inches of snow on the ground; people laughed at my surprise and said that the Italian winter is Italy's best kept secret. On the other hand, I've baked in April in Milan, so there's no telling.'

'I packed a few summer frocks and a sundress and a pair of shorts and bathing things, so that will do me if it's warm.'

They were sitting outside a café near Notre Dame, enjoying an aperitif before deciding where to have dinner. The city was emerging from dusk into the twinkling lights of evening. They watched the stream of people walking past: a man with a parcel dangling from his finger, tied in a neat loop, a woman with a doll-like child tripping along beside her, a pair of highheeled ladies of the night, little fur collars making a frame for their dramatically made-up faces, an officer whose eyes flickered over them as he slowed for a moment, hesitating, before he strode on; a young couple who could hardly be out of their teens walking with her arm wrapped around his waist while he held her close to him with a protective arm over her shoulders and her other hand in his.

'I like her hairdo,' Delia was saying, but Jessica wasn't listening. She had stiffened, her eyes focused on a figure lounging against a lamp post.

'Giles Slattery,' she breathed. 'Over there, in that mac he always wears, I'd know him anywhere.'

'You're imagining it,' Delia said. 'Beasties under the bed, that's all. Lots of men wear those macs.'

Jessica wasn't imagining anything. Her mind might play tricks on her; she might have caught sight of a stranger in a mac, but no, she was sure it was Slattery; the angle of his hat, his posture, the relaxed stance of a man accustomed to standing and waiting and watching—all the details were horribly familiar. She dragged Delia inside the café and stood by the window, peering out over the letters painted on the glass.

'There he is, leaning against that cast-iron lamp post, just lighting one of those ghastly thin cigars he always has dangling from his mouth.'

Delia was at her shoulder, and saw his face illuminated for a moment by the match. 'God, you're right.'

'No question about it. Do you think he knows where we're staying?'

'Bound to. He must have followed us when we came out of the hotel, otherwise how would he know we were here at this café? Quick, there must be another way out. Let's pay and slip out through the back.'

Which they did, into a noisome alley, with refuse piled against the wall and an unpleasant film on the cobbles underfoot.

'You get the car, and wait for me round the corner from the hotel,' Delia said, as they tumbled out of the taxi which had miraculously been drawn up at the end of the alleyway. 'I'll cram everything into the suitcases and settle up with Madame.'

Delia shot through the door of the hotel as Jessica called out, 'And why not tell her we're going to Austria or Germany? To put Slattery off the scent.'

EIGHT

‘Mr Grimond wants to see you right away, Mr Bryant,’ said the secretary in the outer office. ‘The moment you got in, he said.’

‘Have I time for my tea?’ Mr Bryant said, eyeing the cup on his desk, which had a saucer balanced on top, and a custard cream biscuit beside it.

‘At your peril. He’s on the warpath.’

‘Better get it over with, I suppose,’ said the youthful Mr Bryant with a sigh.

Mr Grimond’s office was entirely without colour. Situated on the second floor of a red-brick building in Queen Anne’s Gate, it overlooked St James’s Park, or would have done if its occupant hadn’t chosen to shut out the view with two dingy blinds. A square of grey carpet, of precisely the right size for his civil service rank, was laid on the floor, and on it was placed a dark wooden desk with a scratched leather top, strewn with buff files. Mr Grimond matched the sobriety of his room with his salt and pepper hair, faded tweed suit and brown tie. He sat on a wooden revolving chair that squeaked dismally every time he moved.

‘You wanted to see me?’ Mr Bryant said.

Grimond looked up from his file. ‘Got in at last, have you? Yes. A man’s gone missing. One George Helsinger. Dr Helsinger. Alice has asked for his file. Read it, and then catch the next train to Cambridge.’

‘Cambridge?’

‘Cambridge. Cold market town on the edge of the fens.’

‘I know Cambridge. I was at university there. But why do I have to go to Cambridge?’

‘Because the man who’s gone missing is one of their boffins.’

‘Oh, dear. Is he important?’

‘Would I be going to this much trouble if he weren’t? He’s one of our top men. An atom scientist. Worked on the A bomb at Los Alamos, nothing he doesn’t know. And I bet my last ten-bob note he’s halfway to Moscow by now.’

‘In which case, why am I going to Cambridge?’

‘To make enquiries. Talk to his colleagues, his landlady, find out what he’s been working on, has he been moody, what are his political views, as if I didn’t know. He’ll be a Red, like all the rest of them.’

‘When was he reported missing?’

‘Yesterday, after I noticed that he was down as having been granted a sabbatical. Six months’ leave of absence from the laboratory, I ask you, nobody gives us six months off on full pay. I checked to find out where he was spending his time, and it turned out nobody knew. No attachments to any foreign universities—that’s what they often do, apparently, take themselves on a jaunt to America or France or somewhere they can be idle at the taxpayer’s expense. “Time off to think” is all the idiots he works with could come up with.’

‘Do we know if he has actually gone abroad?’

‘Told his landlady he was going to the Continent, and didn’t know when he’d be back. He’s gone all right.’

‘Have we traced him?’

‘Doing it now, checking on the airports and ferries. Trail will have gone cold; he left the day before yesterday. He’s done a flit, defected, no question about it. There’ll be hell to pay on this one, mark my words.’

NINE

Marjorie's heart lifted as the ancient taxi, reeking of terrible old French cigarettes, rumbled its way across the cobbled streets. Paris was alive; Paris had been reborn; all the harrowing times of Occupation were now only a memory, if a vivid one for someone of Marjorie's age, who remembered the war and the distress of the fall of France all too well. The houses were still shabby, with peeling paint and crumbling stucco, the roads uneven and pot-holed, the pavements cracked and disorganised; but yet, underneath it all, the vitality of the city was there, unquenched and unmistakable.

And the sun was shining. And she was hungry, very hungry, her hunger sharpened by the shops and stalls they passed, fruit piled high, a little boy walking along with a baguette almost as long as he was tall tucked under his arm, a corner stall with oysters laid out in icy baskets.

The taxi ground to a halt with a screech of uncertain brakes, and the driver heaved himself out and slouched round to let her out and hand her her suitcase.

She recklessly handed over some of her precious francs, including a tip more generous than his surliness warranted, but she was in Paris, and it was spring, and she was, for this moment at least, happy, and the tip earned her an answering smile and even a civil 'Au revoir, Madame'.

Madame! Yes, she'd been Madame for a long time now. How many years it was since she'd arrived in Paris, an eager seventeen-year-old, definitely a mademoiselle, plunging into a delightful world of cafés and jazz and endless, relentless pursuit of love and pleasure and fun. Paris had been her liberation, but it wasn't a liberation that had survived her inevitable return to England, to a necessary job, mindnumbingly boring, so boring that she'd found herself using every scrap of time when the supervisor's eyes weren't on her to scribble stories that took her out of the dull office and into a headier, richer world of the imagination. Then her second liberation, of finding she could make enough money by her pen, just enough to get by, so that she could give up her job, which she'd left with joy in her heart, swearing to herself that never, no, never again would she work in an office.

A thin woman swathed in grey garments, and with dark, suspicious little eyes, pushed a ledger towards her.

'Papers,' she said. 'Passport. How long are you staying?'

It was all so familiar, the Hotel Belfort, with its tiny entrance hall, the vase of dried flowers, dustier and more shrivelled than ever, sitting on the scruffy counter, the brass bell that gave off only a dull thud when struck, instead of the expected clang. Even Madame Roche didn't seem to have changed a bit.

'You don't remember me, Madame Roche? I used to stay here, before the war.'

Madame's eyes flew heavenwards. 'Ah, before the war, that is a long time ago. Who can remember before the war? Everything was different before the war.'

Yes, and I bet you had German lodgers, and fleeced them, just as you've always fleeced your clients, Marjorie thought, as she took the large key that Madame held out for her. Why, she wondered, knowing what Madame Roche was like, had she always stayed here when she was in Paris? Familiarity, and she liked the area: the boulangerie on the corner, the little shop that sold tin goods, the kiosk where she bought her daily paper, the old woman selling flowers from a tiny stall. Buckets and buckets of flowers; no doubt the woman and her flowers were long gone.

It was a mistake. This was a mistake. She should have gone straight through; it was madness to break her journey in Paris. If she'd left early in the morning, caught the first boat, gone straight to the lawyer's office, collected the money, then she could have been on the train to Italy even now, not stirring up old memories that were better forgotten.

Her happy mood was draining away. No, she wasn't going to look back, she wasn't going to let any regrets take her back into the glums. Come on, Marjorie, she told herself. Let's see how much money you've got, and then go out and find a restaurant.

She stared at the notes in the envelope, each bundle held in a paperclip, with a white sheet of paper beneath it. French francs, one said, and a much bigger bundle of Italian lire.

Had they made a mistake? Why on earth would they give her that much money?

'Under the terms of the late Mrs Malaspina's will, we are directed to defray all necessary expenses for your journey to Italy,' the grave lawyer in London had told her. 'We shall give you here in England the maximum you are allowed by government regulations to take out of the country. Obviously, once you are on the other side of the channel, out of the sterling area, such restrictions do not apply, and our colleagues in Paris will ensure that you have enough money to continue on your way to Italy.'

'But who is Beatrice Malaspina? There must be a mistake. I've never heard of her.'

There had been no mistake, the lawyer assured her. Her name, her full name, her address, even her parentage, daughter of Terence Swift, all of it was perfectly correct. The Marjorie Swift that Beatrice Malaspina, the late Beatrice Malaspina, had summoned to Italy was quite definitely her, not some other Marjorie Swift.

She had given up wondering why. Brief fantasies of the white slave trade flashed through her mind, and then she'd laughed at herself. She'd never been the sort to appeal to any kind of white slaver, and now, well past thirty—admit it, nearer forty—skinny and grey after the last few difficult years, she wouldn't fetch sixpence on any slave market.

A scheme, a touch of spivvery? What would be the point? She had nothing that anyone could swindle her out of. Less than a hundred pounds in the world, and that would be gone by the end of the year, and then, horror of horrors, unless a miracle happened, she would be back once more in the office job she'd sworn never to take again.

Always supposing she could find any such employment. Who would want to employ a woman no longer in the first flush of youth, and a woman moreover who hadn't had a proper job for more than ten years? The familiar fear flooded over her, but she pulled herself up. A week ago, she had never heard of Beatrice Malaspina; a week ago, she had no more idea of being in Paris than of finding herself on the moon. Where there was a will, perhaps there was an inheritance, although why a total stranger should leave her so much as a Bible was beyond her.

Unconsciously, as she thrust the key into the lock, and fought the warped door, ideas began to creep into her head. Mistaken identity? Clichéd, but then everything was a cliché until you wrote it afresh. Wills? Murders were done for wills. And mystery, the mysterious woman summoning the English spinster.

She put her suitcase on the rickety stand provided for it, took off her coat—once good, now threadbare—and removed her hat. She washed her face and hands in the basin, supplied with a mere trickle of water, but enough for her purpose. Then, in a moment of bravado, she took out a powder compact, and sponged the last few grains on to her cheeks.

That day in Paris brought Marjorie back into the human race, that was how she saw it. The next morning, the memory of a meal such as she hadn't had for years still in her mouth and in her mind, she woke early, and set off to walk the Paris streets. She stopped for a café au lait and a croissant, the buttery pastry melting in her mouth, a taste so delicious that it almost hurt senses dulled by the last few years of darkness and fear and despair. How could she have thought of leaving it all? Of never again greeting glad day as the sun rose over the Seine, never feeling a taste explode in her mouth, never greedily gulping down coffee, hot and black and bitter.

She walked along the left bank, over the bridges, across the Ile de la Cité. In her mind was the France of Dumas, an untouched world of swords and kings and musketeers, not the rundown shops and streets in front of her eyes. Flaubert would provide a more realistic model, but no, on that day she saw Paris through the eyes of a Romantic, not a realist.

And so the evening brought her, weary, but with an underlying sense of happiness that was so unfamiliar she didn't trust it, to the Gare de Lyon, to catch the overnight Paris-Lyon-Nice train.

On which the French lawyers had booked her a compartment, a bed in a Wagon Lits carriage; a luxury beyond her imagining. She pinched herself as she sniffed the clean white sheets, jumped guiltily as the *conducteur* put his head round the door to enquire if she wanted anything, and then made her pillow wet with tears.

Tears for what, she asked herself, as she turned the damp object over and gave it a defiant punch. For the girl she had once been? For the fact that she was, despite her best efforts, still alive? That someone, even someone she knew no more than the man in the moon, had cared enough to leave instructions and money for her to travel in this quite unaccustomed comfort? Tears of relief for being away from her wretched life in England, of gratitude for the exquisite omelette she had eaten at the station before getting on the train, of anger at herself that she should be grateful for such tiny things.

Les petits riens, she told herself as she snuggled luxuriously into her berth. The train seemed to echo the words, *petits riens, petits riens*. It was the little nothings that made life worth living, in the end.

Then she mocked herself for thinking such nonsense. The *petits riens* were all very well, but it was the greater things of life that caused all the trouble, and they pushed everything else out of the way, crashing in on one's dreams and delights, and turning happiness into misery.

TEN

In the next compartment, George Helsinger wasn't asleep. He preferred wakefulness to sleep whenever possible, only succumbing to slumber when tiredness simply became too much for him. For sleep brought dreams, and these were dreams he could do without. It was odd, that he, the least violent of men, should have become involved in the most violent act humanity had ever wreaked upon itself. And that even ten years later, his guilt and sense of moral failure should still haunt him in this way.

Pure science, that was what his life was about, so how had it ended up with nothing pure about it, and a bang that changed the course of the world? Nothing, now, would or could ever be the same again. He marvelled at how people went about their daily lives as though nothing were different, as though it had merely been another bomb among the tens of thousands, a bigger bomb, but still just death and destruction falling from the sky.

But it changes everything, he wanted to tell people. Only no one wanted to hear what he had to say. It was over now, past, history, what was done was done, and hadn't that act of extreme violence brought an end to all the other violence, and wasn't that a good outcome? And if they now all lived under its shadow and threat, well, wasn't all life a risk?

He had found recently, as he lay in a state between wakefulness and sleep, a zone where the bad dreams and memories were kept at bay, that prayers from his youth came traipsing into his mind. He had, he would have said, long put the fathers and their rigorous, prayer-filled life behind him. He had become a man of science, had turned his back on God, had played God. Along with his fellow scientists.

Yet here were those words, filling his brain with their remorseless repetitions. The Kyrie: *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison.* Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Hail Marys—how long was it since he'd said a Hail Mary? Yet the words were there as though they'd never left him: *Ave Maria, gratia plena*. Blessed art thou…

Was he losing his wits? Was he going to end up in a mental asylum? He'd heard rumours about some of his fellow scientists, that they'd gone bananas; well, many of them were bananas to start with.

He didn't notice the clean comfort of the sheets; he was moving in a world of bewilderment, in which French lawyers and Wagon Lits reservations seemed to be nothing to do with him. The meeting with the lawyer in England came back to him like the memory of an inexplicable dream.

'You can go?' Mr Winthrop had asked. 'There's no problem about leaving the country?'

George had stared at him. 'There is a problem, for I have no money. And even if I had, the amount one is allowed to take out of the country is, I believe, quite inadequate for anything more than a few days in Ostend.'

'Not quite as bad as that. Many people manage to go away for a fortnight or more on their allowance…However, that need not concern us. All your expenses will be paid, and the arrangements for onward travel from Paris will be made across the Channel.'

The late Beatrice Malaspina. Who was this mysterious woman, summoning him from beyond the grave, drawing him across Europe to he knew not what? The lawyer in England had been able to give him no details; the lawyer in Paris was working to precise instructions, he said. If he knew anything more, which George doubted, he was not going to pass on the information.

In the morning, he would be in Nice. Nice! Haven of artists and writers and aristocrats, a world away from his laboratory, from the dingy rooms he occupied in Cambridge, from rainswept, foggy England.

He could see the map of France unfolding in his mind's eye. Down through the Loire valley, the railway line running alongside the great river, down through the heart of France and so into raffish Nice; raffish but at the same time elegant, that was how Nice had been before the war. He had spent

a fortnight there in the languorous hot days of 1938, guest of a fellow scientist, unusual for being of a background and wealth quite unlike most scientists.

His host, he recalled, had gone on to enjoy a distinguished war, adviser to Churchill, honours, position.

And, no doubt, a sound digestion and a good conscience, and the ability to sleep at night. Any destruction he had wrought on his fellow human beings had been a remote affair, a matter of memos and committees and impersonal, reasoned decisions.

I should have been a biologist, George told himself. Or a botanist, what harm had botanists ever done to anyone? Would he ever have imagined, as a bony boy, that his passion for mathematics could bring him to a state of such despair? His first teacher had warned him how it might be. 'Numbers will get the better of you, George; you will never be able to escape them. They will be the master, not you.'

Prophetic words, if only uttered to take a brilliant youngster down a peg or two.

Lulled by the steady rhythm of the train, George slept despite himself, overcome by sheer exhaustion. And for once his sleep wasn't trampled on by the hobgoblins of the past; he slept soundly and dreamlessly, and awoke to find the sun straining through the blind, and the *conducteur* rapping at the door to tell him that they would soon be arriving in Nice, and that *petit déjeuner* was being served in the restaurant car.

'Take your passport with you, monsieur. It is not far to the border.'

There was something about borders, Marjorie told herself as she made her way along swaying corridors to the restaurant car for her *petit déjeuner*. Red and white poles and no man's land and customs and officials, and the knowledge that you were passing from one country to an entirely different one.

The restaurant car was surprisingly full; who would have thought there would be so many people travelling to Italy at this time of the year? A waiter hurried forward, shrugging deprecatingly. Madame would sit here, if the gentleman permitted, a fellow English traveller…

Marjorie looked at the seat, where a tall, balding man in round spectacles was staring out of the window. The waiter coughed, and the man turned his head, looking at Marjorie with dark, intelligent eyes.

George saw the nervous, bony face of a woman whom he would have known anywhere in the world for an Englishwoman. He half rose, made a little bow. 'Of course, please…' with his usual courtesy, although he would have preferred to have his table to himself, not to share it with a woman who would doubtless feel obliged to make conversation. It was odd how English people had reverted to their old habits of reserve and suspicion after the war. Conversations with strangers at bus stops and on trains, being invited in for a cup of tea by neighbours you had never spoken to before, the very unEnglish sense of camaraderie—all of that had vanished. While queues and saving string and old envelopes had stayed. It was very odd.

Marjorie was eyeing the basket of croissants and brioches and fresh rolls in a hungry manner. 'Please,' he said, passing Marjorie the basket; she took a croissant, and sat back to allow the waiter to pour her coffee.

How long would he be staying in Italy? The lawyer had been vague. 'In fact, Dr Helsinger, I have to admit that I know little about Italian legal procedures. It might be a few days, or perhaps longer. There are other interested parties who will be arriving at the Villa Dante, one of them is an American, and of course I have no idea as to his movements or time of arrival. Since the late Mrs Malaspina specified that all the beneficiaries of her will should be brought together at the villa, we must abide by the conditions she laid down.'

'Then there are other people going to Italy from England?'

The lawyer's face had taken on a shuttered look. 'I think I can say yes, but of course under no circumstances can I divulge any details of anyone else named in the will. That would be most improper.'

'No, indeed, quite improper,' George said, at once annoyed with himself for being drawn into the kind of language this stiff-necked lawyer used.

'Delicious,' Marjorie said. 'One has forgotten how food should taste.'

They talked in a polite and distant way about France, France before the war, Paris in the thirties, when George had been a student there, Paris now, as they had glimpsed it during their brief time in the city.

'I, too,' George said, 'was only able to stay one night and I should have liked to stay longer. To revisit old haunts, although of course nothing will be quite the same as it was. It is impossible that it should be.'

'Are you travelling on business?' Marjorie asked.

She had torn a roll apart—why did the English rip at their bread, instead of dissecting it neatly with a knife?—and was spreading it liberally with butter.

'Personal business,' he said.

'Not work. You don't look like a businessman.'

He was startled. What did he look like? He was wearing a suit, a concession to the purpose of his journey. What was there to mark him out as different from his fellow men?

'You look as though you lived by your brains. I see you in a laboratory. Not smells, though, or germs. Too much equipment around you. Are you a scientist?'

Now he was even more startled. 'As it happens, yes. But I find it strange that you can tell. Have we perhaps met…?'

'No.' She was quite definite. 'I'd remember it if we had. Although during the war one met so many people, nearly all of them strangers.'

'So, then, there is something about me that marks me out as a scientist. What would that be?'

Marjorie added a spoonful of raspberry jam to her roll and took a mouthful.

George waited.

'It just came into my head that was what you are,' she said eventually, giving her mouth a determined wipe with her napkin. 'It sometimes does. Are you at a university, or do you work for a company? Or are you that mysterious thing, a government scientist?'

The habit of secrecy was so ingrained in George that he found this impossible to answer. 'I do scientific research' sounded lame, but it was the best he could manage. 'And you, are you travelling for pleasure?'

'Hardly likely or possible, with the sum the government allows us for travel. No, I, too, am here on personal business.'

'Are you going to Rome?'

'No, I shall leave the train at a place called La Spezia. Do you know Italy? Is it a pleasant town?'

'A naval port, I believe. Heavily bombed during the war. I have never been there.'

Marjorie seemed to lose interest, her eyes focusing on the scenery outside the window. 'It's very pretty along here. The hills and the sea. Very dramatic. I'm not staying at La Spezia, so I'm not really interested in what it's like. One just says these things, in a conversational way, does one not?'

She picked up her handbag from the seat where she had laid it. It was, he noticed, very shabby, but once it had been an expensive bag. Crocodile. He guessed that she wasn't in comfortable circumstances; there was something of a child with its nose pressed against a shop window about her. She did not look as though she were accustomed to travel of this kind.

Well, she would get off the train at La Spezia, as would he, and vanish to catch her train or bus, or be met by an aunt or a friend, and he would not see her again.

She was holding out her hand. 'Thank you for letting me share your table. Goodbye.'

She was walking away; too thin, and why didn't she hold herself straighter? Then she stopped and looked back at him, a faintly puzzled look on her face.

'Does the name Beatrice Malaspina mean anything to you?'

He was so surprised that he dropped his cup back on to its saucer with a crash that made heads swivel.

Marjorie came back to the table and sat down again. 'I can see it does. Are you named in the will as well? Is that why you're here, on the train? Because, like me, you're on the way to the Villa Dante?'

ELEVEN

Mrs Wolfson was no one's idea of a typical American grandmother. She was sharp and bohemian, a townee to her fingertips, and she had never baked an apple pie in her life.

Lucius Wilde had always loved her and had always been in awe of her. It didn't matter that he was a successful man in his thirties; Miffy, as she was known to friends and family alike, still provoked as much respect as affection in him.

'I've come to say goodbye,' he told her, after he'd kissed the beautifully made-up cheek offered to him.

'I shall miss you,' she said. 'I'll order martinis.' She rang the bell and a maid appeared almost at once. 'In the library,' she said, and led the way up the beautiful curved staircase to the first floor.

Mrs Wolfson lived in a brownstone in Boston and had done so since she came to the house as the bride of Edgar Wolfson. Twenty years older than her, he had been a dealer in fine arts, had made a great deal of money, and had acquired for his own walls a large number of paintings, not to mention the sculptures and bronzes and porcelain and rugs that filled every available space.

Lucius loved this house. He loved the paintings, especially the twentieth-century ones, for his grandfather had had a progressive outlook and bought modern paintings long before the artists became fashionable or expensive.

The martinis came, and Miffy attacked hers with gusto. 'I just love the first cocktail of the day,' she said. 'Paris, and then London?'

'Paris for a couple of weeks, and then I'm going to visit some friends who live near Nice, before going on to England.'

'Nice? To stay with the Forrests, I suppose. Will Elfrida be there? Wasn't she staying with them in Long Island when you met her?'

'Yes, and yes.'

'I wonder why you didn't bring her to meet me.'

'You know why. We became engaged on the eve of her return to England.'

'Bookings can be changed. You'll bring her back to America for a visit as soon as you're married? By which time, of course, it will be too late for you to discover whether I like her or consider her right for you.'

'Come on, Miffy, a man in his thirties is allowed to choose his own wife.'

'A man of any age can choose wrong. It alarms me that your parents are so pleased about the engagement. They say she's just perfect for you.'

'And so she is.'

'You aren't in love with her.'

'Oh, for heaven's sake…' Exasperating woman, but of course she was right. She had always been able to see through him and out the other side. 'You'll like her. She's lively and forthright…'

'Organising, so I've heard. And determined. I'm sure she'll be a great asset to your career, a woman like that can take a man even to the White House.'

That made him laugh. 'I have no political ambitions.'

'You have no ambitions of any kind, not of your own. All the ambition in your life is provided by other people. Have you ever thought about that?'

'Miffy, do lay off.'

'All right. Now, you've told me your plans, which I already knew: France, then a position in the English branch of the bank. That's not why you're here. Come clean, Lucius. What's on your mind?'

'Did you ever know someone called Beatrice Malaspina?'

The light was fading fast outside the windows, and Lucius didn't notice the watchful light in his grandmother's eyes. 'Because I've had an extraordinary letter from a firm of lawyers. I went to see them, in New York. They told me I'm named in the will of this Beatrice Malaspina.'

'Was she an American?'

Lucius shook his head. 'An Italian, I should think, judging by the name. The firm here are acting for her Italian lawyers. She has—had, I should say—a house on the coast somewhere in the north of Italy. Liguria. The terms of the will state that I must go there, to her house, the Villa Dante, to be able to collect this legacy.'

'Which is?'

'Haven't a clue. Could be a bundle of worthless lire, a set of spoons, her father's stuffed tiger—your guess is as good as mine.'

'How intriguing.'

'So you don't know her?'

'I've never met a Beatrice Malaspina. Of course, you're curious, and wills are wills, and if you're going to be in the south of France it won't be much of a detour—only you don't want to go to Italy.'

She said this as a simple statement of fact; it wasn't a question.

'Not really, no.'

'It was all more than ten years ago. And it was wartime.'

'It was wartime,' he agreed. 'Even so…'

'Don't you think it might be time to lay that particular ghost to rest?'

'How can I?'

'By not dwelling on it. Wars happen. These things happen. And your parents have done you no favours by blotting it out of their consciousness and never talking about it.'

'On the contrary, the last thing I want is for them to talk about it.'

'You went to Dr Moreton, but he didn't help.'

'Yes, I did, and no, he didn't.'

Which might be, Lucius reflected, because he didn't tell him the truth. He never had told anyone the truth, not even Miffy, although he wouldn't be surprised if she had guessed a good deal of it.

'Dr Moreton always was a fool. Your mother thinks the world of him; she's never been any kind of judge of character or professional competence. She hasn't learned that a shiny brass plate and hair going grey at the temples don't amount to a row of beans.'

'So.' Lucius leant forward, his hands dropped between his knees. He was looking at his feet, shod in shiny black Oxfords; how he hated polished laced-up shoes.

'So, do I think you should go? I don't deal in shoulds, Lucius, you know that. Have you asked your father if he knows anything about this departed person?'

'No.'

'And you don't intend to. Very wise. Any hint of an inheritance, and he'll want to take over.'

'I did ask Dolores. Whether she knew anything about Beatrice Malaspina.' Dolores had worked for his father's firm for more than thirty years, and she knew all the company's and partners' secrets. 'And drew a blank. She said it meant nothing to her.'

'You're going to Italy, in any case,' said his grandmother. 'You haven't come for advice.'

'No, not really. I thought at first that the lawyers had made a mistake, but no, correct down to the last detail, who I was, where I lived and worked.'

'They wouldn't tell you about Beatrice Malaspina?'

'Clams could learn a thing or two from them. Just acting on instructions from Italy, that's all they'd say. I asked if Beatrice Malaspina had lived to a ripe old age. I mean, she could have turned out to be my contemporary, who knows?'

'And?'

'They did tell me that she had lived to a very good age. And that was all they'd give away.'

‘Naturally, you thought you’d come and ask one old relic if she knew another one.’

‘Perhaps she was a friend of Grandfather’s. That’s what I wondered.’

‘As I said, I never met anyone of that name.’

Lucius finished his drink and stood up. ‘Thank you, Miffy. I’ll write and let you know how I get on.’

‘Mind you do. I’m intrigued. I shall be keen to hear what is the secret of the Villa Dante. And what Beatrice Malaspina has left you.’

‘If it’s silver spoons, I’ll share them with you.’

‘Like I need silver spoons. Find yourself a clear conscience, Lucius, then you can send that back to me. We can all do with one of those.’

The Villa

ONE

The mattresses of Delia's girlhood had all been uncomfortable. Her austere father was a great believer in very firm mattresses; he slept with a sheet of wood beneath his own mattress; and urged the rest of his family and staff to do the same. 'With a hard bed, the body relaxes, not the mattress.'

The mattresses at her Yorkshire boarding school had been thin, lumpy and set on a sagging mesh of strings; those at Girton College, Cambridge, were likewise meagre and designed to keep your mind on higher things than bodily comforts.

Which had left Delia a connoisseur of mattresses, and the one on Beatrice Malaspina's bed was perfect, neither too hard nor too yielding; hooey to her father and his theories of relaxation. Nothing could be more relaxing or comfortable, and when she awoke to the sound of birdsong outside the windows, and saw sunlight filtering through the shutters, it was after a deep and untroubled night's sleep, a rarity for her this winter, cursed as she was with bronchitis.

She slid out of bed and padded across the smooth dark red tiles to the windows: long, double windows stretching almost from the ceiling to the floor. She pulled them open and struggled for a few moments with the shutters before she found the catch and pushed them back against the walls.

Warm air drifted in as she stepped out on to a small terrace. The searing wind had gone, leaving only a slight breeze to make ripples on the red sand, warm and scrunchy under her bare feet.

Delia blinked at the unaccustomed brightness. It was too early in the morning for the sun to be high or hot, but there was a dazzling quality to the light that made her catch her breath. She looked out over a garden, once formal, now sadly overgrown, and saw a silvery gleam in the distance. It took her a few seconds to realise what it was. The sea! So the villa was on the coast.

Crashing sounds came from next door, and Jessica's tousled head looked out of an adjacent window. 'I say, you've got a balcony,' she said.

Her head vanished, and then she was calling out to Delia from the door of her room.

'Come out here, quick,' Delia said. 'You don't want to miss a minute of it.'

They stood together, leaning on the stone balustrade and gazing out at the green and blue and silver vista.

Jessica let out a long sigh. 'Heaven,' she said. 'Pure heaven. And can you hear Chanticleer out there?'

The vigorous cock crows mingled with the sonorous dong of a bell marking the hour.

'Was that seven strokes? Oh, the air is so fresh it almost hurts to breathe.'

'I do so hope this is the Villa Dante,' Delia said. 'We might find we have to decamp to a crumbling old house with no view and bedbugs in the mattresses.'

'I hadn't thought about bedbugs,' Jessica said. 'Still, no itchy bits this morning, and the bedrooms are quite up to date. It could have been all decayed fourposters with mouldering curtains, instead of which we get stylish art deco.'

'The villa is old, though. Eighteenth-century, wouldn't you think?'

'Don't ask me. Could be that, or older, or built fifty years ago. I think Italians, having found the kind of house they like, just go on building them. I'm going to get up, and let's see what we can do about breakfast.' Then, suddenly alert, 'What's that?'

Delia, lost in the view, came to. 'Did you hear something?'

'I think it was the gate. Hang on, we should be able to see it from one of the other rooms.' She vanished, then called across to Delia. 'A stout party in black coming up towards the house. At a guess, I'd say a servant.'

Delia didn't want to greet the new arrival in her nightclothes, so she hurled herself into the bathroom that led off her bedroom, a huge and marbled affair, with, however, no more than a trickle of water coming out of the substantial taps. Five minutes later, she was washed and dressed and

running down the stairs, clutching a red clothbound book. She caught up with Jessica, who was still in her pyjamas.

Voices were coming from the kitchen quarters. Delia pushed open the door, and there was the woman in black talking at great speed and at the top of her voice to a harassed-looking man with snow white hair and a wrinkled, deeply tanned face.

'*Buon giorno*,' Delia said.

The woman whirled round, startled, and then burst into smiles and more talk, of which Delia understood not one word.

'Can't you ask her to slow down?' said Jessica.

Delia held up a hand. '*Non capisco*,' she tried.

The flow of words slowed abruptly, and the woman made tutting noises before coming closer, and, jabbing her chest with a plump finger, said as one talking to idiots, 'Benedetta.'

'Signorina Vaughan,' said Delia, pointing to herself.

That brought an immediate and delighted response. '*La Signorina Vaughan, si, si*.'

'Looks like she was expecting you,' Jessica said.

Delia touched Jessica's arm. 'Signora Meldon.' And then, '*Ch'e la Villa Dante?*'

That brought more *si, si*s.

Delia was relieved. But the woman was off again, and, seeing their incomprehension, reached out and took their hands to lead them to the open door. '*Scirocco!*' she said, pointing dramatically to the heap of red sand that had come to rest by the stone threshold.

'I think she means sirocco,' said Delia. '*Si, scirocco*,' she said, and made a whooshing sound to indicate a mighty wind.

The woman nodded vehemently, and then, catching sight of the man standing by the table, flew at him, talking once more at the top of her voice. She paused for a second, to push him forward, saying, 'Pietro, Pietro.' Then she thrust a large broom into his hands and propelled him out of the door.

'Looks like he's on sweeping duty,' Jessica said. 'What's the Italian for breakfast?'

'Bother, I can't remember,' said Delia. She mimed putting food in her mouth; instant comprehension, and Benedetta was urging them out of the kitchen. She bustled past them, and led them along to the entrance hall. There she flung open a door and led the way into a room hardly visible in the semi-darkness. There was the sound of shutters opening, and light poured in from two sets of doors.

Delia stepped out through the doors. 'It's a colonnade,' she called back to Jessica. 'With a vaulted roof.' She came back into the dining room. 'It runs all along this side of the house and there are steps further along down into the garden. Necessary shade for hot summer days, I suppose, and there are plants weaving in and out of the balustrade. Clematis, for one, with masses of flowers, and wisteria.'

'*Prima collazione, subito!*' Benedetta said, setting down a basket of bread and a jug of coffee before whisking herself away.

It was a large, high room with faded frescoes on the panelled wall. A glass table, set on ornate wrought-iron supports, ran almost the length of the room. Four places were set at one end of the table. 'For our fellow guests,' Delia said. 'We're obviously the first to arrive.'

'No one said anything to you about a host or hostess, did they?' Jessica said. 'I mean, there could be a horde of Malaspinas.'

'I told you, there was nothing to be got out of Mr Winthrop, it was like talking to a deed box. But the French lawyer did say there was no one living at the villa now. Perhaps we're all to gather here, for a formal reading of the will.'

'Or to be bumped off, one by one, like in a detective story,' Jessica said cheerfully. 'In any case, they'll have to lay an extra place, if four are expected, since they can't have known I'd be coming as well.'

'I suppose the others were held up by the wind. Or maybe they'll arrive at the last minute. It's not the end of the month yet; the others might not be able to get away as easily as us. Let's hope they'll know something about the mysterious Beatrice Malaspina. Or perhaps it will all turn out to be a dreadful mistake, and they're the grieving heirs and will toss us out into the storm.'

'Doesn't look like there's any storm in the offing just at present,' Jessica said.

Delia stood beside the French window, restless, wanting Jessica to hurry and finish her breakfast.

Jessica poured more coffee. 'Are we going to look round the house?'

'Before anything, I'd like to go to the sea,' said Delia, catching her breath after a sudden fit of coughing. 'Sea air will do me the world of good.'

'You and your fascination with water,' said Jessica. 'No, don't fidget and fret. I'm hungry, and I'm going to finish my breakfast in my own good time. Then we'll go and indulge your Neptune complex.'

Delia loved the sea, and water in all its forms, and the sight of the shining Mediterranean from her bedroom window had filled her with longing to go down to the shore. 'Besides, it's not as though we'd rented the house. It seems rather rude just to prowl around it,' she said, sitting down again and trying not to look impatient.

'Do you suppose there's a private beach?'

'Probably,' said Delia, thumbing through her dictionary. '*Spiaggia* is the Italian for beach. I shall ask Benedetta.'

'Can you manage that? When did you learn Italian? Didn't you only do French and German at Cambridge?'

'We musicians pick up quite a bit, and I bought a Hugo's *Italian in Three Months* to study during rehearsals, there's a terrific amount of sitting about. Crosswords get boring, and I can't knit, so I decided to improve my mind and expand my horizons.'

Benedetta came in to offer more coffee and Delia enquired about the beach, which brought a volley of head-shaking and finger-wagging.

'Can't we go?' Jessica asked.

'I don't think it's territorial, more concern for our health.'

Benedetta was pointing at Delia's chest and making hacking noises.

'Especially for you. She's noticed your cough.'

More Italian poured out of Benedetta, accompanied by much gesticulation.

Delia shrugged. 'She's lost me. We'll just have to find our own way. *Il giardino?*' she said to Benedetta.

Which brought more frowns from Benedetta, and a reluctant gesture towards the steps and the garden and, finally, a dramatic rendering of a person shivering, crossing her arms and slapping herself vigorously.

'She wants you to put on a coat or jacket,' Jessica said. 'I don't need Italian to understand that.'

'Compared to England…Oh, all right, I can see you're about to fuss as well.'

Once outside, Delia was glad of the jacket she'd thrown over her shoulders; the air was fresh and the light breeze had none of the heat of the southerly wind of the night before. Jessica had pulled a jumper on over her shirt and thrust her feet into a pair of disreputable plimsolls.

They went out through the dining room into the colonnade, blinking in the strong sunlight.

'There are paintings on the walls,' said Jessica, stopping to inspect them.

Delia was already running down the steps to the garden, eager to be moving, to get to the sea. How absurd, like a child full of excitement at the beginning of a summer holiday, longing for the first glimpse of the sea, wanting nothing except to be on the beach. She turned and gave the frescoes a cursory glance, then came back up the steps for a closer look. The colours had faded, but the graceful lines of three women in flowing robes set among a luxuriance of leaves and flowers delighted her.

'They look old,' said Jessica. 'Or just faded by the sun, do you think? What are those words written in the curly banners above the figures? Is that Italian?'

'Latin,' said Delia. 'Sapientia, Gloria Mundi and Amor.' She pointed to each figure. 'Wisdom. Glory of the world, which is power, and Love.'

'Not the three graces, then. I must say, Wisdom looks pretty smug.'

'Love even more so. Her expression is like a cat who got the cream.'

'And Gloria Mundi reminds me of Mrs Radbert on speech day.'

Their headmistress had known all about power and possibly wisdom, but love had never tapped that severe woman on the shoulder, Delia was sure. She laughed. Jessica was right; Gloria Mundi only needed an MA gown to be Mrs Radbert's double.

The garden to the front of the house was a formal one, a pattern edged with bedraggled box hedges, and a desolate, empty fountain in the centre.

Jessica stopped under a broad-leaved tree. 'It's a fig. Look at the leaves, did you ever see such a thing? Like in all those Bible paintings. You don't realise how apt a fig leaf is until you see one, do you? I think if we follow this path, it'll take us to the sea.'

'Through the olive trees. Only think, this time last week we were in damp and foggy London, and now…' Delia made a sweeping gesture. 'All this. It's heaven. And I can smell the sea.'

'No Giles Slattery, no Richie.'

'No one knows where I am except old button-mouth Winthrop,' said Delia. 'Not even my agent, who'll be furious when he finds out I've vanished.'

They were walking through pine trees now, umbrella pines that cast a web of shadows around their feet. The ground was dusty and strewn with pine cones and needles, and a smell of resin lingered in the air. It was startling to come out of the darkness into bright sunlight and find the sea stretched out before them, a shimmering, radiant, turquoise blue under a blue heaven.

Delia stood and gazed, the light almost too much to bear, the beauty and the still perfection catching at her throat. In a tree just behind them, a bird was singing its heart out.

'Perfect,' said Jessica with a sigh. 'A little beach, utterly private. With rocks. Isn't it quite, quite perfect?'

'Stone steps going down to the cove,' said Delia, already on her way down. 'Bit slippery, so watch your footing.'

She felt drunk with the colours and the light and the beauty of the place. 'Trees for shelter, rocks to lean against, and this exquisite private place,' she said. 'Lucky old Beatrice Malaspina to have lived here. What a pity it's too early in the year to bathe.'

'We don't know how long we'll be here,' Jessica pointed out. 'Don't Italians take their time about the law, like late trains and so on? The Mediterranean sense of time, or rather non-sense of time. For myself, looking at this, I feel I could stay here for ever.' She paused. 'Of course, you wouldn't want to, not with your music to get back to.'

She perched herself on a rock and rolled up the legs of her trousers before dragging her plimsolls off and walking down to the sea.

'I'll worry about work when my chest's better,' Delia said. There was no point in fretting over her work; at the very thought of it, she began to cough. 'Besides, in a house like the Villa Dante, I'd be surprised if there weren't a piano. I've brought some music with me.'

'It's chilly,' Jessica announced, dipping white toes into the tiny lapping waves. 'About the same as Scarborough in July, though, and I've swum in that.'

'You aren't going to swim?'

'I might, if the weather stays warm. Too cold for you, though, with that chest of yours, so don't go getting any ideas. A paddle is your lot for the time being.'

'I've got stockings on.' Why hadn't she put on slacks, like Jessica?

'No one's looking.'

True. Delia hitched up her skirt and undid her suspenders. She rolled down her stockings and took them off, laying them carefully on a smooth rock, and went down to the water's edge.

'We'll be all sandy and gritty and we've nothing to dry our feet on,' she said, coming alive as the chill water swirled about her ankles. 'This is bliss.'

She looked down at her toes, distorted by the clear greenblue water, and wriggled them in the sandy shingle, disturbing a shoal of tiny fish as they fluttered past.

'It's odd,' she said as they sat on a rock and dried their feet with Jessica's handkerchief, 'to be staying in a house with no hostess. I feel as though Beatrice Malaspina is going to come sweeping into the dining room, to ask if we slept all right and whether we have everything we need in our rooms.'

'She'd better not. A ghost would be too much.'

'I wonder who the house does belong to.'

'You, perhaps. The mysterious Beatrice M might have left it to you in her will.'

'Why should she?'

They sat in companionable silence, listening to the birds' joyful song from the nearby trees, and the mew of gulls out at sea.

Delia lifted her face up to the sun. 'I can't believe how warm it is. So much for Benedetta and her shivers. Mind you, the guidebook is very doleful on the subject of Italian weather, which the author says is full of nasty surprises for unwary travellers. He advises warm underwear and thick coats until May, as the weather in most parts of Italy can be surprisingly inclement.'

'Killjoy.'

'He sounds like a man after my father's heart—you know how he mistrusts warmth and sunshine, as leading to lax habits and taking the pep out of the muscles of mind and body. And also, they drink wine in Italy, how shocking!'

'Felicity drinks. Last time I saw her, she was guzzling cocktails like nobody's business. I suppose she caught the habit from Theo, he's a great cocktail man.'

The spell was broken; the mere thought of Theo, the mention of his name, took the pleasure out of the day. Delia stood up. 'Let's go back to the house, and sit on the terrace and just do nothing at all.'

'We could look round the house.'

'Later. There's plenty of time. I shall go upstairs to change into a sundress, you find Benedetta and ask what we can sit on. I'll look up the word for deckchair in the dictionary.'

Benedetta was very doubtful about the deckchairs. It seemed that April was not only a month to go nowhere near the sea; it was also definitely not a month for sitting outside in the sun. Reluctantly, she instructed Pietro to bring out some comfortable chairs. She followed him with armfuls of cushions and several rugs.

'I think she means us to swathe ourselves in these, like passengers on an Atlantic crossing,' Delia said, taking a cushion and ignoring the rugs.

Jessica pushed her sunglasses up on her forehead and lay back, letting her mind drift. It was extraordinary how easy it was here just to be, to simply exist, free from the endless round of repetitive, tedious memories of a past she longed to forget, but which refused to go away.

'The wardrobes in the bedrooms are full of clothes,' Delia said. 'Did you notice?'

'Perhaps Beatrice Malaspina was a dressy woman.'

'They can't all be hers, because they aren't the same size.'

'Family clothes. Or maybe she had to watch her weight.'

'She might grow fatter and thinner, but she can hardly have grown or shrunk several inches. Heavenly evening dresses from the thirties, do you remember how glamorous they were?'

'Oh, yes, and didn't you long for the time when you could dress every evening? And then, of course, when it was our turn, it was all post-war austerity and clothes rationing.'

'You've some lovely frocks now. That's what comes of marrying a rich husband.'

Jessica was silent for a moment. Then she said, 'Richie will have had to buy himself some new clothes. I never told you what I did before I left, did I?'

It had surprised her, the visceral rage she felt for Richie at that point. Opening his large wardrobe she had hauled out all twenty-three of the Savile Row suits that were hanging there. She looked at them, lying in a heap on the bed, and then ran downstairs to his study for the large pair of scissors he kept on his desk. She cut two inches off sleeves and hem of every jacket and every pair of trousers. Pleased with her efforts, she made all his shirts short-sleeved, and hacked pieces out of his stack of starched collars.

Getting into her stride, she threw away one of each pair of cufflinks, snipped the strings on his squash and tennis racquets and dented his golf clubs and skates with some hefty bangs of a hammer. More cutting work saw to his fishing rods and driving goggles, and then she carefully removed every photo he possessed of her—not that there were many of them, only the large studio shots in heavy silver frames designed to look good on the baby grand which no one ever played. The pictures and snapshots of them together she dealt with by removing herself from the photos, leaving him gazing at nothing but blank, jagged-edged shapes.

He was beside himself with rage when he discovered the extent of her destructive efforts.

'Grounds for divorce, don't you agree?' she shouted at him down the telephone before slamming the receiver down and then, swiftly, picking it up again to ask the operator how she could change her number. 'I've been getting nuisance calls, you see.'

'Goodness, you must have been in a temper,' said Delia. 'How very unlike you. I wish I'd been there, I can't imagine you laying into his things like that.'

'It was surprising, wasn't it? But I enjoyed doing it. Very Freudian, I dare say. I wonder how he explained the sudden need for new suits to his tailors.'

'I expect they've seen it all before.'

'I can't believe I ever lived in that house with Richie. It all seems far away and unreal.'

'The Villa Dante has a timeless quality,' Delia said, closing her eyes. 'As though nothing exists except the present moment.'

TWO

Which wasn't, as it turned out, a very long moment, for barely half an hour later, when Delia was just drifting into a pleasant doze of warmth and sunshine and fresh air, and Jessica was well into her book, there were sounds of arrival, of a revving car, of voices: Benedetta's, Pietro's, another Italian man and then, unmistakably, people speaking in English.

'Oh, Lord,' said Jessica, laying down her book and swinging her legs to the ground. 'I think your fellow legatees are here.'

Delia didn't feel like greeting these people clad in a brief green sundress but Jessica, cheerful in the beige shorts she had put on when they came back from the sea, had no such qualms.

The Italian man, who had the slanting eyes and lively figure of a faun from the classical world, announced himself in a flurry of bows, eyeing Jessica's legs with evident approval, seizing her hand and bending over it, crying out how glad he was to make the acquaintance of Miss Vaughan.

'No doubt,' said Jessica. 'Only that's not me. I'm Mrs Meldon. This is Miss Vaughan.'

Dark eyes glowing at the sight of Delia's shapely form. 'But there is no Mrs Meldon expected,' he cried. 'I know nothing of any Mrs Meldon.'

'I drove here with Miss Vaughan,' Jessica said. 'The lawyers in Paris knew I was coming. Didn't they tell you?'

'No, the lawyer here, which is me, knows nothing about it; no one tells me anything. However,' he said, brightening, 'there is no problem, with the Villa Dante so large, and how pleasant for Dr Helsinger to have such charming feminine company.'

Delia was about to ask the faun what his name was when he recalled his manners, and with profuse apologies announced that he was Dottore Calderini, *avvocato*, legal adviser to the late Beatrice Malaspina, 'Such a wonderful lady, such a loss.'

Delia turned her attention to her fellow legatees. A dark woman with a bony face and angular frame, too thin for herself, and a tall balding man with intelligent, tired eyes and those round spectacles that no one wore any more. A don, by the look of him. Probably not the most exciting company in the world, but one of them might turn out to be a mine of information about Beatrice Malaspina and the Villa Dante.

The woman held out her hand. 'How do you do? I'm Marjorie Swift. This is George Helsinger. Are you here because of the will as well? The lawyers said there were four of us.'

'Only I'm not one of them,' said Jessica. 'Just a friend.'

'So there's one more to come,' said Marjorie, looking round as though she expected another legatee to leap out of a bush.

'Indeed, indeed, but as to when that will be I cannot tell you,' cried Dr Calderini. 'For I do not know when he comes, although it must be before May begins. So I am afraid here you must stay until we know he is coming, until he arrives.'

'What if he never comes?' asked Delia.

'People in wills always come,' said the lawyer with a sudden air of worldly cynicism. 'You may take my word for it.'

'I think,' said Delia, 'that Benedetta should show Miss—Mrs?—Miss Swift and Dr Helsinger to their rooms. If they've had a long train journey…'

'Long, but extremely comfortable,' said Marjorie. 'And I think first names, don't you, given the circumstances? I'm Marjorie.'

'My name's Delia, and this is Jessica.'

George shook hands with Delia and Jessica. 'I should be happy if you would call me George.' In the distance a church bell was tolling a single note, the sound carrying in the still air. 'The angelus,' said George.

'What?' said Delia.

'It is a bell rung every day at noon.'

They walked together towards the house and up the flight of shallow stone steps that led to the front door. At the threshold, Dr Calderini paused with a polite *Permesso?* before stepping inside.

Marjorie and George stood, amazed by the frescoes, exclaiming at the beauty of the marble-floored hall. 'And do I see a garden beyond?' said Marjorie.

'Neglected, now,' said Delia, 'but it must have been lovely once. I don't suppose they've had the staff to keep it up, not since the war, not if it's the same as in England.'

'Ah, the war,' said Dr Calderini, who had been conversing in rapid Italian with Benedetta. 'Everything was lovely before the war.'

Delia doubted it, remembering what she had heard and read about Mussolini and his fascist government, but certainly it would be true as far as gardens and houses went.

'And what's this?' Marjorie said. She was standing in front of a column on which sat a glass box.

'I didn't notice that last night,' said Delia, going to have a look.

'I thought it was part of the painting, all that perspective and detail that deceives the eye,' said Jessica.

'It's a thumping great ring,' Delia said.

'Ah, that is a cardinal's ring,' said Dr Calderini. 'A great treasure—the Signora Malaspina was much attached to it. It belonged to Cardinal Saraceno, who built the villa. Although it has been much altered since his day, naturally. There is a fine portrait of him, also, in the house. It is a poisoner's ring,' he added casually. 'Not the ring of his office.'

'Poisoner's ring?' said Jessica. 'Belonging to a cardinal?'

'He was quite a wicked cardinal.'

That would confirm all her father's long-held prejudices as to the untrustworthiness of any Catholic priest, let alone a cardinal, thought Delia. She laughed. 'So the house belonged to a prince of the church who poisoned people. I knew the Villa Dante was extraordinary the moment we got here.'

'You will be very comfortable here,' said Dr Calderini. 'People are always happy and comfortable at the Villa Dante, even in these troubled times, and Benedetta will look after you. She is to have help from the town if she needs it. Now, I shall take my leave.'

'Hang on,' said Delia. 'Haven't you forgotten something? I mean, we want to know why we're here.'

Dr Calderini turned himself into a tragic mask of regret. 'So sorry, so sad to have to be disobliging, but Signora Malaspina's orders were laid down most strictly. I am not at liberty to tell you anything until all four of you are present at the Villa Dante, which will, I am sure, be very soon. Until then, my lips are sealed, I can say nothing. So,' he finished, bowing and smiling as he headed for the steps, 'enjoy the hospitality of the villa as Signora Malaspina wanted. You are to make yourselves completely at home. When the fourth man is here, then I will be back, and all will be made clear.'

And with a few parting words for Benedetta, he was gone.

Delia turned to Marjorie. 'You and Dr Helsinger, I mean George, travelled together? Are you old friends?'

'We met on the train, I've never set eyes on him before.'

'Did you know Beatrice Malaspina? Can you tell us anything about her?'

'I never knew her, and I know nothing at all about her; this whole business came as a bolt from the blue. I have no idea who she may have been, and nor, I may say, does George Helsinger; we discovered that in our conversation on the train. Do you mean you don't know why you are here, either?'

'Except for the will, no.'

'Perhaps the mysterious fourth legatee will be able to enlighten us. If he ever arrives. Meanwhile, I'm perfectly amazed to be here, and I intend to make the most of every minute that I'm away from England.'

She spoke with such vehemence that Delia was surprised, but she couldn't find out any more about her, since Benedetta had appeared and was clucking with impatience to carry off the new arrivals to their rooms.

'Well,' said Jessica, as she and Delia sat on the curved stone benches under the frescoes to wait for the others. 'What do you make of your fellow guests?'

'It makes me wonder more and more about Beatrice Malaspina,' said Delia.

'It's a pity they had to arrive this morning. Now we shall have to be sociable and make polite conversation. I can't see that we're going to have anything in common with either of them.'

'I think they look quite interesting. George Helsinger—can he be English with a name like that?—has a clever, interesting kind of face. I don't know what to make of Marjorie. Dreadful clothes and no expression on her face, yet I get the feeling she's far from dim.'

'Women's Institute spinster type,' said Jessica. 'Lord help us.'

Had they but known it, Marjorie was summing them all up in exactly the same way. She had no worries about George. A kind, intelligent man, with a tormented soul. What was worrying him so greatly? An experiment that had gone wrong? Or might he be being chased by foreign agents, keen on extracting atomic secrets? In a flash, she pictured men with hats drawn low over their faces, in belted raincoats, lurking in doorways…

They hadn't talked much more on the train, merely exchanging remarks as to how odd this whole Beatrice Malaspina business was. Then she had returned to her own compartment, to sit by the window and marvel at the blue depth of the sea as the train wound its way down the coast.

They had met up again at La Spezia, where they transferred to a local train with wooden seats and an ancient engine, which reminded them both of wartime rail travel in England. They alighted at a deserted-looking station; what a long way down from the train platforms were in Italy, she thought, as she reached up for the suitcase that George was holding out to her.

'Now, what is best for us to do?' George said as he joined her on the platform. 'This station is a good walk from the town, which, as you see, is up the hill. Perhaps there will be a taxi.'

For a moment her imagination ran riot again. The whole thing was a set-up, there was no Villa Dante, no will, no Beatrice Malaspina, they had been lured here to be kidnapped and killed after torture to extract secret information. At least, they could extract scientific secrets from Dr Helsinger. Her mind ran on sinister lines: remote Italian castles in the style of *The Mysteries of Udolpho*…would there be a readership for a modern gothic? People had wanted comforting reads during the war, Jane Austen, that kind of thing, but gangster movies were popular, and so…

She came back to reality with a jolt, as George's voice repeated what he had been saying. 'I heard a car, and I see a man approaching. I think someone has come to meet us.'

Now, when Benedetta had whisked herself out of the room, Marjorie felt in the bottom of her suitcase and retrieved a notebook. A hard-covered notebook which she had bought in Paris, unable to resist the allure of beautiful stationery. She shouldn't be spending the lawyer's money on any such thing, but she had forgone lunch, satisfying her hunger with a ham baguette. The difference in cost would surely cover the price of the notebook.

She sat down on the bed and opened the notebook. The blank page stared up at her, as so many blank pages had done for so long. She closed it again. She had bought it hoping to keep a journal of her travels, of her Italian adventure. Nothing more. Facts, only facts. She took a deep breath, dug in her handbag for her fountain pen, unscrewed the top, opened the notebook and resolutely wrote the date at the top of the page. She underlined it, and wrote beneath it in her copperplate script, *The Villa Dante.*

She put the notebook down, and went over to the window. Delia Vaughan, rather an exotic creature, with that mass of hair and vivacious eyes, and a beautiful speaking voice. Jessica Meldon—Mrs Meldon—a typical product of the English upper classes, no doubt a crashing snob; a pity Delia had felt it necessary to bring such a friend—and where was Mr Meldon, whose name was never out of the papers? The couple were estranged, so the gossip columnists claimed. A pity she was here; the Villa Dante didn't at all seem the right kind of place for a flighty socialite who'd quarrelled with her husband.

THREE

They lunched on seafood risotto and *arrosto* of chicken, followed by cheese and fruit, and then, as they drank tiny cups of bitter black coffee, George politely asked Delia and Jessica if they would show him, and Marjorie, if she wished it, round the villa.

Jessica and Delia looked at each other.

'Actually,' Jessica said, 'we haven't seen much of it ourselves. We went to the beach after breakfast, and then you arrived. And yesterday, when we came, it was the evening, we only had candles and oil lamps, and were too tired after the drive to look at anything except our pillows, do you see?'

'We weren't sure about looking round, in any case,' Delia said. 'It seemed intrusive. But since the lawyer said we were to make ourselves at home, and there's no host or hostess to offend…'

'We can explore and discover the villa together, in that case,' said George. 'We can be systematic, let us go to the front of the house and begin our explorations there.'

He led the way round the outside of the house, and they stood for a moment at the foot of the shallow flight of steps that led to the three arches of the loggia. They looked up at the mellow façade, a faded cream with brown shutters at all the windows and a line of scooped terracotta roof tiles far above them.

George squinted owlishly up at the pediment. 'It is very harmonious,' he said. 'You see that the windows on either side repeat the triangular shape above them.'

They walked up the flight of steps and through the front door.

'Do you know about Italian houses?' Jessica asked George. 'I thought it must be eighteenth-century, but Delia says it's older, because of the frescoes.'

'Older than that,' said Marjorie. 'I dare say it's been altered a lot, and probably was done over in the eighteenth century, but it must be Renaissance originally, only look at the proportions.'

'Even older than the sixteenth century I think, in parts,' said George. 'Have you noticed that there is a tower at the back? That is mediaeval, I should say.'

Delia still found the trompe l'oeil disturbing as she wandered round, looking at the paintings. 'It's odd, the mixture of everyday and mythological. Here's the servant in his tights I noticed last night, but over there is the story of Ariadne. Just look at the muscles on the Minotaur's chest.'

Marjorie came over to have a look. 'That must be Theseus, looking very pleased with himself. I never thought much of Theseus, he's the kind of man who would be a politician in the modern world.' She followed the images round to the other wall. 'Here is Dionysus, on his ivy-clad ship, sailing in to find Ariadne on the beach. And here he is with all his maenads, dancing among the vines.'

'Those grapes look real enough to eat,' said Delia as they paused to look at an ebullient Bacchus with attendant nymphs.

'They've been making a night of it by the look of them,' said Jessica. 'Look at the ceiling.' She pointed upwards to a riot of gods and goddesses frolicking in billowing clouds. 'Can you imagine what your father would have to say about it, Delia?' And, by way of explanation to the others, 'Delia's father is something of a puritan.'

'I don't think he'd mind half so much about these as he would if the paintings were saints and martyrs. Those are what really irk him.'

They went through the wide central door which led into a second room, overlooking the gardens at the back.

'More wall paintings, and windows that aren't windows at all,' said Jessica.

'Classical landscapes,' said George. 'Very realistic.'

'On this wall is Prometheus,' Marjorie said. 'That's an odd choice, not nearly such a happy story as Ariadne and Dionysus.'

'Who was Prometheus?' asked Jessica.

Marjorie gave her a scornful glance. 'He stole fire from the gods to give it to humans, and so they punished him.'

Delia looked at the eagle swooping down towards the bound figure, and shivered.

'And over there,' said Marjorie, 'if I'm not mistaken, is a sibyl.'

'Go on, then,' said Jessica. 'I've got my hand up. Who or what is a sibyl?'

'Sibyls prophesied. This one is a Cumaean sibyl. She's holding the golden branch to give to Aeneas so that he can go down into the underworld. In Virgil—you have read Virgil?'

'Not to remember a word of it,' said Jessica. 'I was hopeless at Latin.'

'Dido's betrayer,' said Delia, feeling on familiar ground there; she had sung the role of Dido. 'Dido, queen of Carthage, Jessica; come on, you've heard of her.'

George had returned to the entrance hall and was investigating what was through the other two doors. One led to a marble staircase, and the other into a small antechamber, with only a pair of painted columns for decoration.

'That's the door to the dining room,' said Jessica, standing with her back to the garden and pointing to the door on her left. 'So the one opposite it is probably the drawing room. The arcade stretches right across the back. Wonderful shade from the summer heat.'

By unspoken consent, they went out of the doors into the vaulted arcade.

'More frescoes, you see,' said Delia, pointing to the female figures of Sapientia, Amor and Gloria Mundi.

'And painted columns,' said Marjorie. 'What wicked satyr faces.'

How extraordinary it must be to live in such a house, surrounded by images of classical gods and goddesses disporting themselves with frivolous abandon over walls and ceilings. 'Let's go and see what's in the tower,' said Delia.

'I think,' said George, walking backwards, 'that at one time the tower was attached to the main house. There is a wing stretching out on the other side there—'

'Which is Benedetta's territory, isn't it?' said Jessica, counting the windows. 'Where the colonnade bit ends, there's the octagonal room beyond the circular staircase, and then there's a passageway that leads into the kitchens.'

'Just so,' said George. 'So there would have been such rooms on this side. However, they are gone, and only this single tower remains.'

The three-storeyed tower was round, but had another section attached to it of a more regular shape. 'Which is not nearly as old as the tower,' Marjorie said.

'How do you know?' said Jessica.

'It's built of stones that are all the same size.'

The tower itself was built of a motley collection of stones and brick. Marjorie rubbed a finger along one of the shallow bricks. 'Roman.'

'We've caught ourselves a know-it-all,' Jessica whispered in Delia's ear, but not quietly enough, Delia suspected, for the remark to have escaped Marjorie, judging by the quick flush of colour on her cheekbones.

For a moment, she was annoyed with Jessica, who seemed to have taken one of her rare dislikes to Marjorie. Well, good manners would have to prevail, if they were to survive one another's company until the fourth man arrived and the mystery of the will was solved.

'It's like something out of the Brothers Grimm,' she said, moving away from Jessica and walking round the tower to find the entrance. A Rapunzel tower, and she was unreasonably disappointed when they reached the stout door to find it chained and padlocked. A faded notice was threaded on to a loop of chain, with *Pericoloso* written on it in red letters.

'Which means dangerous,' said Delia. 'Oh, bother. Crumbling stonework, I suppose.'

Benedetta must have seen them by the tower, for her small figure hurtled out of the house, cries of disapproval on her lips as she hurried up to them, wagging her finger in a most definite way.

'Is she telling us that the tower is out of bounds?' said Jessica.

'We can see that for ourselves,' said Marjorie.

Delia was listening carefully to Benedetta's flow of words. 'I think she's asking us if we've seen the *salotto*. That's the drawing room.' She shook her head, and Benedetta seized her arm, pulling her towards the steps and back inside.

'*Ecco!*' announced Benedetta, as she swung open the door to the main room of the house. The shutters were closed, but instead of opening them, she switched on the lights. '*Il salotto*.'

'I was right, it's the drawing room,' said Delia. 'Goodness, look at the ceiling.' She turned to Benedetta and gestured to the shuttered windows, and Benedetta shook her head and made negative tutting sounds. Then she relented, and went over to the windows to open the shutters at the two windows which led out on to the arcaded terrace, George leaping across to help her.

Even with the shutters open, the light in the room was muted, but now they could see up into the vaulted ceiling, which was a deep, dark blue, scattered with stars.

'How pretty,' said Delia, tilting her head back to get a better view.

She had expected the drawing room to have heavy, dark wooden furniture, and she was surprised by the cream walls and panelling, and modern furniture, of a kind, she said in an awed way, that one mostly saw in magazines.

'Comfortable, though,' said Jessica, bouncing down on an immense sofa.

Benedetta looked pleased at their evident admiration, and burst into a torrent of Italian, from which Delia gathered that the room was entirely the work of Beatrice Malaspina. Benedetta was pointing with an air of pride at the frieze of figures painted along the walls at shoulder height. They were dressed in mediaeval costume, Delia saw, as she went to have a closer look.

'Not old, of course,' said Marjorie. 'Old in style, but modern in execution. And how varied; look, this man is almost surreal, and this poor creature has been so cubified you can't tell if it's a man or a woman. It isn't finished, either—there are the outlines of more figures that haven't been painted in. I wish we could see it properly, this part of the room is very dim.'

There was another window on that side, with a closed, slatted wooden blind over it. Delia went to pull the slats open, but the string had no effect, and Benedetta came over to take it from her hand, shaking her head again and showing her that it was firmly stuck.

'It's like the pilgrimage to Canterbury,' said Delia, peering at the figures, which were walking along a road, between buildings painted in a slanting two-dimensional way.

'Not Chaucer, but another great mediaeval poet, I think you'll find,' said Marjorie. 'Dante. Look, there he is, in the red hat, greeting the line of people. And the building he's standing in front of is the Villa Dante, I'm sure it is.'

'How very clever of you to recognise him,' said Jessica.

'There's a famous painting of Dante in a cap like that,' said Marjorie, sounding slightly defensive for the first time. 'This is copied almost exactly, so it's hardly clever of me. And, given the name of the villa, it's not surprising to find a picture of him here.'

'I wonder if the house actually has any connection with Dante?' George said. 'Perhaps he stayed here. Perhaps Benedetta would know.'

Delia was listening hard to what Benedetta was telling them about the figures painted on the wall. She shook her head, frustrated. 'She's too fast for me. I really am quite useless at Italian.'

'We have to be grateful that one of us has any knowledge of Italian,' said George. 'I regret that I never learned the language, although, unlike Jessica'—with an apologetic smile in her direction—'I was good at Latin.'

'Oh, Latin,' said Delia. 'It isn't at all the same, you know. They pronounce all the words differently, for one thing, and then one imagines that the Romans spoke in measured tones, like stone inscriptions.'

'Whereas,' said Marjorie, 'they no doubt gabbled away like anything. Do you think that's a portrait of Beatrice Malaspina?'

The painting hung on the far wall on a panel between two flat fluted columns. It was a full-length portrait of a woman dressed in evening dress in the style of the late nineteenth century, her hair swept up, a black velvet ribbon at her slender throat. Her dress was black, and cut very low. Paris, thought Delia, and what a beautiful woman she must have been. No, not exactly a beauty; striking, rather, with that mass of hair and those huge dark eyes.

Benedetta hurried over to press a switch that illuminated the painting from above. In the brighter light, Delia could see that the hair of the woman in the portrait was very dark red, not unlike her own, but with glints to it that hers didn't have. 'And just look at that diamond on the velvet collar, what a huge stone,' she said.

Whatever else Beatrice Malaspina was, she had been rich. Or married to a rich man, which amounted to the same thing.

Or did it? Her mother was married to a rich man, but did that mean she was too? Far from it, with every penny counted, every item of expenditure having to be justified. Delia's own first act of financial independence had been to open an account at a different bank from the one where all the family had their business; goodness, what a storm that had provoked. Father hated not being in control of her money.

'I think it's by Sargent,' she said, after staring at the picture for a while longer. 'We have a portrait of my mother painted by Sargent.'

'A fashionable lady,' said George. He was doing a swift calculation in his head. 'How old would you say she was in that painting? Late twenties? Early thirties?'

Marjorie had her head on one side. 'Past thirty. She looks slightly younger than she is because of the way the painter has chosen to light the portrait.'

Delia was surprised at how definite Marjorie was. Was she going to turn out to be one of those assertive women who always insisted that they, and they alone, were right? If so, she, as well as Jessica, would find her a tiresome companion.

'In that case,' George said, 'we may make a guess as to when she was born. That is, if one can date a picture by the clothes, which is more than I can do.'

'About 1900,' said Delia. 'I know something about clothes of that time,' she added.

'In which case, she would have been born in 1870 or thereabouts,' said George.

'So she must have been in her late eighties when she died.'

'A good age,' said George. 'Let us hope that we live so long.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Marjorie, but so quietly that Delia only just caught the bitter words.

Delia had been drawn irresistibly to the piano which stood close to a window. She lifted the lid and tried a few chords, then pulled a face. 'It needs tuning, but it's a good one; nice touch, excellent tone, I should say.'

Benedetta was beside her, gesturing and talking much too fast. Delia sat back on the piano stool and gestured to her to slow down. Benedetta tried again.

'It was Beatrice Malaspina's piano. I mean, of course it was hers, this was her house, but she played it. At least, I think that's what she's saying.'

Benedetta seized Delia's hand in a surprisingly strong grasp and tugged her up from the stool. 'Okay,' said Delia, disentangling herself with some difficulty. 'What do you want to show me? Oh, a cupboard full of music, how heavenly. Here's the full score of *The Magic Flute*. Perfect; I see Beatrice Malaspina as a Mozartian.'

'Now we've lost her,' Jessica said to George.

'I take it Miss Vaughan plays the piano?'

'Delia is a professional singer. Opera.'

'Then it is a shame that the piano is out of tune,' said George. 'Otherwise we might have had the pleasure of hearing her sing.'

Benedetta clearly considered they had spent enough time in the drawing room. She switched off the light above the painting, and went over to close the shutters.

'It's an evening room, with doors open on to that big terrace and a view of the sun setting over the sea,' said Marjorie.

'We can come in here after dinner,' said George.

'If Benedetta will let us,' said Jessica. 'She's very bossy.'

As Benedetta led the way from the room, Delia lingered for a last look at the painting. She gazed up at it, the image of her mother's portrait strong in her mind; one dissolved into the other, and she was back, far back in her childhood, looking at the picture of her mother while her parents had a furious argument.

She must have been very young. Three or so. Her nurse talked about it for years afterwards. She had never forgotten the day that little Delia wickedly escaped her eagle eye and scampered away, undetected, to the forbidden territory of the gate which led through into the churchyard.

The Georgian house was built, in true manorial style, next to the village church. In former days, the family would have walked to divine service along the path, through the gate and so on to church land. But her father had bought the house and not the religion. Lord Saltford had been brought up a Nonconformist, and he would have nothing to do with the Church of England, however close at hand. He even objected to the bells as being frivolous in their exuberant peals, but that was something he couldn't fix, the village having a strong tradition of bell-ringing that no newcomer, however rich, was going to change.

So the gate was kept shut, but on the other side of the gate on that particular day was Pansy the donkey. Pansy was the love of Delia's young life, and she considered it unfair that Pansy should be allowed into the churchyard as a neighbourly gesture to graze the grass and save the aged sexton's labours, while she had to remain on this side of the gate.

The latch had not caught, the gate swung open, and Delia escaped through it. Wily beyond her years, she had closed the gate behind her, and it was several hours before the desperate nurse discovered her, curled up under an ancient yew, fast asleep.

The row was a distant memory, beyond her understanding then, but frightening as arguing parents are to a child, even to a child of her time who spent most of her life in the company of her nurse upstairs in the nursery. On that occasion, her nurse, distraught and sobbing in the kitchen, had left her with her mother, and there was her father accusing her mother of not caring for her at all, of deliberately letting her roam, of not immediately sending out searchers to look for her. The child might have been anywhere, could even have been abducted, held for ransom. She could, he bellowed at her mother, in a terrifying rage now, at least pretend to care for the child.

'I care for her as much as you care for Boswell,' had been her mother's defiant words before she flew out of the room.

The remark hadn't surprised Delia; even at three years old, she had known that her father didn't like her thirteen-year-old brother, Boswell, any more than she did.

Odd, how a scene like that, from a quarter of a century before, when she was too young according to all the psychologists to have any memories of anything, should come so clearly to her mind. Buried all that time, only to emerge now, in a place so very different from her childhood home.

She was back in the present; there was Jessica at the door, calling to her to come. With a final glance at the portrait—how the woman dominated the room—Delia went to join the others.

Marjorie fell into step beside her. 'You felt it,' she said abruptly. 'The atmosphere, the presence of this Beatrice Malaspina.'

'It's a remarkable portrait.'

'It's not just that. The whole place is filled with her presence.'

'You mean photos, and her furniture; she probably had a lot to do with the way the house looks. Unless she employed an interior designer, and none of it reflects her true personality.'

'That's not what I mean,' said Marjorie, and snapped her mouth shut.

Neurotic, Delia said inwardly. Neurotic woman on the verge of middle age, with a chip on her shoulder. I don't see that she could ever have had anything to do with the woman in that portrait, talk about different worlds.

FOUR

They gathered before dinner on the part of the colonnade they had named the fresco terrace, and Delia went in search of drinks. 'There'll be wine, but they might have the makings of a cocktail. Beatrice Malaspina looked a cocktaily kind of woman to me,' Delia said. 'Where did I put that dictionary?'

She came back triumphant, with Benedetta in tow, bearing a tray of bottles and glasses and a very up-to-date cocktail shaker.

'No problem,' said Delia, waving at the array. 'The magic word, cocktail, and hey presto, Benedetta had this out and ready. The jazz age has a lot to answer for, don't you think?'

George said he was absolutely no good at mixing cocktails, and he looked hopefully at the others.

'I'll do it,' Marjorie said, adding that she'd worked behind the bar at an hotel at one time. Let them despise her; what did she care?

But Delia was full of admiration and interest. 'Lucky you. I always wanted to do that,' she said. 'How come?'

'My cousin was manager of a big hotel on the south coast. I was staying down there one summer and all the staff left, first one thing and then another. So the barman was rushed off his feet. He showed me what to do, and I got quite good at it.'

Marjorie was mixing the contents of the bottles and adding ice and a soupçon of this and that in a most professional way as she spoke. A final brisk flourish of the shaker, and she poured drinks for all of them.

'Jolly good,' said Delia. 'I vote we appoint you cocktail-maker-in-chief while we're here. And you can show me how you do it. I wish they taught you really useful stuff like that at school, instead of wanting you to arrange flowers and manage household accounts.'

'We didn't do those things at my school,' said Marjorie. 'I expect it was a very different kind of school from yours. I went to the local girls' secondary.'

'You probably learnt more than I did,' said Delia cheerfully. 'I bet you can spell, which is more than Jessica can, let me tell you. She's a rotten speller.'

'Was yours a boarding school?' Marjorie asked, emboldened by her cocktail.

'Yes. Northern and bleak. Jessica was there, too; that's where we became friends. It was simply ghastly.'

George was sipping at his cocktail. 'Don't you like it?' Marjorie asked. 'Can I mix you something different?'

'On the contrary, I am savouring it. It is an alchemy that you make among the bottles, I think. Also, I am interested in hearing about schools. I wasn't educated in England, you see.'

'I thought you weren't English,' said Marjorie.

'I was brought up in Denmark. My mother is Danish. But I was educated abroad, at a Catholic school.'

'Are you Catholic?' Marjorie said. 'I thought scientists were obliged to be atheists.'

'You can be brought up a Catholic and then give it up as soon as you're grown up,' Delia said. 'I was brought up a Methodist, but nothing would get me into a church now.'

'The best thing to be is C of E, like me,' Jessica said. 'It means you can believe or not believe exactly what you want. And how odd that we should talk about religion, have you noticed that English people never do?'

Delia laughed. 'My mother told me that I shouldn't talk about feet, death or religion at the dinner table.'

George raised his eyebrows. ‘What an extraordinary collection of forbidden topics. How very English. But why ever should you wish to talk about feet at the dinner table?’

‘You can talk about horses’ feet—hooves, I should say,’ said Jessica. ‘Any talk of animals is fine. What a dull lot we are.’

‘We can talk about religion here because it’s Italy,’ Marjorie said.

How obvious it was. Italy was a country steeped in religion. Not that it probably had many more truly religious people than anywhere else in Europe, yet religion was all around them. ‘The Vatican and the pope and so on, and all the paintings. One associates Italy with religion. And then, when we’re abroad and the sun’s shining, all kinds of things come out of the woodwork, as it were. Don’t you think so?’

Her words were greeted with silence, as the others thought about it.

‘Our hostess had connections with the Vatican,’ Marjorie went on.

‘How do you know?’ said Jessica.

‘There are photographs of three different popes.’

‘It doesn’t mean she ever met them.’

‘They’re signed, with her name on them.’

‘You call her our hostess as though she were still here.’

‘I think of her like that.’

‘Are there any cardinals?’ said Delia. ‘I dislike clergymen on principle, but I adore paintings of cardinals, as long as they’re kitted out in those gorgeous robes. They always seem to be more theatrical than ecclesiastical.’

‘As it happens, there are several paintings of cardinals,’ George said. ‘I noticed them particularly, even though Benedetta was rushing us along on her tour of the rest of the house. There is one magnificent one in the drawing room, a portrait painted in profile, did you not notice it? The cardinal is touching a large gold ring which he wears on his smallest finger; I believe it is the same ring that is displayed in the glass case in the entrance hall. His picture faces the one of Beatrice Malaspina. I didn’t notice it at first because her portrait is so striking. Then there are others that hang in the passageway beyond the dining room. I, too, very much like paintings of cardinals. These are not very respectful of the cardinals’ dignity, however, there is one where he is striding along, his cloak swirling about his feet, and peeping out from underneath are little devils. Perhaps Beatrice Malaspina was not such a devoted Catholic as the pope photographs might suggest.’

‘Private and public,’ said Marjorie. ‘Quite different, of course. The outward forms and inward truth.’

George gave her a searching look, then turned to Delia. ‘I shall show you the cardinals, Delia, after dinner, to which, I have to say, I am looking forward; with such delicious smells coming from the kitchen I find I am hungry. It seems odd that you and I only arrived here this morning, Marjorie, it feels as though we have been here much longer than that.’

‘I know what you mean,’ said Delia. ‘It’s our first day, really, for last night with that sandy gale we hardly knew where we were. It’s a very welcoming sort of house, I think.’

Jessica laughed. ‘Not like your pa’s house, then.’ She explained to the others, ‘Delia’s father’s house is about the same size as the Villa Dante, but Lord, what a difference!’

‘It is bleak,’ said Delia. ‘It’s just right for my father, though. He has a bleak nature, so he and the house suit one another.’

‘What does your father do?’ George asked, and then apologised. ‘How rude of me, to be so inquisitive, and to ask personal questions.’

Delia shrugged. ‘I don’t mind questions. It’s probably the same thing in the air that made us talk about religion. My father’s in manufacturing.’

Not just rich landed gentry then. More a grinder of the faces of the poor, and Marjorie’s mind was off at the mill, toiling hands, in clogs and shawls, mean, sooty streets, brass bands…Factories, full

of dangerous machinery…Not so much of a toff as all that, then, thought Marjorie. Bet her mother is, though. Delia didn't behave like the daughter of parents who'd climbed up from the gutter. He'd probably inherited some vast concern from his father; rich as anything, those northerners who made beer or mustard or sauces. Manufacturing what? There was a caginess there, as though Delia didn't care to say exactly what he manufactured. Well, Marjorie didn't mind being thought rude.

'What does he manufacture?' she asked. 'Don't tell me he's an armament king, like in Bernard Shaw.'

'Not at all,' said Delia. 'Textiles. The closest he came to anything to do with the war was making parachute silk.'

Jessica jumped in. 'Are there any armament kings left? Aren't they obsolete now, with our new blow-the-world-to-bits bombs?'

Whatever had Jessica said, to cause such a look of pain on George's face? Marjorie looked at him intently. 'I know what kind of scientist you are. You're an atom scientist,' she said.

He looked taken aback. 'I'm a physicist…yes, you could call me an atom scientist. It is what the press like to call us. My field is isotopes.'

Isotopes? Did isotopes have anything to do with making the bomb? Probably. Then he was that kind of atom scientist. And one with a conscience by the look of it, poor man. She'd often wished she had a gift for science, a clear, cerebral world, so much easier, surely, than her own field, she'd always thought. Now, looking at George, she realised that was a facile judgement. Haunted; he was a haunted man.

A gong sounded, making them all jump. Then Benedetta's chivvying voice, the tone unmistakable, even if the words meant little to them.

'Dinner, I think,' said George, attempting a smile.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.