

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Mark is back!” announced Christina, late one afternoon as Michael closed the door of the flat. “He suddenly appeared today! No warning to Mama, but walked in off the street just as if he'd been out for a stroll, or had been to the studio, and had returned because it was time for dinner. I was dumbfounded!”

“That is a relief,” said Michael. “I imagine your mother is pleased.”

Christina looked at him quizzically. “We all are! I do not know why he went off in the first place without a word or any explanation, and he was back in the house for only fifteen minutes when he suddenly declared he had to go out again! He didn't say where he was going, only that he would be back. Then when he did come back he said that he'd been up to Grosvenor Square, to the American Embassy, but he would not say why. It is a complete mystery!”

“Do you think he is planning to emigrate?”

“I really don't know. He simply refused to tell us! Anyway he is back now having, I assume, seen whoever he went to see or done whatever he meant to do. Oh, and I should warn you that an old friend of yours, and enemy of mine, is back in town. He had the gall to call on Mama today.”

“Who?”

“Your favourite Austrian.”

“Not von Cerny? Why on earth is he here?”

“Now, I am just about the last person you should ask that of,” she said haughtily. “As far as I am concerned I would rather not be in the same room as him, but I would assume he has his eyes on some other prize. The man never goes anywhere or does anything without there being some purpose in it.”

“So long as I do not have to pass an evening with him. Mark will not appreciate his company, either.”

“Nor I,” Christina said sourly, “but the two of you had better start thinking up some good excuses as we are to dine at Mama's tomorrow, and I am sure that Angela will have invited him so that she can spite me and make eyes at him all the time.”

“Angela? Make eyes?”

“Oh, Michael! How unobservant you are. Haven't you noticed? She started it when he was, shall I say, bothering me. She couldn't bear to think I would - well, she was jealous. It has become a habit, one I do not think she can break now.”

“Well, I do not think it would be a good idea for him and Mark to meet, not straight away after he has come back from fighting in Spain.”

“I suppose I have to credit my sister with the fact that she would not have known that Mark was returning when she invited him - if she has invited him! Which reminds me, a young man called around and left a message for you to go your Mr Fishwick. I am glad it is you and not I.”

“He is not my Mr Fishwick,” said Michael, feeling irritated. “If he is anyone's, he's my father's. A young lad? I wonder what has happened to his old clerk. And what is it about this time? Some dirty work for my father?”

“I thought that you were on speaking terms with your father? Now that everything is going so well?”

Michael shrugged. “He has his moments, but he has always been unpredictable, even more so since Natacha died. No, that is not really true. He will pick his things to talk to me about, but there are also things about which he will not talk to me and I know nothing about the personal loans and investments. And, as for general matters, the weather and all that - nothing!” On reflection, Michael realised that he now had no-one to talk to about general matters, and certainly no-one in whom he could confide. He thought of, and missed, the long discussions he had once enjoyed with Felicity. He could talk to Christina when she was prepared to do so, but only about family matters or, occasionally, her latest plot. A vital ingredient of his life had been removed and was missed.

"I think Mama has borrowed from him," said Christina casually. "I think that Newington was used as collateral."

"Our wedding present?" said Michael. "Mortgaged?"

"Well, it sounds as if you might own a bit more of it than I do," snapped Christina.

"There are other business deals that I don't get to now about. I think that may be because they are not exactly proper."

"They are illegal?"

"No, I don't think they are exactly illegal. They are the sort that would be embarrassing if news of them got out. Questionable, might be the appropriate word."

"What kind of deals?" asked Christina, becoming curious.

"I don't know. Some of them upset Sophie, I know that."

"You must have some idea!"

"Well, deals with foreign governments or their agents which they do not want made public. Those kinds of things. Don't tell Mark but I think he has been buying arms from Germany, selling them to Russia, then arranging for them to be transported to Spain for the Republicans to use. Deals like that."

"Fascinating!" said Christina, sounding satisfied. "I must find out more."

"Well, be wary. You know what happened to Bluebeard's wife when her curiosity led her to open the seventh door?"

Christina pulled a face. "Just for my books," she said lightly. "I haven't done a gun-running one yet. That could be quite a good theme. I must go and make some notes!"

Michael decided that he would call at the house in Bloomsbury on his way to Mr Fishwick's office. He felt surprise at how coolly Christina had reacted to her brother's return. Her reaction was more suited to one's return after having gone out to post a letter, rather than that which should be reserved for your brother returning from a country in which at least half of the population was intent on blowing him up. But, then, Christina was strangely unemotional. Michael sometimes wondered if she exhausted herself on her novels and simply had nothing left for ordinary, flesh and blood, mortals such as her husband and brother.

"She is dead," were the words with which Mark greeted him when they met. "I now know that for sure. I have seen her."

"You have been to the place where she died, where she is buried?" asked Michael, softly.

"I have. I met the Count and stood beside him in the crypt. She looks very peaceful and beautiful. And he is a good man, an honest man, and he loves her passionately, I have no doubt of that. He asked if you would leave her there. I am sure that it is what she would have wanted."

"It is strange, but my father has not mentioned her, nor any plans to have her brought back to this country and buried here. I must admit I have not pursued the issue. You know how unapproachable he is. I don't pretend to understand his attitude, but I believe he was like this after my mother died. There was no outward indication of grief. He simply buried himself in his work. I assume that it will be in order to leave poor Natacha there, except what about you? What about the mourning?"

"It has been a long time, hasn't it?" said Mark. "I will miss her. I will miss having the opportunity to go to her grave and remember her, but I can bear this in the knowledge that the Count's degree and period of mourning will make up for all of us. And, if you think about it, if she had been lost at sea, we would never have known where she was." Michael stared at his friend, not able to understand the line of thought he was pursuing and realised that Mark was talking more to himself rather than to him. "She is in a beautiful place," Mark continued, "and cared for. The Count said he thought she is at peace. I think so, too. I believe he is right. I do not think we should disinter her and bring her back."

Michael nodded. "And, what about you? I suppose you have countless stories to tell us about your experiences in Spain?"

"I suppose that I have, but they are mostly bad and there is none that I would wish to talk about at the present. As with winds that are not entirely ill, I also have some pleasant

memories, but even those are tinged with sadness and misgivings.”

“Then I will not press you,” said Michael, sympathetically. “Perhaps, in time, you could write a book, or tell Christina and she could write a book. She appears to go from strength to strength. The publisher has taken to now just ringing her up and asking when the next one will be ready. I do not understand it!”

“I don't think I'll write a book,” said Mark thoughtfully. “There were writers and poets enough out there, and plenty who will not be coming back.”

“What will you do? Install yourself back in the studio and start painting again? How about that exhibition we used to talk about?”

“I cannot go back to the studio!” said Mark emphatically. “Not now, not ever. There's no question of that!”

“Why ever not?”

“I would rather not say. Not now, at least. But, may I ask you to promise me one thing? Should anything ever happen to me, should I die or anything like that, would you go to the studio and deal with the contents? Will you promise that?”

“Should I die? You shouldn't be thinking like that now unless you are planning some new foolish adventure!”

“It was not foolish and I want you to do this one thing for me should anything happen.”

“You want me to deal with whatever it is you have in the studio?”

“In the event of my death, yes.”

“In the unlikely event of your death. What ever is there?”

“I can't tell you that either. But will you promise?”

“But if I do not know what is there, how will I know what to do with it?”

“You will know. If, and when, you have to go there, you will know. Will you promise?”

“Of course I will promise. It is a rather strange and morbid request, but I'll promise.”

“Thank you,” said Mark. “Now I think I should get some rest. It has a rather wearying day.”

“Yes. And I still have to get across to St Paul's. It's a bit late now. Perhaps I will go first thing tomorrow morning. Will we see you at dinner tomorrow night? Take my advice and check the guest list before you go, if you decide to go.”

“I will take your advice,” said Mark.

“Morning guv,” said the young man as Michael stepped out of the damp, foul-smelling, alleyway into Mr Fishwick's damp, unpleasant, office. “What can we do for you?” Michael explained that he had received a note asking him to call in and see Mr Fishwick. Mr Fishwick was not there, but was expected back any minute. Would Mr Bernstein care to park himself? Anywhere would do. There was little choice and Michael selected the seat by the door.

“What has happened to the old fellow I have seen here before?” he asked.

“Old Tom? He 'ad to go. Past it! Couldn't get up and down the stairs from the cellar. Couldn't even manage to open the door of the ol' safe! I'm Will.”

“And, what is Mr Fishwick up to?”

“Blowed if I know,” said the youth with a crafty expression. “And if I did, that would be telling. I can tell you this. The guv'nor appears to be getting heavily involved in scrapyards.”

“Scrapyards?”

“Yeh. He bought a couple of big ones out on the Essex marshes last week. Beats me. But I don't think I told you that, guv. Mum's the word.”

This was the cue for Mr Fishwick to appear from the street, red and flustered and unaware of Michael sat behind the door. “Will, have you taken those papers up to the bank yet? The Siemens deal?” Then, alerted partly by some rather obvious signals from Will, he looked and saw Michael. “Mr Bernstein!” he exclaimed. “I am deeply honoured. Do come into my humble office straight away.” He threw open the inner door and gestured to Michael

to enter. "Will!" he hissed. "The papers!" Then he closed the door on him and turned to Michael. "Do sit down, Mr Bernstein, I crave you. I beg your indulgence in asking you to take the trouble to come here but walls have ears, and we can talk here without running the risk of being overheard. I am sure that you appreciate the need for absolute confidentiality when dealing with delicate matters?"

"Who is the young man?" asked Michael, feeling uncomfortable at the mention of "delicate matters" and trying to recall whether he had committed any new indiscretion. He had not seen or written to his lost love. He had made no attempt to contact her or find out what she was doing. No doubt she was now in Paris, working hard, receiving plaudits from all who were fortunate to see her dance, starting to etch her name in the world of ballet. He had, for some time, tried hard not to think about her and had almost succeeded in putting all thought of her to the back of his mind. It was all in the past, an episode of his life which might have turned out different if - if he had been luckier or, perhaps, had met Felicity earlier, before he had committed himself to marrying Christina. Or if he had been braver or more independent and simply terminated the arrangement with his wife-to-be. It was all "ifs". He had tried to forget it, and now he felt a rising resentment towards this man who was forcing him to expose and open up all those old wounds. Yet he could still feel the emotion and the raw longing rising within him.

"He is my nephew, Master Michael. He is my wife's sister's son, and a bright young fellow at that. Plenty of street craft. He'll go far, with a little guidance, something I can, in my lowly capacity, give him. And he has a youthful pair of legs which should be carrying him to the bank at this very minute." He opened the office door and looked out. The outer office was empty.

"Is my father buying scrapyards?" asked Michael. Mr Fishwick appeared to flinch slightly. "Why?" added Michael.

"That I cannot say, with all humility, Master Michael. What I can say is to ask you to treat the knowledge in confidence. Secrecy is the hand maiden of good commercial practice. If the news gets out the price will rocket and there will be those who will ask questions. And those questions might be the sort that could stop progress on an important venture or prove embarrassing for some of the principals involved, something some of them would not take kindly to. I would humbly ask you to keep the information to yourself."

"Is my father buying into steelworks, or steel capacity?" asked Michael, becoming more determined. "What is he up to?"

Mr Fishwick choked and looked uncomfortable, then suddenly leaned forward. "I can tell you this," he hissed, "in the strictest confidence. I must stress that, as rumours can be easily started by careless talk and if they are attributed to a person of influence they may assume credibility and upset the markets. So, on the understanding that you do not repeat any of this outside these walls, your father thinks that there will be another major war."

"Another war?" said Michael loudly.

"Shhhhhush!" exclaimed Mr Fishwick.

"But where?" whispered Michael. "And between whom?"

"Who is to know? Russia and Germany? Russia and Japan? Germany and the rest of Europe? There is no saying."

"That is nonsense," scoffed Michael. "If my father is buying on the strength of that kind of hunch, he is wasting his money. The League of Nations would never stand for it."

Mr Fishwick stared at him for a moment. "I think it is more than a hunch," he said mysteriously. Then his attitude changed. "Ah, young Master, I dare say that you are right even if your father may think otherwise. If you are right, of course, your father could stand to lose a fortune. If *he* is right," he added, leaning his head on one side, "he will make one, and become very rich, indeed."

"You mean that my father is investing in the belief that there will be a major war, possibly another World war? I don't believe it. He must have taken leave of his senses."

"I am sure that you are absolutely right," said Mr Fishwick, looking vexed. "I dearly hope so, sincerely, for the sake of my Country. But, in all humility, this is not a subject that is worth debating. Sadly, if you will indulge me, we should turn to more mundane things."

“Such as?” said Michael crossly, still coming to terms with the prospect that his father should be sufficiently convinced that there would be a war to invest in it. Perhaps he thought it would develop out of the conflict in Spain, or be sparked off by the events in East Africa he could vaguely recall reading about.

“I believe, and you will, of course, correct me if I should be wrong, that you - your practice - will shortly be drawing up the tender list for the Newington-Braham scheme, one with which you are familiar?”

“I am. What of it?”

“There is a company that your father would like to see given the opportunity to quote, if you - your practice - could see its way to such an inclusion. They are called - .” At this point Mr Fishwick paused and consulted the pages of a ledger on the desk before him. “Ah, here they are - A G Muir & Co. I doubt if you have heard of them.”

“I have heard of them,” said Michael, trying once more to stem the tide of memories. “Mr Muir is a builder. I would not have thought his was a suitable company to bid for such a scheme.”

“I am sure that, as usual, you are absolutely right, but your father says that builders can, and do, lay pipes. What am I, a humble clerk and totally lacking in any experience of such things, to know about matters such as this? I can tell you that your father has a considerable sum of money extended to the builder in question, one which he, this builder, will not be able to repay unless he obtains a number of reasonably sized contracts and starts to generate a positive cash flow.”

“And should Mr Muir not obtain a reasonable sized contract and generate your positive cash flow? What then?”

“What then? Why, we will have to foreclose on him and take the collateral which consists of an amount of property in Dover including the builder’s yard and office and his bungalow. Your father would have no option, much as I am sure, if I can express such a view without causing offence, he would find such a step most unsavoury.”

Michael stared at the man glumly. Here he was again, this wretch, dredging up memories, and presenting him with a moral dilemma. Moira and Arthur could be married by now. Michael began to wonder if there had been a double wedding and whether Felicity had been a bridesmaid. He pictured her back in lilac, then pink, then back in lilac. There she was standing in the aisle, radiant, the sole focus of attention, out-shining and eclipsing the brides. How he would have liked to have been there to see it! How he would have liked to have stood there beside Felicity! How he would simply like to be with Felicity! “I am not involved in the selection of the tender list,” he said, weakly.

“Ah, but a person in your position, deservedly so I must add, can clearly influence the decision, I am sure. Your word should be law. I am sure it is.”

“I will see what I can do,” said Michael, feeling wretched. “What else is my father up to?”

Mr Fishwick smiled unpleasantly, exposing an incomplete row of yellow teeth. “Your father is involved in many things, intricate deals, wheels within wheels, complicated arrangements which a simple, lowly, mortal such as I cannot begin to fully understand or explain. I am just one of his instruments, a faithful servant, carrying out my duties to the best of my limited capacity. I am sure that your father will tell you everything you need to know, when the time is right. But the matter of Muir & Company? You will see that they are invited to tender? It would be unfortunate if Mr Muir was made homeless or, worst still, bankrupt.”

Michael stood. He did not have very much choice in the matter. “I will see what I can do,” he said. “You will appreciate that even if he tenders, Mr Muir is not guaranteed that he will bid lowest and win the contract.”

Mr Fishwick smiled again. “Just so long as he is on the list. We will leave the rest to providence.”

“Very well,” said Michael. He felt he had no option, but the thought put him in a bad mood which remained all day and it was one that no number of pleasant memories of Felicity could remove.

“So it has happened at last!” Michael looked up from his paper and across the silver strewn breakfast table at his wife. It was several weeks after the unpleasant meeting with Mr Fishwick, in which time he had carefully sown sufficient seeds to ensure that Angus Muir would be on the tender list, but it still assailed his conscience, both because he had been virtually blackmailed into doing it, and because he harboured his own doubts about the ability of the company to undertake the work. He comforted himself with the thought that as Angus Muir knew all the local problems that were likely to arise, he would not bid lowest. Michael had convinced himself that the Scot would probably be the highest. If that happened, there was still the question of the amounts owed the bank and the action his father might sanction in order to recover the collateral. Short of going and facing his father, Michael could not see any way of influencing that.

“What has happened?” he asked.

Christina brandished a letter and displayed, Michael thought, a little more than the usual degree of interest that she showed for the day's prospects, the contents of the newspaper, or the small number of personal letters that found their way past her secretary and onto the breakfast table. For a moment he thought she had been nominated for some literary award, but he could see that the letter was hand written. “How did that one get past Miss Saunders?” he asked.

“Because it has arrived from Vienna, from Mama!”

“From Helen?” Michael could sense that Christina was anxious to tell him something yet found the news she had to impart not entirely to her liking. “It’s about Angela?” he guessed.

“Yes! How did you know?”

“She's getting married?” he joked.

“Michael!” she exclaimed, not without more than a hint of disappointment, even annoyance, in her voice. “It’s Herr von Cerny,” she added sharply. Michael stared at her, trying to understand what she was trying to say. “I thought something like this was in the wind,” she said, standing and going across to the window with so much purpose that Michael thought there must be a message secreted there. “Of course, we must stop it!”

“I am sorry,” he said, remaining sat. “What are you saying? What do you mean - it is Herr von Cerny?”

She turned and looked exasperated. “He has asked Angela to marry him and, according to Mama, she has accepted. How could she? How could she possibly think of doing such a thing? And with him of all people!”

Michael felt a swell of anger grow inside him. Here she was, his wife who demanded such fidelity of him, becoming vexed because her sister was proposing to marry the man that she did not! “Why should anyone stop it?” he said accusingly.

“Good lord! You get more and more like your father every day,” she snapped. “Do you know that it was your father who encouraged Mama to let her go, and go herself? Even loaned them the money!”

“Then I dare say she's having to get married to pay the interest on the loan. I cannot see why you should object, unless -.”

“Unless what?” she asked sharply.

“Unless,” said Michael slowly, deciding that he would not accuse his wife of still being in love with the Austrian, although he was now beginning to entertain wild thoughts that they had secretly met in Rome when they were on their honeymoon.

“For a start the man is a Nazi!” Christina continued, not waiting for his answer.

“I believe that he is very influential and I assume that he is reasonably well off. Your sister could do a lot worse. I expect there are some that would say that they are made for each other.”

“Oh, you are impossible!” said Christina, stamping her foot. “And so is the thought of him marrying Angela! It’s wrong and immoral! And what will Mark say about it?”

“Mark?” said Michael, wondering why his wife would consider the wedding immoral. Perhaps it was the differences in age, but that would have applied all the more to Christina. “Mark is far too pre-occupied with other matters. In addition, I think he has lost his

political obsessions. I do not think Mark will be all that concerned.”

“Mama is for it! You do not see any harm in it. And you think Mark will not be concerned. Am I the only one with any sense? I suppose the final humiliation will come when we are invited to go the Vienna for the wedding! Well, I shall not go. I can tell you that now!”

Michael did not answer. There was no point attempting to debate the matter with Christina. Perhaps in a few days she would calm down and accept the prospect of her sister marrying an Austrian architect. It was probably better than marrying a drainage engineer. Perhaps that was what was upsetting her so much.

Mark did have other concerns as he sat in an outer room at the American Embassy waiting for his interview. He had become a more or less regular visitor over the weeks since his return from France, so much so that one of the officials had jokingly suggested he should apply for a season ticket.

“I must say,” drawled the man, leaning back in his chair on the opposite side of the desk when Mark was eventually ushered in, “that when you first came to see me I thought this guy must be crazy! There you were, marching into my office and asking me to find a missing person and all you had to go on was that her name was Rebecca, no surname mark you, that she had red hair, that she was a potter, and that she came from Wisconsin which is a pretty big slice of territory to cover. I was ready to tell you that you were wasting my time, and your time, and all the time of the goddam officials who would have to look for this shit. But then I said to myself, there's this guy who's fought in the Spanish Civil War - you did say you fought in the Civil War?”

“I suppose you could say that I fought,” admitted Mark, feeling ill at ease. “I fired some shots but I seemed to spend an awful amount of my time either sitting around, doing nothing whilst waiting for something to happen, or running from shells and tanks. Don't get be wrong. I am not suggesting that I was a coward. It was just the way that things appeared to turn out. The odds were heavily against us and there were men being killed, dying or being maimed all around me. If that is what fighting is, I fought.”

The American official shook his head. “Quite a number of our nationals have been reported killed out there, guys who had not learnt their lesson from the Great War. You won't catch us fighting another war, not as a Nation. And it was out there that you met this Rebecca person?”

“Yes,” said Mark, becoming irritated. “I have told you this before. I was injured and she took me in and nursed me. She said that her husband was out there too, but had disappeared. I assume that he was caught by the Nationalists and shot. They did that to foreigners. Just took them out, stood them up against a wall, and shot them! No trial or examination! Just an execution! But have you found her?”

“Hold your horses a goddam minute! We may have done. We know that a Rebecca Van Hass left Spain on the twentieth of February and travelled here, to London.”

“She is here? Where, for goodness sakes?”

“Hold on, I did not say that. I simply said that this Rebecca Van Hass, who answers your description in some respects, came to London in February. We have discovered that she stayed here three weeks, then went back to the States.”

“Oh!” Mark could not disguise his disappointment, yet he felt that he should feel overjoyed at the news that Rebecca, if this was his Rebecca, was still alive.

“Now, I guess I must warn you that this may not be your woman, but she sure fits the bill and I do have an address for her. Here!” He reached across and handed Mark a piece of paper on which something was typed.

“Was she travelling alone?” he asked, fearful of the answer.

“Peter Van Hass, her husband, was listed as having been killed in Madrid last year. She was travelling alone.”

Mark could not hide his joy and profusely thanked the American for all the work that he and his colleagues had put in on the search. The official smiled and said it was satisfying to have been able to bring a problem that seemed at first to be insoluble, to a satisfactory end. “I hope you find her,” said the official as they parted.

He walked back to Bloomsbury, making plans. He had a lot to think about. Rebecca was alive! She had been there, in London! Perhaps she had come to look for him? Perhaps she had even come to the house and asked for him, and been told that he was in France or Spain, or simply abroad! Yet, he thought, if she had called at the house, surely someone would have told him. If she had called she would have left a note or a card, something to tell him that she had been there, some clue or hint, something to tell him she was alive and well! Perhaps she had called and seen Angela? There was no knowing what would have happened. Perhaps Rebecca would never speak to him again?

Then, it might not be his Rebecca. It was not that uncommon a name. There were bound to be a number of Rebeccas from Wisconsin, and a number of these would have red hair, be potters, and be in Spain with their husbands at the same time as he was there. No! That could not be the case! It had to be her, and there was only one way to confirm it. As soon as he reached the house he wrote her a letter.

"I must say, Mama, that I am surprised at how calmly Mark has taken the news of Angela's engagement," said Christina, taking a cream cake and eyeing those remaining on the plate. "I cannot greet it with anything like the composure he is showing."

"Mark has other concerns," said Helen, quietly counting the number of cakes her daughter was consuming and wondering if she was providing for more than one.

"I am not sure that I understand exactly what Mark's concerns are. Is he planning to emigrate to America?"

"I do not know," said Helen, slightly alarmed by the peevish tone. "In a way I find it all very distressing. I am pleased for Angela but with you married and living in your flat, and Angela now likely to go to live in Germany, and now Mark planning to do goodness knows what, it seems that the whole family is breaking up."

"Oh, Mama, it is not like that at all. You have known for years that Michael and I were due to marry. And there was always every chance that Mark would have married Natacha had she not died. As for Angela, she has always been likely to marry the first man who asked her! I just wish it had been someone else. At least they are going to live in Germany."

"Christina! That is not at all nice. And all of that means that I will be left here on my own, feeling dreadfully lonely."

"You have always got Matthews."

"Matthews? Why she's older than I am! I need someone young around me, someone like your Miss Saunders, except I do not trust her."

"You don't trust her? In what way?"

"I am not sure," said Helen. "Perhaps I should not say any more. It is uncharitable."

"Oh, Mama! You have said it now. You must finish an explain."

"It is nothing I can place my finger on. It is just something about her. Just a feeling I have."

"She is very attentive and thorough," said Christina defensively. "I have no cause for complaint. But, about Mark?"

"He worries me. Do you know he has not set foot in his studio since he returned from France?"

"Really? What about his exhibition?"

"I didn't like to ask him at first. I mean I was so pleased to have him home, and now it looks as if he is thinking of going away again. And then, when I did broach the subject, he just shrugged his shoulders. I wish I knew what was happening. He is so restless! I do not know who he takes after; certainly not your father." Helen paused for a moment and dabbed her eyes with a small handkerchief. "I really find it all quite distressing. When you have children, as I am sure you will find out, you expect all the troubles when they are children, not when they are adults. He has changed, you know. All of this, his going to Spain without any reference to me, Natacha's death, and now this American woman."

"What have you found out about her?"

"Virtually nothing, but she has made him so restless, inattentive, unreliable and, at

times, morose. He is not the happy carefree boy he use to be.”

“He is no longer a boy, Mama.”

Helen looked sternly at her daughter and frowned. “It may be all right for you novelists. You analyse and understand motives and emotions, but Mark simply baffles me. Why will he not return to his painting and try and pick up his life where he left it, even if Natacha is gone? We all have had to come to terms with her loss, why not he? And what does he mean when he says he will never set foot in his studio again?”

“He does intend to go to America?” asked Christina, purposely avoiding the question she could not answer.

“I do believe he wants to,” said Helen weakly. “And then I shall be all alone. But I will go down and live at Newington, if you will allow that.”

“Of course, Mama, just so long as you leave the control of the expenditure on the house and the Estate to me. I am doing very well with Mr Barnes. We have come to a perfect understanding.”

Helen smiled wistfully. “Ah, yes,” she said thoughtfully, “he did throw up his arms at one or two of my extravagances but, then, I do so love the House. It deserves the best. You will promise me that its upkeep is maintained? I do not know what Angela plans to do with this house in view of her position, but I will not want to go on living here once you have all gone. I do not feel safe in London any more.”

Christina looked around her, almost as if she was seeing the house for the first time. “Perhaps Michael and I could take it on if Angela does decide to settle where ever it is.”

“Oh yes,” said Helen brightly. “It is a nice house and it has been in the family since it was built. It has a nice atmosphere and would be ideal for raising a family.”

“I do not think that Michael would want it to raise a family,” Christina said after a moment's thought. “I do not think he wants children.”

“Not want children?” Helen looked down at her lap, at the spot where once they had nestled and looked up into her loving face. “Perhaps he is wise,” she said sadly. “Children do bring a great deal of heartache and disappointment.”

“I trust that I have not been a disappointment to you, Mama?”

“You, Darling? No, you have not been a disappointment, far from it. I could not have asked much more of you, but - . Perhaps I will go and live at Newington and find myself a companion, and simply let Angela and Mark go their own ways.”

Mark was intent on going what ever he saw as his own and only way. He wrote to the address given to him by the Embassy official, sending the letter by airmail. Eight fretful weeks later it was returned to him, unopened and endorsed “no longer at this location”. He wrote again, writing “please forward to new address” on the envelope. When ten weeks passed without a response, he sent a third letter marked “Urgent, please forward to new address”, and waited. On each occasion he had meticulously calculated how long it would take for the letter to be taken across the Atlantic and on to its destination. He did a similar calculation for the reply, should there be one. It was true, he admitted to himself, that there were unknowns in the equation, such as how long it might take for the letter to be forwarded, presupposing that it was. Once the calculated time had run out he passed through a short period completely possessed with anticipation, seemingly living between postal deliveries, always eagerly awaiting the next because that might be the one. Then, as the days slipped by and nothing arrived, prediction turned to hope, then despair and dejection as he grew morose and depressed. Each fresh letter started the cycle anew.

On this third occasion he was not to be disappointed. Ten days after he had despatched his letter a response arrived in a *par avion* envelope. It was lying there, innocent, vibrant, on the breakfast tray. He could not bear to open it then, at breakfast, seemingly in public, so he took it up to his room and carefully and gently slit open the envelope. He waited while he contemplated what might be inside. What was inside was all he wanted; a letter from Rebecca and she had written:

“Dearest Mark,

How wonderful to hear from you! I am simply over-awed to think that we both made it out of that hell on earth, alive. So much has happened since I saw you last and you left me to walk to Madrid, yet it seems like only yesterday. There is too much to cover in this letter, especially if I am to complete it and catch the post. Which is exactly what I am going to do right now! I will write more fully later. Do, do write to me again,

lovingly, Rebecca.”

There was no explanation as to whether she had received any of the earlier letters, nor why she was writing from a different address in Wisconsin, but he seized upon the word “lovingly” which he found acceptably provocative. He left his room and dashed to a writing desk where he wrote a simple note to his heart's desire:

“Dearest Rebecca,

Do not write but rather tell me face to face. Will you allow me to visit you? May I come out?

love, Mark.”

He thought that “love” was even more provocative than “lovingly” and that the note would tell her what was in his mind without him having to spell it out. It would be difficult for her to refuse unless, of course, she positively did not wish to see him again. There was no hint in her letter that this might be the case.

“Is it good news, Mark?” asked Helen as he rushed past. She had seen him take the letter from the tray at breakfast, examine it, then leave with it still unopened.

“The very best!” he cried. “I may be going to America!”

“I knew it,” she said to herself. At least he appeared to be cheerful. That was a small blessing.