

COOL BEFORE STIRRING

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CHAPTER ONE

LA RIPOSTE

Margaret Ainsley arrived at the restaurant on Turtle Creek and requested a seat near the window where the light was kinder and she could see her young guest when she arrived. Their luncheon meeting was the last item to check off the long list she had compiled in the sleepless night, and she needed this last moment alone to mentally prepare.

An attractive woman in her late fifties whose regal bearing made her appear even taller than her lofty five feet eight inches, Margaret gathered herself gracefully into the high-backed chair and smoothed back her silver-laced blonde hair as though she were brushing the lines from her face.

Luminescent blue eyes, pleasantly crinkled about the edges, studied a distant piece of air as she sought some reassuring thought to dispel the thick dread that had taken up residence in the pit of her stomach. While she waited for the waiter to return with her tomato juice, her thoughts drifted back to the other time her marriage to Robert had been so threatened. Those were anxious moments, too, she told herself hopefully, and things worked out--well, maybe not right away, but eventually they had.

The optimistic argument lost its appeal, however, as Margaret recalled the awkward months it had taken for them to mend their fractured relationship. And more, it had happened so long ago that the physical attributes of her youth and the welfare of their young child had resolved the issue in her favor then.

But now ...

Margaret stole a glance in a mirror across the way and lifted her chin with a sigh. Now, with an empty nest and a face and figure drifting south, she would have to rely on different qualities....and options.

The pieces of the puzzle had finally come together yesterday when a trusted friend reluctantly confirmed Margaret's worst fears about Robert's recent behavior. She had found it impossible since to focus on the dinner party they were to host in their home the next evening for his company directors and their wives in town for annual meeting.

In the past several weeks Margaret had spent countless hours making arrangements--the menu, the flowers, a string ensemble to play on the terrace, the fine wines Robert had specified for each course. Briefly a smile transformed her drawn face as she thought of the colorful azaleas and tulips in her garden which had burst into full showy bloom a week earlier in March than usual.

At that moment her guest walked in. Wearing a spring-green Chanel and very high heels, she was even more striking than Margaret recalled. And young. Heads in the dining room turned as she followed the maitre d' through the maze of tables, her auburn hair bobbing with each confident step. Lively brown eyes searched the room, found those of her hostess, then brushed past as though they hadn't.

Margaret took a deep, steadying breath and locked into place a pleasant expression as the slim-hipped figure approached and settled smoothly into the chair opposite hers at the table.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Ainsley," Shawn said, her voice businesslike and brisk as it had been on the phone that morning.

"Oh please, Shawn, call me Margaret." Undoubtedly the girl didn't call Robert, *Mr. Ainsley*.

Shawn had to know what their meeting was about, but if she felt uneasy, Margaret could discern no telltale signs of restless hands or shifty eyes. On the surface at least, the girl was cool and composed, her crisp demeanor emitting strong signals that here sat the new breed of professional woman in full and efficient control of her life.

Margaret had learned all she could that morning about the Harvard MBA whose impressive rise through corporate ranks had within the past couple of years landed her an important position with Robert's corporation.

Saving the personal issue for later, Margaret purposely kept their conversation low key and, on the surface, pleasant throughout lunch. At her prompting, Shawn gave a compelling account of her background and the events of a successful career path which had culminated in her current title of Director of Planning for the corporation Robert headed as Chief Executive Officer.

The discussion afforded the observant wife an opportunity to study her adversary as they talked. Knowing that it would take more than just a pretty face to interest her husband, Margaret listened with growing alarm as she realized how appealing was the girl's rare combination of looks and shrewd business sense. At a minimum, there was no mistaking Robert's fascination---a fact he had not denied when she confronted him last night when he came home late.

"I guess you might say I've been incredibly lucky," the young woman was saying in summation.

Margaret smiled. "Well, you know what they say: The harder you work, the luckier you get."

Waiting for the waiter to clear the table and move out of audible range, Margaret finally broached the subject that had hovered shroud-like in the background. "Shawn, I'm sure Robert has told you that I know about the two of you."

"Yes." No ersatz surprise or contrition to insult Margaret's intelligence, just a flat, simple *Yes*.

"Where are you wanting this to go, Shawn?"

The young countenance closed down, a veiled expression serving notice that no self-incriminating words were forthcoming from one so well schooled in the business facts of life.

Margaret prompted, "Do you suppose it might be that old biological clock thing with you? Time ticking away on your child-bearing...?"

Shawn cut in. "I can assure you, Mrs.... Margaret...my career is the only child I want!"

"Oh, you're young yet--that can change. But, that's irrelevant," Margaret continued with a dismissive wave of her hand. "What concerns me most, Shawn, is the upheaval that lies ahead for all of us if this affair continues. Have you considered the consequences on your career...or Robert's? Have you thought of the stigma you will bear for breaking up someone else's family?"

Margaret had saved this guilty punch, expecting the shock value to persuade when other arguments failed. Her eyes searched the stony brown gaze but found no discernible sign of weakness or doubt.

With an air of condescension, Shawn finally spoke. "These are questions you should be asking your husband, Margaret, not me."

"But you and I both know, Shawn, that it's the woman who holds the biological edge in these matters--especially when a man is at the vulnerable age my husband is."

Shawn's shoulders lifted and fell in cool dismissal.

Steadily Margaret pursued the script she had crafted in the darkness of night. Changing tactics, she lowered her voice, "The main reason I asked you here today, Shawn, is to let you know that I'm willing to let the entire matter die quietly if you will agree to end it at once. Otherwise ... "

Shawn cut in. "I didn't come here to barter, Margaret. A person can't very well barter what she doesn't own."

Margaret blanched at the stinging rebuke.

"The only reason I came today is because Robert asked me to." Carefully editing her words, Shawn continued, "He was afraid you might create a scene otherwise. He didn't want to risk any embarrassment while the directors and their wives are in town."

This was one more cruel reminder to Margaret that her husband's primary concern was for his business.

Confident of her advantage, Shawn hurried on like a professor explaining the lesson to a slow student. "You have to understand, Margaret, the world is different now. People change; their needs change. I'm sure in the early part of your marriage you provided Robert the setting he needed, but what he needs at this point in his life is someone who shares his enthusiasm for business. After all, that is the driving force in his life."

"Surely you aren't suggesting I don't know my own husband!" Margaret shot back, feeling her face getting hot as she spoke. Quickly

she checked the rising hot anger that threatened to unravel her attempt at calm persuasion. Breathing deeply, she fought back to the centered core of herself where she knew her strength lay.

Shhh, that threatened center cautioned her. *Be still. Use silence*, the valued trait that Robert himself often touted as his best negotiating tool. She straightened and leaned back in her chair. Taking a sip of the steaming brew in her teacup, she studied the fronds of a potted palm standing well beyond her adversary's head, allowing the seconds to tick by in silence.

Assessing the verbal skirmish up to this point, Margaret knew she was losing ground. Even if she were a skilled debater (which she decidedly was *not*), any attempt to reason with this bright young woman was obviously an effort in futility. Not only was she attractive and smart, she was more tough-minded than Margaret had imagined.

Mentally sifting through the options she had considered before, Margaret discarded each in turn as unworkable, leaving her with the one option she had hoped would not be necessary but had prepared for, nonetheless. It was a plan which once set in motion would have to be carried out for the next several months.

So be it, she thought, returning the cup resolutely to its saucer. Convinced that nothing short of drastic measures would work now, she had no choice. In a voice deceptively calm, Margaret turned her attention back to her wary guest. "You're right, Shawn. Sadly, the world is different now. It's just that after concerning myself with my husband's welfare for all those years, I couldn't walk away now without making certain he'll be well taken care of."

Shawn's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

Margaret's pulse quickened. Which raw nerve had she exposed? Was Shawn mistaking the aggrieved wife's response for

capitulation? Or was *taking care of* simply not on the young executive's agenda?

More sure of her course, Margaret hurried on, "I have only one thing to ask, Shawn ... and then we can go."

Reluctantly the girl leaned to hear.

"Do you love him...love him enough to justify all the disruption this change will bring into his life?"

"Well... of course I love him ..." The young woman's voice trailed off as the question filtered down to a deeper level of understanding. She blinked and looked away, the starch of her composure flaking at the edges.

"That's all I need to know then ... that you love him." Reaching down to her handbag resting on the floor, Margaret retrieved an envelope with Shawn's name penned on the front. She handed it across the table to her bewildered guest.

"Here are details for the company dinner tomorrow evening. Since you are attending anyway, I'm sure you won't mind hosting it with Robert in my absence."

Quickly recognizing the impropriety of such an act, Shawn's mouth flew open to protest.

But the older woman went on, "I've also jotted down some things you'll need to know once the board's nepotism rule goes into effect."

Shawn's eyes widened.

"You know, the rule the board recently passed stating that if two executives in the company marry, one of them must resign."

Margaret stood then and, drawing herself up to her full, imposing height, patted the girl's shoulder in gracious finale. "I must run now, dear. I have a five o'clock flight to catch for Paris."

The young woman sat holding the envelope as though something evil was about to issue forth.

Stepping out into the sunlight and the town car waiting for her at the curb, Margaret smiled wryly at the words Shawn was no doubt reading at that moment:

***Shirts folded, light starch.
Breakfast promptly at six.
Dinner whenever he gets
home (often quite late).***

CHAPTER TWO

PAR AVION

Flight attendants in first-class were still serving dinner courses long after Margaret slipped on a satin eye mask to shut out the light and sights about her. After picking at the salad on her tray, she had returned the rest of her dinner, uneaten, and was trying unsuccessfully to sleep away the flight to Paris.

But events of the past twenty-four hours had left her too agitated for the oblivion of sleep she sought. Dark thoughts scrolled unchecked behind the silk mask in a raucous dichotomy.

The wife's always the last to know, said one.

Not so! argued another. Margaret had known ... something. Known it viscerally and for a long time but had not been able to identify the persistent edginess which kept her feeling as though a chasm was about to open beneath her feet. That her own anxiety coincided with changes taking place in Robert hadn't dawned on her at first. She had attributed his preoccupation and fatigue--then outright impatience and irritability--on the same heavy workload he himself blamed them.

Last September, after months of steering his company through the minefields of a labor relations dispute, Robert had finally declared the mission a success.

Margaret had voiced her relief. "Now!" she had told him, "we can get on with our lives."

But, soon after, the hard-driving CEO, up to his entrepreneurial eyebrows in a corporate take-over of Wilmot Industries, was off to Atlanta, leaving her at home for long stretches of time while he oversaw negotiations.

In January, with that project behind him, she had once again thought, "Now!" and marked the occasion with a dinner party in their home, partly to celebrate, but mostly to reestablish their lapsed social life.

Her efforts had gone in vain, however. Not only was Robert unenthusiastic at the idea at the outset, when the evening rolled around, he was plainly restless and bored with the friends whose company he had once enjoyed.

It was then that Margaret began quietly checking about, amassing the damning facts that had ended in yesterday's confirmation of her worst fears.

It's the wife's fault when a husband strays, another smug saw buzzed in her head.

Nonsense! Margaret flounced in her seat, punching the pillow into a more comfortable prop. Her mind flashed back to all the insipid "how to" articles she had ingested as a young bride eager to learn the secrets of keeping one's marriage intact--articles cautioning the stricken reader that she was in danger of being replaced in the conjugal bed if she responded incorrectly to the inevitable quizzes. *Have you let yourself go? Are you becoming mentally lazy?* And always the inane query about how one squeezed the toothpaste tube.

Armed with each fresh piece of advice, a young Margaret naively determined that she would sidestep all the marital pitfalls.

Dutifully complying with the expectations of the '50s wife, she had set about aiding and abetting her husband's ambitious career goals while meeting the mandates of motherhood and volunteering her fair share of community service.

She and Robert had married fresh out of college, their son Paul born the following year. In ensuing years Robert's advancement through corporate ranks had necessitated a dozen cross-country moves for the family, moves in which her husband went eagerly ahead to set up his office while Margaret remained behind to deal with realtors and packers and school bureaucracies. In each new community, she gamely tackled her new responsibilities as the process repeated itself all over again.

When Robert eventually reached the top echelon of management in Dallas, the relocations ended, and with them, the reliable old '50s rules and roles which by then were obsolete. She scrambled to adjust to new ones--or rather to the lack of rules resulting from the social unrest of the '60s and '70s when the world as she knew it turned topsy-turvy.

So what went wrong? she asked herself now. Why was their marriage hanging by a frayed thread while others of the same generation seemed to click along without all the effort? They had been no different at the outset from other young couples of the day. Marrying in innocence after a brief courtship in those days before premarital sex was the norm, they and their contemporaries had blindly accepted the premise of a song popular at the time--*just Molly and me and baby make three, so happy we'll be ... in my blue heaven.*

Robert, handsome and smart, an accounting major with a brilliant future ahead of him, was coveted by every girl on campus. Happily, Margaret basked in the spotlight of his attention as he gradually focused on her their senior year. Her sorority sisters had squealed with glee the night she walked in wearing his fraternity pin. A real coup, they smugly pronounced, one of their own snaring Robert Ainsley from the clutches of Eta Beta president. Gladys Stricklin.

A heady round of events followed then in rapid succession. His fraternity came to serenade her, she standing proudly on the sorority house balcony above for all the world to see. He proposed a short time later with a teensy solitaire which, through the years, was traded in for increasingly bigger ones.

What babies we were, Margaret told herself now. We had no idea of who we were or what we wanted. Comparing the giddy twosome they had been at twenty-one with the sedate couple they were now in their late fifties, she could almost believe two different couples were involved. Last night's unhappy scene flashed through her mind.

"I can't give her up, Margaret," Robert had said with a tone of finality, his face closed and impersonal.

The words were scary enough, but her husband's resignation alarmed Margaret even more. Resignation from this confident man who had often declared life's challenges merely as mountains to be climbed meant that he had at last come up against one too high to scale.

With a mix of fear and disbelief Margaret, arms outstretched, had moved toward him, but Robert leaped from his chair and made for the door.

"I think it will be best if I sleep in the guest room for awhile," he said and ducked out of the bedroom, thus ending their pathetically one-sided conversation.

Stunned, Margaret, who had never thrown an object in anger in her life, snatched up the nearest one at hand, a Baccarat paperweight, and threw it with all her might at the closed door, the loud shattering of expensive crystal punctuating her fear and frustration. There was no point chasing after him. Experience had taught her that even in the best of circumstances, Robert would not discuss personal matters. No amount of nagging or pleading would

prompt him to open up to her now. Beyond tears, she had sunk numbly onto the chair at her desk, her emotions oddly at bay even as her feverish mind darted here and there, making swift forays into every possibility out of this morass.

She thought of the friend who had once humorously remarked, "Don't just do something, Margaret, SIT THERE!" But it wasn't her nature to just sit there. She had to do something. Now. Even if it was wrong. Eventually, she had come up with the Paris plan on which she was now embarking.

Whipping herself into a froth of activity, she had stayed up all night making lists and packing, all the while assuring herself that the separation, if it came to that, would never go full term. She pictured a penitent Robert coming after her in a week or so, begging her to come back. With each item she folded and dropped into the suitcase, Margaret had prayed that her plea to Shawn's sense of decency the following day would resolve things in a civilized manner, and she would not need the luggage she was packing.

Abruptly Margaret sat up in her seat, whipping off her eye mask. This will never do, she thought, pressing her fingertips to her temples.

"Can I get you something?" asked an observant flight attendant who was strolling by.

"No thank you, dear. I'm fine." Rummaging in the carry-on case at her feet, she brought out the packet of information she had picked up from the Dallas representative of Le Cordon Bleu cooking school.

Margaret stared vacantly at the cover: *Le Cordon Bleu: L'Art Culinaire. Paris - 1895*, it read. For years she had dreamed of studying gourmet cooking at this world-renowned institute, but going there now under the present circumstances seemed less the grand adventure she had envisioned than penance for a fired housewife.

She tried resurrecting her enthusiasm by recalling the scene in an old movie which had first inspired it. Audrey Hepburn in the role of Sabrina had lined up with her fellow classmates at the school to await the teaching chef's evaluation of their prepared dishes. Margaret, already an excellent cook, had watched in fascination as the doe-eyed ingénue learned to slice and dice vegetables with lightning speed and crack an egg neatly into a dish with one hand.

Now, however, try as she might to recapture her former excitement, Margaret's would-be fantasy faded into a bleak image of herself, alone and lonely in a foreign country. Slipping the packet back beneath her seat, she recovered her eyes with the mask and courted sleep by reciting like a mantra the Brillat-Savarin quote she had just read in the pamphlet: *Tell me what a man eats, and I shall tell you what he is. Tell me what a man eats, and ...*

An unwanted thought broke into Margaret's reverie: At this moment, I am nothing but a wilted salad being hurtled through space.

Her mind wandered back to the telephone conversation with Jane when she had called her sister from the airport to say goodbye.

"Margaret," she had chastised, "I hope this isn't some foolish idea of retaliation. Surely you're not trying to prove that old adage: Living well's the best revenge."

"Absolutely not, Jane! I'm paddling furiously just to keep my head above water. Robert's so caught up in this affair he isn't making good sense. I honestly feel that the best thing I can do is go away for a while and give his ardor time to cool down. Meanwhile, I've got to stay busy to preserve my own sanity."

"Well..." Jane said softly, "maybe it's true that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but..." She paused, then blurted out, "Oh Sis, it's just that I'm worried about you--going over there by yourself under such sad conditions. What ... what if things don't work out the way you planned?"

"That's just it, Jane. Beyond giving Robert a chance to see what life is like without me, I HAVE no plan! I'm just trying hard to stay focused on the journey instead of becoming obsessed with the destination."

In truth, those brave-sounding words now echoed in Margaret's ears. Trickling in like early election returns, the hard facts were starting to register, and she realized just how far out on this spindly limb she had crawled.

She was as scared as she had ever been in her life.

CHAPTER THREE

BIENVENU

"Bienvenu à Pa-ree, Madame Ainsley," the dapper little concierge greeted her from behind the reception desk. Margaret smiled at Pierre through a veil of nostalgia that had wrapped itself about her the moment she stepped inside the familiar little hotel where she and Robert had always stayed together.

As she glanced about, the last trace of confidence that had survived the flight from Dallas now vanished into the gray Paris morning, leaving her with an unanchored feeling--like a balloon cut loose from its moorings. Fatigued and three thousand miles from home, she was now doubting the wisdom of having left behind not only her husband with his paramour but the family and friends who would have been a comforting bridge across this low point in her life.

"It's nice to see you again, Pierre," she said with an attempt at enthusiasm, then more fervently than she intended asked, "Have you any messages for me?"

Immediately Margaret despised the cloying tone in her voice which betrayed the promise she had made herself, to carry out this marital separation in a manner worthy of a Wise Woman.

"I'm sorry, Madame, no messages." The alert concierge's black raisin eyes searched the hotel guest's face then quickly amended his answer with words meant to cheer. "But your husband called a

short time ago to request that our staff take excellent care of you during your long stay here. Five months, I believe he said?"

"More or less," Margaret replied as she slid the registration form back across the marble counter. *So that's the way it works. Instead of calling me, my husband will communicate through the hotel staff.*

She rode the tiny brass-caged elevator up to the third floor and dragged herself to the room she had requested on the front. The porter inside had arranged her several pieces of luggage along one wall and was fussing with fixtures and switches while awaiting a gratuity.

Margaret ushered him to the door, hung out a Do Not Disturb sign, and kicked off her shoes. Mentally, she tested her reserve of strength, then shook her head. The times she and Robert had come here together, they always fended off their jet lag by wandering about the city until a reasonable hour to retire; but today she was too physically and emotionally spent to play that little game. Without unpacking so much as her carry-on bag, she showered, wrapped herself in the hotel's large terry bathrobe, and fell exhausted across the bed.

The persistent jangle of the telephone awakened Margaret, and she lay for a moment trying to get her bearings. Daylight filtered through the fringes of the heavy damask draperies, and her watch registered ten ... but ten what?

"*Bon-jour ...*" she finally answered, the unevenness of her voice forcing a second effort.

Le Cordon Bleu was calling to remind Madame Ainsley that her reservation for classes commencing on Monday must be confirmed by check today, Friday.

Good Grief...Friday! Margaret thought, quickly tallying the hours she must have slept.

In the lobby, refreshed and dressed, Margaret asked Pierre to tell her how to catch the Metro to rue *Leon Delhomme*, the street address for the school.

“Madame Ainsley, that is the address for Le Cordon Bleu, the most famous cooking school in the world. All Paris taxi drivers know where it is. Allow me to call one for you.”

Margaret did not care to tell him that her stay this time would differ from ones in the past. This time, she would blend into the rhythm of the city--to mix with the Parisians on their mass transit rather than argue with choleric taxi drivers, dine at picturesque bistros and sidewalk cafes rather than suffer the gastronomic delights of three-star restaurants.

Following Robert's rule--Never Explain--she didn't. “Pierre, please ... just show me on this transit map where to get on and where to get off.” She handed him the Paris street map in her hand.

“Madame ... such an elegant lady ... I cannot allow you to go alone your first time on the Metro. You are certain to be lost.”

She studied Pierre's inscrutable face, wondering if Robert had given the man reason to doubt she could handle such a simple task? Before she could respond, however, Pierre officiously thrust his wristwatch before his face and studied its dial. With Gallic certitude, he declared, “In half an hour, Madame Ainsley, I shall finish my duties here and personally escort you to your school.”

“Oh, Pierre, no!”

“I insist, Madame. Thirty minutes, no more, you visit the shops on *rue de Rivoli*, then we shall go together to Le Cordon Bleu.” When he hurried to explain that the train out to the school's neighborhood was the same train he rode daily and would do so shortly, with or without her, Margaret graciously accepted his offer without further protest.

She had no misgivings about setting out with Pierre that afternoon. Through the years, the Ainsleys had followed the young man's steady rise in the hotel's employ, watching him climb through the ranks from a night clerk in his early thirties to the esteemed concierge's title he bore now in his forties.

Walking with him along the crowded avenue, Margaret smiled at their odd-couple image framed in the shop windows they passed: a tall attractive woman of a certain age towering over the suave, sophisticated Frenchman; she fair and fading, he swarthy and robust; her regal bearing and long-limbed stride counterposing his bantyrooster swagger and strut.

Pierre made a dramatic display of tucking her arm beneath his, the gallant Napoleon delivering his charge to the halls of Le Cordon Bleu. They walked briskly for the two long blocks, then descended the Metro's littered steps to the Concorde station below. Leading her through its subterranean passages teeming with pedestrian traffic, Pierre paused beneath the signboards long enough to show her how to decipher directions to the proper platform for each line. Moments later they boarded the Number Twelve train which breezed into the station before them.

"You're right, Pierre," Margaret said, struggling out of her coat at the first stop, "my first outing on the subway would have been difficult without your help. Thank you for accompanying me."

As Pierre helped Margaret remove her coat, his flashing dark eyes swept the length of her long body then returned to rest on her face. "My ple-zure, Madame Ainsley," he beamed, "always with a lovely lady it is my ple-ZURE."

Margaret had forgotten how openly flirtatious Frenchmen were, as though they inherited some national gene at birth. "You're kind, Pierre," she stated matter-of-factly, "but I'm not feeling very lovely right now. I think I'm being replaced at the hearth."

“*Ah, les affaires de coeur,*” he mournfully replied, “*C’est triste.*”

“*Oui,*” Margaret said quickly, embarrassed at her momentary lapse in discretion. She retrieved the transit map from her purse and thrust it out for Pierre’s inspection. “Where are we now?” she asked.

Pointing to a dot on the network of black lines, Pierre raised his voice over the train’s roar, “That last stop, Madame, was Pasteur. Next is *Volontaires* and then *Vaugirard* where we shall get off. Each line of the Metro is named for its last stop. The train we are on,” he explained, “is part of the *Marie’d Issy* line and will reverse its course once it reaches that terminus.”

Margaret stored away the information for the future.

From the station it was but a seven-minute walk to the cookery school three blocks away. Her anticipation mounted with each step.

“There you see it,” said Pierre, as they rounded one last corner, his arm introducing with a flourish the short, narrow street. “That white building there,” he said, pointing.

A narrow, four-storied affair, the building was neatly sandwiched in the middle of a long block of taller buildings on either side. Margaret spied the familiar blue and white logo above the school’s entrance. Above the door, waving in the breeze, was a long banner marking the schools centennial year: **Le Cordon Bleu 1895 - 1995.**

“It doesn’t look like the building in *Sabrina*,” Margaret observed.

“Oh, but it’s not, Madame!” replied Pierre, recognizing her reference to the old movie classic. “Le Cordon Bleu moved here only a few years ago. Classes were held originally in the *Palais Royale* and then other locations before coming here.”

Margaret focused on the cluster of students milling about in front of the school. *Young!* she silently observed, *every last one of them.*

Once Pierre had determined she could find her way back to the hotel, he left Margaret standing across from the school and returned to the *Vaugirard* station to continue his journey home.

Before Margaret could step off the curb, a large delivery truck roared down the street and ground to a halt in her path. Students, gathered on the opposite side, raced out to unload several cases of food and supplies. An irate driver of a commercial van, blocked from behind, bore down on his horn with cacophonous revenge whereupon a curious chef on the second floor threw open a window and poked out his toqued head to see what all the commotion was about.

Margaret laughed aloud at the comical scene and crossed over, eager to become acquainted with her new home-away-from-home. Still engrossed in the feverish unloading activity, she raised her hand to push open the school's glassed front door and was startled when it swung smoothly away untouched, bringing her face to face with a pleasant looking gentleman holding it open from inside.

Warm brown eyes flecked with gold and crinkled at the corners with parentheses of good humor smiled back at her. Strong character lines etched the man's leathered but boyish-looking face, a face that reflected a gentle strength and was framed by a thick shock of white hair. She guessed his age to be somewhere in the range of her own.

"Merci beau coups," she said, expecting him to be either a school administrator or one of the chefs.

"Let me guess ... ," responded a deep voice with the unmistakable hint of New England. "Is it Georgia (jawjah) or Texas? You'uh definitely from the south!"

"My! What good ears you have!" Margaret said in an attempt to be clever. "I'm Texas ... I mean, from Texas."

“Well *Bienvenu*, Texas!” he said, flashing a toothy white grin at her slip of tongue. In one arm he held an oversized shopping bag with the school's logo stenciled on the side and kitchen utensils crowding over the top. His free hand made a courtly gesture inviting her to step inside, then, casting one last appreciative glance over his shoulder, he stepped briskly through the door and was gone.

Struck by the unexpected jocularity, Margaret turned to watch him disappear down the sidewalk with an easy athletic gait. Student or visitor, she wondered briefly? Hopefully, a student, then she wouldn't be the token senior on this very young campus.

“*Bienvenu*, Madame Ainsley,” said the Director of Le Cordon Bleu when Margaret presented her tuition check and the application form she had filled out beforehand. “My name is Emily Dessange.”

When Margaret replied in slow, but grammatically correct French, the Director smiled her approval and switched to French as well. “My assistant is away this afternoon,” she explained, “so I have the pleasure of showing you about the school myself.”

In her mid-to-late forties, Madame Dessange was a dignified looking woman of medium height boosted by high heels and light brown hair swept up in a French twist. Her beige business suit with pearls at the collar complemented deep-set blue eyes and a complexion too fair, Margaret decided, to be French.

Her high heels clicked rhythmically against the tile floor, announcing their entry into a cheerful solarium flooded with natural light from a skylight high above. Two students at a far table looked up and waved.

“*Bonjour*, Sebastian .. *Bonjour*, Eun Ju ... ” she called out.

Margaret was pleased at the friendliness, so different from the stuffy atmosphere she had expected.

Fresh-looking and pristine, the large room's restful ecru background was brightly accented with royal blue and white. A canopied coffee bar occupied one corner of the room which was otherwise filled with empty tables and chairs and a profusion of exotic plants reaching for the sun above.

“Students come to this area between classes to study their notes or visit or...” Madame Dessange nodded towards one wall. “...check the bulletin board for messages and announcements.”

Margaret crossed over to look at the posted information. Along with several news clippings about the school's recent centennial celebration, there were two notices of job openings in restaurants in Lyon and Bordeaux as well as a three-page computer printout of the school's enrollment. Alongside each student's name was the country from which he or she hailed. She scanned the list, wondering aloud at the fact that other countries were better represented on the list than was France itself.

“That's because the French grow up in households where the culinary arts we teach here are fairly routine,” Madame Dessange replied. “They learn by osmosis, you might say.”

The director turned back through the door they had entered and led Margaret up a tiled stairway to a classroom on the second floor. The solarium's fresh color scheme was carried throughout.

“We have two amphitheaters for demonstrations,” the director explained. “You will report to this one on Monday; but I'm afraid we can't look in today because students inside are taking their practical examinations.”

“Oh, so we DO take exams!” Margaret said. “I was wondering...”

“Indeed. The Classic Cycle consists of three courses--Basic, the one you are enrolled in, Intermediate and Superior. Students must pass an examination for each course before advancing to the next.”

The director stopped her explanation to address a small red-haired student struggling up the steps with a crate full of eggs. “Bonjour, Kate,” she said pleasantly, holding open the door to the classroom until the girl vanished inside.

“Kate is one of our new Chef assistants. After completing Basic, selected students can defray their expenses in subsequent courses by serving the school as a chef's assistant or an English translator.”

“That reminds me,” Margaret interrupted, “your brochure says that English translation is provided only in the first course. With my limited French, is it unwise of me to continue with the Intermediate course as I'm planning?”

“Oh, your French is quite adequate,” Madame Dessange assured her. “But even if you were not so fluent, we have found that students with even a rudimentary understanding of the language become so familiar with the culinary terms they hear repeated over and over in their first course that they rarely have trouble understanding French instructions in the advanced ones later on.”

The Director paused, then went on in her melodious voice, “You said you are planning to take the second course. What about the last one?”

Margaret's lips pressed together. Strolling the hallways, caught up with the appealing orderliness of the small school, she had managed to forget for a few blissful moments the disarray in her own life. “I'm afraid I can't stay long enough to take that last course this year, but I plan to come back in the future and graduate.”

Until that moment, Margaret hadn't considered a future beyond the months she was to be separated from Robert, but the

seductive seed of pursuing a long-buried dream had been planted somewhere in the course of the tour.

After allowing her new enrollee a moment to observe an optional bread making class in progress, Madame Dessange ushered Margaret back down the steps to a small boutique on the first floor. "I shall leave you now. This is where you can purchase your uniform and supplies," she explained with a nod toward the young woman at a nearby counter. "Julie will see that you have everything you need for your first course."

School supplies at my age! Margaret thought wryly as she turned herself over to the young woman. Purchasing the basic equipment was the easy part. Chef's jackets, dish towels, aprons, set of knives, a student hat called a *calot*, and finally an airtight container for carrying her prepared foods home from class. The greatest challenge came when she tried to find a pair of the standard blue and white checked trousers to fit. After trying on several sizes, she gave up. Those long enough bagged at the waist; those that fit at the top were too short at the bottom. Finally she settled for slightly exposed ankles and departed the school carrying her own heavily laden shopping bag.

Walking at a fast clip just ahead of her was the tiny young woman Margaret had seen with the eggs. Kate. Out of uniform now, she wore neatly pressed jeans and a gray sweatshirt. The curly red hair Margaret had seen tucked beneath a *calot* now streamed behind, half the length of the girl's minikin body.

Coming alongside her at a stoplight, Margaret caught a glimpse of freckles dotting the pixie face with its small, straight nose and almond shaped eyes. She was about to speak when the light changed, and the girl stepped from the curb and crossed over to the other side. Glancing about before descending the Metro steps, the young woman saw Margaret for the first time and stopped to wait.

“New student, huh?” she called out in a clipped British accent. “*Bienvenue.*”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Your shopping bag ...”

“Oh that!” Margaret laughed as she looked down at the bulging bag she embraced with both arms. She hurried to keep pace with the girl's sneakered sprint down the station steps.

“Once students get past their first course,” Kate explained over her shoulder, they never again have to purchase so many supplies at one time. That was my clue.”

As they stood, Mutt-and-Jeff-like, on the platform, Margaret admitted her anxiety about getting on the right train and off at the right station.

“Oh, don’t bother yourself,” Kate said. “That's the same train I take. My stop is three past yours, so I'll get you on and boot you off.”

When they boarded minutes later, Margaret seated herself opposite Kate, grateful for an opportunity to converse in English with a fellow student since she had pretty well exhausted her powers of concentration using her slow, halting French with Madame Dessange and before that Pierre.

“I understand you are one of the new chef assistants,” she said.

Kate nodded, her hazel eyes lighting up with pride.

“Then does that mean you'll go on with the Superior Course and graduate?” The subject was becoming increasingly important to Margaret.

“I graduate in late August, yes.” Kate sighed. “Which means that once I get my hands on that *Grande Diplome*, I can jolly well write my own ticket after that.”

The girl responded to Margaret's questions as they rode, punctuating her answers with energy and enthusiasm as she spoke of her keen desire to become a chef—an ambition obviously fueled by the meager circumstances of her young life.

Kate Stone and her four siblings had grown up in a small English village where their father was a groundskeeper for a large estate, and the mother cooked lunches in a school cafeteria. From the age of sixteen, the young woman had served a family in the nearby city of York as nanny to their two children, saving enough money by the age of twenty-two to enroll in the Paris school of Le Cordon Bleu.

“But wouldn't it have been less expensive to attend the London school?”

“Oh, no doubt, it would have ... if I had found the same job there that I have here. The family I worked for in York put me in touch with this Paris couple who needed a nanny in exchange for free room and board. Frankly, without that bit of luck, I couldn't have attended either school.

“Still and all,” she continued, “I'm glad I *did* come here instead of going to London. The Parisian experience is in itself worth quite a lot.”

Margaret quietly observed Kate. For all her peppery personality, there was a fragility about the young Englishwoman that brought out Margaret's maternal instincts to protect her from the pressures she was obviously having to endure to boost herself up the economic strata. One body part or another was in constant motion; hands gestured; one knee bobbed; a facial tic flickered intermittently beneath her right eye.

“Aren’t you exhausted with such a heavy workload?” she finally ventured. “I mean, classes all day plus your job as a chef’s assistant. And then returning each evening to take care of ... how many children?”

“Only three,” Kate replied with a hint of defensiveness. “But they’re nice enough little tykes. I’ll manage.” A determined set to the young jaw waved off any further questions from Margaret.

Jumping to her feet moments later, Kate said, “Hey, here’s our stop.”

“Ours!” protested Margaret, as she jumped up behind her. “I thought your station was three stops away.”

“Oh, it is, but today I promised Gabriela I would pick up chocolates at Fouquet’s to serve at her dinner party tonight. I didn’t have time to make her petits fours this time.”

This time! Margaret thought as she set off down the street in the opposite direction. Threading her way along the pedestrian-choked avenue, she contemplated the difference in the ambitious young woman’s world of today as compared with her own at the same age.

The Kates nowadays, she acknowledged, carved out niches for themselves through sheer spunk and tenacity in a new order where life choices were set in motion early on. Whereas Margaret, like most of her peers at the time, had already traded in a BA degree on an MRS at twenty-two and begun the childrearing process without so much as considering other options.

It wasn’t that one way was better than another, she told herself as she waited for the traffic light to change. Just different. In her opinion, though, a woman still couldn’t have it all no matter which route she took. Excelling in one arena often meant dropping a stitch in

the other. A woman had to understand that upfront and decide which arena was most important to her.

As for herself, Margaret had no doubt which she would choose if she had it to do over again. Given the same opportunity, she would do it the same way as before--stay at home and raise a family. Only next time, she conceded with a sigh, she might tack on a small career at the end.

That thought, however, would have to simmer a while longer on the back burner of Margaret's mind before she could own the possibility that her life, even now, could take on a new dimension regardless of the outcome of the separation from her husband.

Floating into the hotel on this ephemeral puff of optimism, she felt a brief surge in confidence--until she stopped by the reception desk and found there was still no word from Robert.

CHAPTER FOUR

BONJOUR

Jarred into awareness by the telephone early Sunday morning, Margaret sprang upright in bed, her heart accelerating into racing mode. *It's Robert! He's having second thoughts and wants me back.*

“*Bonjour,*” she answered breathlessly.

“Mrs. Ainsley, is that you?” came the cheerful voice of Robert’s secretary.

“Oh good morning, Wilma.” Margaret managed to hide her disappointment from the longtime employee who was more like a favorite aunt.

“You didn't sound like yourself. For a moment I was afraid they had given me the wrong room. Forgive me for calling you so early, Mrs. Ainsley, but with the time difference between Dallas and Paris, I felt the best chance of reaching you was to stay up late here and wake you up early there. I took your husband to the airport earlier today ...”

He IS coming! Margaret's heart took off again as a jumble of half formed thoughts clamored for attention all at once. She glanced at the bedside clock to see how much time she had before the Dallas flight arrived, her hand smoothing and patting her sleep-mussed hair.

“...as you know,” Wilma was saying, “he's been working on this agreement for well over a year now, and since it's so near completion, he wanted to be there to work out any last-minute problems.”

Margaret's roller coaster emotions plummeted again. Only one agreement was so important to Robert right now--the one his company was negotiating with the Chinese trade delegation.

“Mrs. Ainsley ... are you there?”

“So then ... he's on his way to Beijing?”

A polite silence told Margaret that Wilma had just addressed that fact.

“Did SHE go?” she blurted out, seeing as she did the specter of Wise Woman vanish once more from her sights.

There was another brief silence. “Let's just say, Mrs. Ainsley that, under the circumstances, occupying yourself in Paris right now is the best thing you can do.”

That answered Margaret's question. Unexpectedly, tears began to stream down her face, the first she had been able to shed since leaving home.

From afar, she heard the secretary gently cautioning her, “As you know, I'm not at liberty to discuss Mr. Ainsley's business, but that does not stop me from praying that your Paris stay will accomplish what you want it to.”

“Oh, Wilma,” Margaret moaned, weeping openly now, “Nothing's going to be accomplished. I have no grand plan other than hoping that by leaving home I could somehow shock some sense into Robert. But I'm afraid all I have done is leave him an open playing field.”

There was a discreet cough at the other end of the line. “Uh ... if you will allow me, Mrs. Ainsley, I would like to pass along some advice my mother once gave me. Now it's going to sound strange, I know, but it has certainly helped me through some bad times.”

“Of course, Wilma,” Margaret snuffled. “Tell me.”

“When my husband passed away, Mother told me that it was important for a woman alone to treat herself like a queen.”

Margaret smiled through the watery residue on her cheeks. That WAS strange advice.

“ ‘Wilma,’ Mother said to me, ‘Herbert always treated you like a queen when he was here, but now that he's not, you must do that for yourself.’ ” The woman chuckled softly. “God rest her soul. Among other things, Mother also cautioned me about demeaning habits like hovering over a kitchen counter to eat my meals. ‘Set yourself a pretty table,’ she often told me, ‘and dine like royalty.’ ”

“Well, I have room service,” Margaret, now recovered, teased. “Does that count?”

Wilma giggled, then went on in a serious voice. “There are many ways to take care of yourself, Mrs. Ainsley. For one, I know very well how lonely weekends can be for a woman alone. Especially Sundays. You will be doing yourself a big favor if you start planning ahead for them.” She paused, then timidly asked, “For instance, what were you planning to do today?”

“Well...” Margaret's voice trailed off. In truth, she had dreaded the prospect of even getting up.

“That's what I'm talking about,” Wilma said softly. “You need to take charge of your Sundays now, Mrs. Ainsley. Learn to savor them and make them your own.”

“Okay, Wilma,” Margaret replied with an attempt at levity, “I promise that starting today I will savor my Sundays in Paris.” In a casual voice, she moved on to another topic. “By the way, Wilma, how did the Board dinner go on Thursday?”

The secretary sorted her words for a suitable response before replying. “Let’s just say, Mrs. Ainsley, that you were missed. Although the preparations you made were all quite nice, the evening lacked that air of graciousness you always bring to Board functions.” She paused, then continued more guardedly, “... and judging from some of the wives’ comments, I think they felt uncomfortable being entertained in your home without you there.”

“But you did explain ...”

“I told them exactly what you told me to, Mrs. Ainsley--that you had an opportunity to attend cooking classes in Paris and regretted that you couldn’t be with them that evening.”

Aware of the woman’s discomfort at sharing her opinions with the boss’ wife, Margaret gently redirected the conversation by describing her visit to the cooking school where classes would begin the next day. The two were saying their goodbyes when Wilma suddenly remembered something.

“I almost forgot, Mrs. Ainsley, I’m supposed to ask you where the key to Mr. Ainsley’s wine cellar is.”

“Oh dear...” Margaret replied without a moment’s hesitation, “...I’m afraid it must have slipped into the trash compactor the night I was packing for Paris.”

“Oh...” came a tittered response.

Wide awake after they hung up, Margaret briefly toyed with the idea of ordering breakfast to the room and idling away the morning over a crossword puzzle. She had no sooner picked up the telephone,

however, than she promptly replaced it, her conscience prickling at the thought of the good woman's earnest advice.

Reluctantly, she threw back the covers of her comfortable cocoon and arose to face the day. If things don't work out, she bargained, I can always come back.

An hour later, showered and dressed, Margaret set out. Savoring Sunday alone had to be an oxymoron, but she would give it her best shot. She was no stranger to walking, a daily habit she enjoyed at home for the exercise. Nor in the past, when Robert still wanted her along on business trips, had she minded exploring strange cities on her own while he attended to business.

But today, walking alone was even more difficult than dining alone in public, a solitary ordeal she avoided at all costs. At least in a restaurant, she could occupy her eyes with a book. Now they worked to avoid those of strangers ... of lovers strolling hand in hand ... and those she imagined were pitying the sad woman who walked alone in Paris on a Sunday morning.

Nor would her limbs cooperate. Tight and wooden feeling, they resisted all efforts to marshal them into an air of insouciance and ease. She had trudged a block in this self-conscious state normally reserved for the young and unsure when a melancholy washed over her, so sharp and pervasive that she had to fight the impulse to rush back to the hotel.

Confused, she stopped ... then sniffed the air. The entire area was bathed in a fragrance sweeter than Neiman's perfume counter. And then she knew. With a confirming glance at the Tuilleries gardens across the *rue du Rivoli*, she noticed for the first time that the chestnut trees were in dazzling white bloom, the essence of their blossoms permeating the air. The scent, she realized, had triggered a memory of walking here with Robert in a less troubled spring.

Having now labeled the dread, Margaret reached deep within to tap the newly-discovered well of strength she was learning to rely on and coaxed herself on down the street to a crowded brasserie on the corner. Inside, a noisy espresso machine cranked out its aromatic liquids for a steady stream of customers, and she nestled into a booth near the window, comforted by the easy ambiance of the room. Alternating lusty sips of cafe au lait with bites of fresh croissant, she leaned back in her seat and eavesdropped on the lyrical French patois being bandied about her.

Soothed by the background activity, she eventually pulled out her Michelin guide and began studying its pages to chart her course for the day. Concentrating on sites she had not visited with Robert, she finally settled on the Marais quarter where she would stroll the *Place des Vosges*, then spend the afternoon browsing the Picasso Museum.

At that moment, a faint shadow fell across her guidebook. Looking up, Margaret saw two couples outside peering with cupped hands through the window directly above her head. After holding a hasty summit on the sidewalk, the four trooped into the brasserie and settled noisily about a small table nearby, their Australian English, syncopated and unrestrained, immediately altering the easy tempo of the room.

"How'd you sleep, Mac?" asked one.

Mac's had been a bad night--the bed too short, mattress too soft, his wife too many times to the bathroom.

The other man had slept well enough, he said, but was baffled by the strange plumbing.

"Saccharine?" one of their wives inquired at the counter.

When the Frenchman behind stood mute and uncomprehending -- although Margaret suspected otherwise -- the

woman smiled sweetly and repeated, “DO YOU HAVE ANY SACCHARINE? ... SACK-A-WREN!”

Enjoying his little game, the contrary counterman shrugged and turned away, leaving the red-faced woman to retreat in embarrassed silence to her table.

For a while the four discussed the indifferent attitude of the French, then moved on to the weather and which film speed would be best for the day's gray light. Soon they settled down to their itinerary, consulting guidebooks and one another as they tried to reach consensus on the several three-star sights they wanted to work into their outing.

As the lengthy debate droned on, Margaret's initial amusement turned, first, to impatience, then outright exasperation; and she looked up at the chattering foursome with an overpowering urge to chastise them: *Look at the blossoms in the Tuilleries!* she wanted to shout. *Listen to the happy shoosh of the espresso machine. Wake up and smell the cafe au lait. This is as good as it gets right here in this room--a Parisian high as exhilarating as any view from the Eiffel Tower.*

But no sooner had Margaret indulged in this self-righteous indignation, however, than she remembered how close she herself had come to not being in the room at all--how she had nearly succumbed to self-pity and unreasonable fear and retreated to the security of her hotel room before discovering this cheerful oasis.

It's true, she thought, chastising herself now instead of the innocent four, several persons together might well miss a special moment, but theirs was no greater an oversight than that of the person who recognized, but discounted, the moment because there was no one to share it with. Very simply, she would have to guard against self-pity in the future and make the most of her time here in Paris.

Commitment to her day's outing now sealed by this lesson in humility, Margaret began gathering her belongings for departure just as

the two couples scraped back the chairs from their table and set off for the Louvre.

“Bone-JURE,” a friendly Aussie voice called back as the door swung shut behind them.

“Bonjour Bonehead,” muttered the counterman in perfect English.

CHAPTER FIVE

LES LETTRES

Margaret had heard of being saucy or even sauced, but until she spent a week in cooking school applying copious dollops of butter to the likes of hollandaise, b erna se and bordelaise, she hadn't known a person could also become oversauced.

To recover from the week's Battle of the *Buerre*, she fasted on Saturday morning, working her way through a large bottle of mineral water while taking care of domestic chores in her room. She hung hand laundry on a pull-out cord in the spacious tiled bath, sent out her egg spattered uniforms, then shopped that afternoon for an Easter dress for her granddaughter Amy.

Back at the hotel that evening, she ordered a salad up to her room and sat munching it in front of the television, straining to understand the rapid-fire commentary in order to improve her French. What Margaret was really doing, however, and was aware she was doing so, was postponing the correspondence she had vowed to tackle today NO MATTER WHAT—a letter to her sister and one to her son. After giving consideration to both for a moment, she snapped off the television set and padded over to a small desk.

Finally committed, she was eager to begin. For Margaret, spreading words out on paper where she could move them about until they conveyed just the right message was much easier than speaking

those same words aloud and off the top of her head. While others--like both Robert and her sister Jane--could present a concise and cogent argument at any given moment, she often came away from even the most innocuous discussions frustrated at her inability to articulate. She either would have said too much of this or not emphasized enough of that.

For Paul's letter, she planned to keep in mind that simple axiom, *Least Said Soonest Mended*. Busy with his medical practice in San Antonio, he probably wasn't even aware of his parents' problems. She took out a sheet of hotel stationery and began the cheerfully evasive letter.

April 1

Dear Paul and Trish,

Surprise! On the spur of the moment I've come to Paris for cooking classes at Le Cordon Bleu, something I've wanted to do for a long time. Since this is such a busy time for your dad right now, it's a convenient time for me to be away.

Only a week into the course here, my basic cuisine class has already given me more culinary tips than I ever knew existed. But for sheer cooking pleasure, nothing compares with the pastry class. I'm my happiest when I'm in there up to my elbows, nose tip to earlobes, in pastry dough because it evokes such wonderful childhood memories of visits to my grandmother's house on bread baking days. The yeasty mouth-watering aroma billowing from her kitchen and permeating every tiny room in her house was for me a testimony of her love.

For the same reason, Paul, I used to get a kick out of setting a pan of freshly baked cookies on the kitchen counter just before you came home from grade school. You would bound through the door, sniffing the air with

a big snaggle-toothed grin on your face, and I had the joy of watching you bask in that same nurturing glow.

Now, with my ever-improving pastry repertoire, I can carry on the tradition in even grander fashion with Amy. Give her a bug for me and tell her to watch for the new Easter dress Grandmother sent her today.

I love and miss you, one and all.

Mother

Margaret

Grandmother

Pleased as much with what the letter left unsaid as with what it said, Margaret set aside her pen and considered the message to her sister. Leaning back in her chair, she gazed about the lovely high-ceilinged room, its elegant Louis Something furnishings in gilded oyster--a pleasing reminder that she was in Paris, capital of the Chic. She had personally never cared for those monotonous commercial hotels with bland, monochromatic interiors that gave their guests no sense of place. One could as easily be in Nairobi as Naples.

Au Bon Loisir, the hotel where she was staying, was expensive even on the resident plan, but she felt safe and secure here and no longer considered seeking more reasonable lodging near the cookery school.

Turning back to the letter to Jane, she thought about her older sister who still had the irksome tendency of being overly-protective. The thing to avoid here was saying anything that would worry or alarm her. She couldn't let Jane know, for instance, how miserable she was when she came home each evening from school--how the tiny flame of hope that sent her scurrying up to the reception desk was doused by keen disappointment each time she found no message from Robert.

She would not mention that or tell her of the constant effort to guard against anger which, if left unchecked, could easily destroy the person she wanted to be. No, she would sugarcoat her words with an

air of indifference rather than unload her problems on Jane who, along with everyone else in life's classroom, was meted out his or her own share. The problems themselves, she felt, weren't as important as the way a person handled those problems. That was the biggest test.

Dear Jane,

Your concern for me fairly hummed through the telephone lines when we talked before I left, so I'm checking in to assure you once again that I'm okay. Really.

In my best moments, I'm busy, interested in my classes, and certain the sun will rise the next day. In my worst, I wonder why I'm learning to prepare all these fancy dishes when there may well be no one to share them with when I'm done.

Perhaps you were right and absence WILL make Robert's heart grow fonder. But as I said before, I can't place all my eggs in that basket. The fact is, I am giving my husband time to figure out what he wants, and if it turns out not to be me, I must be capable of accepting the decision with grace and go on with my life. Bitterness is an unbecoming trait, and I will go to great lengths to avoid it!

No, I've still not heard from him. Nor will I. We agreed on five months, and it will never occur to Robert that this is one contract he could break without penalty.

With all the thinking time I have in the evenings, I have decided that today's young woman is much better prepared for life than were the women of our generation. Early on, she learns to live within and set life goals whether a man shares that life or not. But you and I and all our friends didn't even look beyond the age of twenty. We had to be married or planning a wedding by then or be considered failures as women.

Remember how Daddy used to tell us, 'Act that way, Young Lady, and you'll end up an OLD MAID like Miss

Wadley across the street!?' In retrospect I think the rhetoric had more to do with his fear than ours, that is, he might have to support unwed daughters for the rest of his life. But his threat was just one more societal drumbeat reminding us if we DIDN'T marry, we had better start training for one of the three career options available to us at the time: teacher, nurse, or secretary.

Have you noticed that so many young women today choose not to marry until their mid-to-late thirties (if at all), and they aren't stigmatized like the Miss Wadleys of our time? I cringe when I remember how horrid even you and I were--snickering about those root vegetables in her garden just because the poor thing had no man in her life.

As you can tell, I'm trying to update my outlook in the event I end up without one in mine. I simply refuse to believe, if that happens, that my only recourse is to fall apart.

If I haven't convinced you with this rationale, for the moment I've managed to convince myself. I may need to repeat the litany all over again when I wake up in the morning, but tonight, at least, I'll sleep.

And sleep she did. Before she had skimmed three pages of Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, Margaret was out with the light.

CHAPTER SIX

LE CORDON BLEU

The pace at school picked up the following week. More complicated dishes were presented in the packed amphitheater where the chefs' instructions in French competed noisily with the translators' English, and the steps of preparation exacted close attention for Margaret to be able to reproduce them later in practical class.

Moreover, she no longer had the benefit of Kate's company and cooking advice on the morning Metro rides. As chef's assistant, the busy young woman now caught an earlier train so that she could be at school in time to help unload delivery trucks, stock pantries, and set out supplies in the amphitheater for the day's demonstration.

During those demonstrations, Kate was the picture of competence as she danced attendance on the chef, anticipating his need of utensils as efficiently as an operating room nurse proffering the surgeon's scalpel. She was well prepared for each class, knowing ahead the day's menu as well as the assorted steps and ingredients of each recipe. Watching her in action, Margaret wondered if anyone else had any idea of the tremendous workload the young woman actually carried.

On Thursday, Margaret remained at school to attend a lecture by a chef from one of Paris' top restaurants, then got up early the

following morning to meet members of her practical class for a tour of a *poissonnerie* on *rue Cler*.

Practically in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower, *rue Cler* was a quaint cobble-stoned street two blocks long where colorful stalls sagged under the weight of every kind of fruit, vegetable, meat, fish, cheese, bread, and pastry—not to mention the fresh flowers which were as indispensable to the Frenchman's table as food itself.

Margaret thrilled at the buzz and hum of activity in the market place. Pausing near a bright pyramid of ochre orange carrots, she watched the locals dart from stall to stall, chatting with one another as they filled their shopping bags with the freshly harvested produce. Idly observing them, her hand came to rest on a mound of carrots, their rich soil still moist and dark in the sun.

Gently, she picked one up. Eyes closed, she breathed in the stirring earth fragrance reminiscent of the gardens in the small hometown where she had grown up. Oh, she thought, if only life could be that simple again, shed of the shackles of sophistication that had tightened their grip each move up the social strata she and Robert had made.

But then, had their life together ever been simple? Always there had been that push to achieve and excel, to reach the top--whatever the top was. But could you explain that notion of success to the farmer whose hands had wrested this vegetable from the earth this very morning and brought it to market, thereby achieving his own measure of achievement?

"Lady, do you want to buy that carrot?" a gruff voice barked in French.

"*Excusez-moi*," she apologized to the testy proprietor, quickly returning the carrot to its nesting spot. Turning away then, she saw the gentleman from Maine who had apparently been watching her from across the stall, frank curiosity written on his face.

“Oh my, how embarrassing,” she said. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough to recognize a woman in deep reverie. An inner life is nothing to be embarrassed about, though. In my mind, it bespeaks depth and substance.” Extending his hand, he formally introduced himself. “I’m Mark Whitman.”

“Margaret Ainsley.”

They had met in practical class, of course, but in the way one meets a roomful of people at once, then waits for a one-on-one to provide the memory a toehold. The two continued on to the fish market together.

The twelve students in their class, having now been together for almost two weeks, were becoming better acquainted--although Margaret still identified most of them more by their home country or state than she did by name. The five Americans had distinguished themselves in typical Yankee fashion with their ceaseless banter and skewed sense of humor while the five from cultures more reserved cautiously observed them, gradually deciding that their American counterparts were harmless enough, if somewhat silly.

“Ooh,” said the young woman from Kansas City, wrinkling her small nose, “I’ll take our stockyards any day over the fishy smell in here!”

“You’re a landlubber, that’s what you are!” chided Maine (Mark!). “These are the wonderful smells of home,” he said, inhaling deeply to make his point.

“Ditto,” agreed California. “Although I’m sure Pacific fish smell even better than Atlantic ones.”

The day’s assignment was *Sole Bery*, “a simple recipe,” the chef told them in demonstration class. “Only eight ingredients.” What he

failed to mention, however, was that Fish Stock, only one of those eight ingredients, had a ten-step recipe of its own calling for as many components--and more pans than Margaret had in her entire kitchen in Dallas.

Later, at her workstation in practical class, she scrubbed, peeled, sliced and diced the vegetables and herbs, putting them into a stockpot with a whole whiting fish that she had cleaned and cut into chunks. After cooking the contents with white wine that she had pre-boiled to reduce acidity, she added water and boiled all the ingredients together another twenty minutes. Counting the time she allowed the mixture to cool, the Fish Stock alone took over an hour to prepare.

The supervising chef who paced the classroom observing students' work-in-progress gave Margaret a nod to advance to the next stage. To ready her eight-ounce sole--still intact with gills, fins, and entrails--she studiously followed the notes and drawings she had made in demonstration class, crossing off each instruction as she complied.

With scissors she trimmed the fins from the edge of the fish (her notes reminding her of the small side ones as well), cut off half the tail, laid the fish white-skin down on a cutting board, and scraped a bit of its dark skin to help detach it from the remaining piece of tail. Taking hold of the scraped portion, Margaret tried peeling away the skin in one smooth sweep the way the chef had done. Unsuccessful, she tried again. The skin frayed, leaving her one last ragtag bit to grasp. Flustered, and fearing she was losing ground, she covered the fish with paper towel for better purchase and tugged again. And again. Harder.

Without warning, the fish slid out of her hands, off the counter, and skimmed across the tiled floor until it came to rest at the feet of an astonished Taiwanese student across the room.

"Mon dieu!" cried the supervising chef.

"Now there's a fish story for you!" sang out Mark's New England accent.

“Yeah...,” chortled California, “...the one that got away!”

The students laughed, then turned back to their preparations as the grinning young Asian politely returned Margaret's renegade fish to her. When she finally skinned it, all that remained for her to do was scale the underside, clean its inside, and start it cooking in the prepared Fish Stock while she whipped up a separate eight-ingredient white sauce to pour on top.

At last, thought Margaret wryly, in a mere three hours I have completed this “simple dish.” Then, like Sabrina, she waited with her classmates for the chef's evaluation of their efforts.

When the kindly man stopped at Margaret's station and leaned slightly so as not to unseat his toque, he carefully inspected Margaret's fish which now floated in a tiny pond of white sauce artfully landscaped with shrubs of parsley.

After his solemn examination, he straightened, looked gravely at Margaret and said, “Petite grit ... eh?” Then he smiled to show her it was a joke.

“*Oiii*, Margaret smiled back, although she was quite certain she had adequately cleansed her fish after the mishap.

The following Sunday, Wilma called to say that Mr. Ainsley and his “staff” were now back from the Orient, their negotiations having gone much easier than expected.

“Uh, the maid quit, Mrs. Ainsley,” Wilma said after they had talked about other things. “He wanted me to ask you where he might find another.”

“Oh dear,” Margaret calmly replied, “The day I left for Paris I told a good friend of mine to feel free to hire Vernice if I wasn't back in two weeks.”

She couldn't be certain, but Margaret thought she heard a muffled snicker on the other end of the line.

"I realize," she went on, "that fulltime help isn't easy to find these days, but I'm sure Mr. Ainsley's Planning Director can help him find a replacement."

Tactfully changing the subject, Wilma inquired then about Margaret's plans for the day, and Margaret was able to assure her that she, indeed, had made some.

After she hung up from the conversation with Wilma, Margaret set out for the *Champs-de-Mars*, the large park where the Eiffel Tower was planted and lifted to the sky. Last Friday, when her class had returned to school from the fish market, she had studied the grounds and wondered if she might picnic there as the days turned warmer on the foods she had prepared in class. Today, she would explore the area with that idea in mind.

Catching the Metro to a stop near an academy enclosing one end of *Champs-de-Mars*, she set off across the expansive park, relieved as she did that she hadn't traipsed off from the hotel on foot as she had originally planned. Walking the parade grounds would be more than enough exercise for the day.

There was a chilly undertone to the April air as though winter were trying to restake its claim. Park visitors wore sweaters and jackets, and when scudding clouds blocked the sun and a sharp breeze kicked up, Margaret was grateful for her own Burberry which she had thrown over her sweater and slacks. Finding an empty bench in a sunny spot ideal for people-watching, she set up her command post in the shadow of the tower, one of its lanky legs visible through the shrubbery, its famous silhouette lost in the lacy foliage of the trees.

Young lovers, elderly couples, and families with excited children strolled the hard-packed paths which lay in its shadow. Behind her sunglasses, Margaret watched a couple of octogenarians tottering past. Smartly turned out in dark suit and topcoat with a red carnation

in his lapel and gray fedora on his head, the proud old gentleman carried himself militarily erect, while his frail little wife, with seemingly the better pair of eyes, steered him gently by the arm so as not to ruffle that pride.

Margaret's thoughts surfaced, then idled and died as quickly as they formed. She marveled that it had been such a short time since she had actually dreaded venturing out alone like this. She attributed her attitude of calm acceptance now partly to the fact that the school days had settled into a soothing ritual and rhythm of their own and partly because Robert, in China, had been too far away for her to wonder at his activities.

Just then her sanguine daydreams were cut short by a cyclist in black bike shorts and yellow windbreaker who pulled up abruptly before her and stopped.

“Well, if it isn't the woman who lost huh soul!”

Oh SOLE! Margaret mentally translated as she looked up into the teasing brown eyes of Mark Whitman. She laughed. “Well, at least I didn't sell it!”

“Mind if I join you?” he asked, propping his bike against a tree without waiting for her reply.

She watched as he slaked his thirst from a water bottle, the tilt of his head exposing a shiny spot on top where the hair, close-cropped and nature-frosted, had given up. Only an inch or so taller than her own five-eight frame, he was wiry and robust as he crossed energetically to the bench and sat down beside her.

His legs, stretched out before him and crossed at the ankles, had a youthful appearance with their sinewy shape and fine covering of dark hair. His strong hands, downy-backed and groomed, sported a worn wedding band on the left.

“Ah, this certainly beats grading exams on a Sunday afternoon.”

Margaret, at that instant wondering at his profession, felt as though he had read her mind. “You're a teacher, I take it.”

“College professor. I've just recently retired.” He told her the name of the school in Maine where he had taught history for the past twenty years, serving as department head for twelve.

“Then you must be **Dr.** Whitman.”

“I'm a Ph. D...yes...,” he replied modestly.

Aware that academicians weren't blessed with the same generous retirement stipends as the Golden Parachutes of corporate CEOs, Margaret was speculating on how the man could manage his stay in Paris for the duration of a course at Le Cordon Bleu when she was once again startled by an answer to her unasked question.

“I'm in the process of turning my family home in Maine into an inn,” he explained. “Since the remodeling crew has rendered it uninhabitable at this juncture, I'm taking advantage of a former colleague's offer to use his Paris apartment while he's on sabbatical in New York.”

“You're a lucky man. With the dollar in such straits, prices are simply awful here.”

“And where are you staying?” he asked.

“Au Bon Loisir, a small hotel downtown.”

He gave her a sharp look. “A hotel? But, how will you do your practice cooking without a kitchen? You do know we have to pass the practical exam at the end of the course before we get our certificate, don't you?”

“I’ve been giving that some thought,” Margaret laughed, “especially after Friday’s fish fiasco.”

They laughed together at the accidental alliteration.

“I can practically guarantee you, Margaret, *Sole Bercy* will be the dish you are asked to prepare for the exam.”

“But they’re randomly assigned,” she argued. “It says so in the brochure.”

“Trust me. I’m a professor. I know these things.” He tapped a silvered temple. “When exam time comes, Chef X will say to Chef Y, ‘I recommend Madame Ainsley be randomly assigned Sole Bercy because she displayed overt hostility towards her sole in my classroom.’”

His flat r-less speech mixed comically with the affected French accent, and the two of them laughed again. He extended her then a blanket invitation to use his kitchen *whenever you like*, and Margaret made a blanket acceptance.

Changing the subject then, she asked, “Is your inn a dream you have had for a long time that’s finally coming true?”

“No. It’s as simple as having my house and living in it, too!”

Margaret turned, her eyes gravely searching his for understanding.

“By the time I pay inheritance and property taxes,” he explained, “I can’t afford to keep the home my parents left me unless I can make it pay for itself.”

“How awful. That’s what happened to owners of those grand old country manors in England. Exorbitant taxes to support all the

country's social programs have forced many of them to turn their homes over to the government.”

“Actually, we're only talking June to October here. I figure I can do anything for five months of the year--even live with a houseful of strangers--if I can live the other seven the way I want to.

“Besides,” he quipped, “with all those people around, I can't very well end up a recluse, now can I?”

Without thinking, Margaret glanced down again at his wedding band.

“My wife died three years ago,” Mark said. “We had no children.”

The words were softly and dispassionately stated. In no way, Margaret knew, was the man trying to elicit her sympathy. Nor did she offer it. Anything she might say at this point would sound insincere. As they sat together in comfortable silence, she was able to observe his profile in repose.

Strong-featured and handsome, there was etched among the laugh lines about his mouth and eyes, a sadness she had not noticed before, perhaps because he masked it with humor the way he did in class. His eyes, looking off in the distance as they did now, reflected the kindness and human understanding of a person who has suffered, endured, and struggled to go on.

Her own eyes softened as an instinct of protectiveness welled up inside her. She opened her mouth to speak, then quickly closed it, flustered by the inexplicable feeling that had come over her.

At that moment, Mark slapped both hands down on his thighs, then stood up and announced, “You're nice to be with, Margaret. I could easily sit here visiting all afternoon, but I'd better put some miles on that bike while the weather holds.”

As he rolled the bicycle onto the pathway, he explained, "I'm getting in shape for a bike tour in the south of France as soon as Basic is over."

He had thrown one leg over the seat and begun pedaling away when Margaret impulsively hollered after him, "Mark...next Sunday...may I use your kitchen?"

"Sure!" he called back with a wave of his hand, "bring your sole!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

L'APPARTEMENT

"But, this is a nice little kitchen," Margaret said the following Sunday when she arrived at Mark's apartment overlooking a small park, only three blocks from school. He had cautioned her at market where they had met the day before to buy groceries for today's practice cooking that his kitchen was small but, he hoped, adequate for their culinary project.

Margaret's eyes swept the narrow galley-shaped room as she entered from the dining area. An economy-sized refrigerator stood to the right. Extending from the appliance, a U-shaped counter ran the length of the room, around the end, and back up the opposite wall where it stopped flush against a small, free-standing stove. At the base of the counter's U was a sink with a portable chopping board placed across it, and above, a window displaying a tiny courtyard outside. Cabinets and counter, appliances, sink, tile floor--all--were white.

"I feel like I'm back in the classroom with all this white," Margaret laughed.

"Yup," Mark quipped, "just trim it with a little Cor-don blue, and you've got it!"

They worked out a time schedule that would make best use of the kitchen's one oven and set to their afternoon's cooking. Mark

launched the preparation of Margaret's Sole Bercy by pointing out some short-cuts for cleaning her fish. Watching his deft hands wield the knife as he demonstrated, she wondered aloud at their strong appearance.

"Results of my Maine experience," he replied. "I cleaned quite a few fish when I was growing up."

"Yes, but those hands tell me you've done more than grade papers since," she insisted.

He looked pleased. "You're an observant one, aren't you?"

Then, while Mark dressed his own fish and supervised Margaret as she labored over hers, he talked about the woodworking hobby he had pursued over the years, describing in humorous detail some of the pieces that hadn't worked out.

"I even made a rocking table once," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Rocking table?"

"Actually, it was supposed to be a regular coffee table, but I never could even up those legs. It just got shorter and shorter and kept on rocking!"

Margaret looked up, waiting for him to continue. "So... you threw it away..." she prompted.

"Oh no!" he said with feigned shock, "We Mainers never throw anything away. My wife just stuck a matchbook under one leg and put it in the guest bedroom to hold blankets at the foot of the bed."

They laughed, at ease with one another like old friends.

“I come by my woodworking interests quite naturally, though,” he said with pride, his eyes reflective, the knife in his hand paused in midair. “My father was widely respected as a master craftsman for the boat building industry back in its heyday. In his spare time he crafted all the millwork in our home and made most of the furniture.”

Margaret's eyes lit up at the image. “The same house you are now converting to an inn?”

Mark nodded. “Just a sec,” he said, setting down his knife. “I have some pictures.” He left the kitchen and returned shortly with a stack of photographs.

“Mother inherited the house from her parents,” he explained as Margaret slowly thumbed through them, taking in the splendid old two-story Victorian with a large wrap-around porch. The house's dazzling white exterior stood in bold contrast to the cobalt blue of the water beyond.

When Margaret came to interior shots displaying his father's craftsmanship, she looked up at Mark. “Why didn't you follow your dad into the business of building ships?”

Done with his fish, Mark crossed to the sink to wash his hands. “Well, for one thing,” he replied as he dried them on the hem of his apron, “the entire industry was beginning to go south about that time. And for another, I had by then inherited my mother's keen interest in history and decided to follow up on it in the educational field.”

He rummaged through the photos and found one showing the house's elegantly appointed living room. “For as long as I can remember that room was the gathering place for the local historical preservation group. Mother served as its president for a number of years when I was a child, and I used to sneak in and listen as one member or another reported some new fact that had been discovered about our area.”

“What a lovely heritage,” Margaret said, summing up their conversation. “You must be terribly proud of it.”

“Oh, I am. I chose my parentage well,” he boasted, grinning.

He began mixing the ingredients for dessert and admitted with an abashed expression, “How devastating ... flunking chocolate soufflé.”

Margaret smiled as she remembered his explanation to a bemused chef in pastry class that week. “My soufflé squatted on the rise and never made it back up.”

After watching him for a moment she said, “Here, Mark, let me show you something.” Easing the whisk from his hand, she continued, “If you whip more gently at first--like this--you won't incorporate so much air into the mixture in the beginning. That can make the soufflé fall.”

“You mean this cement-mixing motion won't cut it?”

“Well,” she said tactfully, “you might save some of that energy for the Bechamel sauce.”

A tantalizing mix of aromas rose about them, filling the cozy kitchen and steaming up the window. They worked comfortably together in the cramped space, concentrating on their individual preparations as they stepped around one another occasionally to cross to stove or refrigerator.

When it came time to prepare the Spinach Loaf, they worked on the several steps together, spending considerable preparatory time on the spinach leaves themselves—de-stemming, washing, wringing out, patting dry and, finally, chopping into coarse pieces.

“I think I know why it's called ***Pain** d-Epinards à la Romaine*,” Mark quipped.

“Now here's where you can put some of that muscle to work,” Margaret coached as he started on the Bechamel sauce that would hold the chopped spinach leaves together.

“And remember...,” she continued, “...the chef said to let it **cool** before stirring.”

“You sound like an old hand at this.”

“I adore cooking. The kitchen for me is what I imagine an artist's studio must be to him. All my creative juices begin to flow the minute I step into one.”

“Your husband's a very lucky man.”

Margaret's luminous eyes clouded over briefly. “Actually, we don't get to enjoy meals at home all that often,” she replied. “Generally, by the time he gets home from the office, I've already eaten.” Concerned that she was sounding whiney and complaining, she hurried on. “Then, too, we eat out a lot, especially when he's entertaining visiting firemen or we are representing the company at some fund-raising gala.”

“So when do you play?”

“What?”

“ **Play!** ...you know...as in doing something just for the fun of it.”

Good question, Margaret thought. “Hey,” she said, “I believe the sauce is ready now.”

Together they generously coated the chopped spinach with the sauce and assembled the rest of the dish. Removing Mark's soufflé from the oven then, they replaced it with the spinach loaf and set the timer.

“How about a game of Scrabble while we wait?” Mark suggested, then added, “...although I know that doesn't sound terribly exciting.”

“Why, I'm delighted, Mark! I love word games, and I haven't played Scrabble since our son went away to college.”

Mark carried out a plastic bag overflowing with the likes of fish scales, eggshells and spinach stems while Margaret washed up their several pans and cooking utensils. Then the two retired to a small game table in the living room and rolled the dice to see who would go first. A dictionary lay propped open on a shelf in the bookcase above the table, and they were soon checking its pages as they challenged one another's words and spelling.

“You're tough,” he said once when she scored a bonus for using all seven of her letters. With a chuckle, he then evened the score with a big play of his own.

More relaxed than she could recall being in a long time, Margaret recalled her telephone conversation earlier that day with Wilma. The concerned little woman needn't have worried about her! This was turning out to be a marvelous Sunday.

“If it's worth smiling about, it's worth sharing,” Mark's voice broke into her reverie.

Margaret, unaware that she was smiling, quickly explained. “Oh, it's just that I'm thoroughly enjoying the day, Mark.”

He sat quietly waiting for her to continue.

“My husband's secretary coined an expression that explains it better than I can. She refers to what we've been doing today as Savoring Sunday.” Margaret described Wilma's concern for her lonely Sundays in Paris that had been the genesis of the phrase.

“Wilma even phoned me again this morning,” she continued, “to make certain my dance card was filled the rest of the weekend.” Margaret did not mention that when she had told Wilma she was spending the afternoon practice cooking with a classmate, the older woman had squealed with delight, “Oh, Mrs. Ainsley, I’m so happy you’ve made a new friend. I hope she’ll be good company for you.”

“So do I, Wilma. So do I.”

When the weak *ding* of the timer summoned them back to the kitchen, the two cooks served themselves generous helpings of their gourmet creations and filled their wine glasses. They were sitting down at the table in the small dining alcove between living room and kitchen when Margaret jumped back to her feet.

“This much work deserves candlelight,” she said, racing back to the kitchen for a match.

They ate slowly at first, gingerly sampling their prepared foods with a self-conscious commentary on the merits of each dish. But soon they gave in to their hunger and the relaxed mood induced by the wine and candlelight and ate with gusto.

Looking over the rim of his glass, Mark quietly studied his dinner companion. “You’re such a joy to be with, Margaret, how can your husband stand being without you for so long?”

The ticking of an antique clock on the sideboard filled the room as Margaret considered a response. She could be evasive, skirting the marital issue as easily as she had with her son. But there was really no reason to be coy with this man whose forthright question deserved a forthright answer.

“I suppose you might call it self-imposed exile,” she began.

Taking care then not to sound like Poor Pitiful Pearl, she sketched for him facts of the separation that she had initiated with the hope of restoring her husband's good sense. "Little did I dream, though," she concluded with a weak laugh, "that he wouldn't have come rushing after me by now."

Candlelight cast a silvery halo on Mark's hair, deepening the compassion she saw reflected in his eyes, and all at once Margaret felt a profound sense of gratitude for this new friend in her life.

"And how does all this make you feel?" he asked.

Unprepared for a question that penetrated so directly to her emotional core, Margaret blinked back tears that suddenly threatened to spill. As she struggled to regain her composure, his soothing voice filled the void.

"I can well imagine that having one's marriage threatened under any circumstance would be painful enough, but to be challenged by a younger woman at what you probably consider a vulnerable age in your own life must bring out the worst sort of fear."

Margaret palmed away the tears that now sprang unbidden to the surface.

"All emotion aside, Margaret," he continued softly, "what I've observed about most marriages is that couples either grow together, grow in different directions, or else one grows and the other doesn't. If you can keep that thought uppermost in your mind whenever you feel you're somehow to blame because you haven't remained eternally youthful, you might find it easier to deal with."

The matter-of-fact way he spoke ironed out Margaret's uneven emotions, and soon she was able to speak for herself. "Thank you, Mark. It helps to hear it stated so objectively. Frankly, I couldn't have described my feelings to you if I tried because I've been so busy running away from them."

“Which ones?”

Puzzled, Margaret paused before replying. “Well ... fear ... like you said. And you're right. The fear of becoming less attractive as I get older has been a very real one, ashamed as I am to admit my vanity.”

“No need to apologize for vanity. I read once that a little vanity is a sign of good mental health.” Leveling a penetrating gaze on her, Mark then asked, “And what about the anger?”

Margaret cocked her head.

“Anger is fueling those tears, Margaret. And while anger is an honest emotion, too, it can tear you apart if it's not dealt with properly. How do you handle yours?”

Margaret shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “Actually, I think I'm more frustrated than angry,” she argued. “Although, I did throw a lovely piece of Baccarat at a door he slammed shut, which I now regret seeing as how it didn't solve anything. And in addition to a few other tacky little things, like hiding the key to Robert's wine cellar I even considered, for a few insane moments, sewing shrimp in the bedroom draperies before I left ...”

“WHAT?” Mark said, letting out an explosive guffaw.

“It wasn't an original idea. I once heard of a wife who actually did that. After she had gone, her husband kept calling in exterminators to find out where the awful smell was coming from.”

They both laughed at the bizarre image of an aggrieved wife's creative revenge.

But Margaret's transparent attempt to lure Mark from the subject of anger with her humor proved as futile as pulling a bloodhound from his scent.

“That wasn't exactly what I had in mind,” he grinned, “but if it helped get rid of the poor woman’s anger, then I say more power to her. The main thing, I think, is to recognize one’s anger and blow some of it off ... even if it means punching something and yelling at the top of your lungs. Have you ever tried that?”

“Try it,” Mark persisted when she shook her head, “bang your fist on the table and say **I'm mad as hell!**”

Margaret straightened to a more rigid position.

“I see,” he said with resignation. “Nice girls--nice Southern girls--don't do that. Getting angry isn't proper. Is that it?” Then as quickly as he had played Professor Higgins, Mark visibly softened and reached across the table to cover her hand with his own. “I'm only trying to help, Margaret. Just chalk that foolish lecture up to too many years as a professor.”

Relieved that the emotional ordeal was at last over, Margaret graciously responded, “I'm sure there's a lot to what you say, Mark. I just need to mull it over for awhile. In the meantime, do you know what strikes me as most noteworthy about this entire conversation?”

He shook his head, his eyes watching her with interest.

“The fact that I'm having my feelings explained to me by a man! Now how's that for a good sexist comment?”

Their laughter cleansed the air, and the pair rustled about dishing up generous portions of Mark's soufflé for themselves.

“I did it!” he exclaimed proudly as he palate-tested the dessert's light airy texture.

“Superior, Dr. Whitman!” Margaret praised. “It definitely rates an **A** plus.”

Moments later, brows knit together in thought, Mark reached over to replenish her wineglass. Resuming the conversation Margaret had thought finished, he said, "You know, Margaret, if it's hard for women to show their anger, it's even harder for men to own up to their fears. We have them; we just don't admit to them." He cleared his throat.

"For example, most of us spend the first half of our lives afraid our hormones will get us into trouble--and the second half, afraid they won't. Personally, I've been so doubtful I could live up to the expectations of courtship since Betsy's death that I've not even been with another woman since!"

"But it's only been--what, Mark--two years?"

"Two plus the three years she was ill. But a friend of mine under similar circumstances put his life back together and was remarried in eighteen months."

It was Margaret then who reached across to give a touch of support. Patting his hand, she said, "Mark, as sensitive a person as you seem to be, it doesn't surprise me that it's taken longer for you to adjust than it would most men. Sensitivity is a marvelous trait, but one pays a price for it."

She removed her hand and leaned back, venturing then to ask him about his wife Betsy.

"She was a remarkable human being," Mark said, clearing his throat again. As he slowly twisted the stem of his glass between thumb and forefinger, he described the plucky wife who had redirected her energies into a career as an English professor when she learned she was unable to bear them children. They had met and married at the University of Maine where both were working on their Masters degrees.

"Betsy taught school to support us while I earned my Ph.D., then went back for her own once I finished."

When Mark spoke of the breast cancer that eventually claimed his wife's life, Margaret saw creeping back into his eyes the sadness she had discovered that day on the park bench.

"That's why I took early retirement," he explained. "Life on that small campus held too many memories after that. I had to move on."

In an effort to help him as he had tried helping her earlier, Margaret sought to restore some levity to the table. "Whoo-eee..." she said, smiling, "I'll bet fantasies broke out like measles in the minds of all those young coeds with a crush on their handsome history professor."

Crinkles of amusement formed about Mark's eyes. "Those May- September liaisons do happen occasionally on college campuses; but I've said all along that if I ever do share my life with another woman, she'll have to be old enough to remember that you can **sing** *Sincerely* as well as **sign** it."

"How clever," Margaret said. Then, trying to be clever herself, she added, "...and when you mentioned the Four Freshmen who sang it, you weren't speaking of former students?"

He chuckled. "You're quick, Margaret, but I think it was the McGuire Sisters who recorded *Sincerely*."

"Well, I'm not about to argue with a History Professor over a song popular some forty years ago."

With their meal ending on that happy note, they cleared the table, tidied the kitchen and walked to the station where Mark waited with her for her train.

As she turned to board moments later, he hollered over the noise, "That was fun, Margaret. Let's savor Sunday again next week!"

She nodded vigorously and waved as the train swept her out of the station.

CHAPTER EIGHT

LES DIMANCHES

Sundays thereafter became creative bookends for the schooldays in between. At first the two classmates were content to follow up their cooking sessions with deep conversation or games of Scrabble or gin rummy into the evening. But as their friendship grew, so did the scope of their weekend plans.

“The weather's too pretty for us to stay in here cooking today,” said Mark when she arrived at his apartment the first Sunday in May. “I've already cooked the chicken for our *Salade Hermine*, so all we have to do is mix in the other ingredients, taste test it, then hie ourselves away from here.”

“Sounds good to me,” Margaret agreed. “What did you have in mind?”

“A Seine walk.”

“A walk along the Seine, you mean.” Margaret rephrased his statement because with her friend's fondness for word play, she sometimes had difficulty deciphering his “Mark-speak”, as she called it.

“Yes ... a Seine walk,” he repeated. He spread a Paris map on the counter top and traced with his finger the route they would take. “We'll loop around the *île de la Cité* and *île de la St-Louis*--and of course

explore the islands themselves--then end up back here where we started.”

Eyes bright, he rushed on, “Even poking along, it shouldn’t take us over a couple or three hours.”

But even had Mark doubled the time estimate, Margaret would have been delighted. Sharing a leisurely walk with an enthusiastic companion was a far cry from the breathless sprints she and Robert always made down airport corridors when they changed planes.

In the kitchen, the two divided the cooking chores and raced through their individual assignments, Mark assembling the salad while she baked Cheese Straws to go with it. Opting out of a dessert, they cooked, ate, and cleaned up in record time, then merrily set off on their adventure like children let out early from school.

Emerging at the St-Michel station, they began their slow, circuitous meander onto and around the two islands in the Seine, crossing and re-crossing the connecting quays and bridges crowded with happy Parisians out enjoying the weather. As they walked, a playful breeze from the river riffled their hair, and the wake from passing sightseeing boats lapped against the riverbank in mesmeric cadence.

Ambling along in contented silence, they eventually stopped to rest against a parapet on the *quai d' Bourbon* where they had a clear view of Notre Dame and beyond, a wide stretch of the Left Bank.

Feeling strangely removed from it all as though she were watching a scene on film, Margaret shook her head to assure herself the magical moment was not a product of her imagination.

Mark's voice broke softly into her thoughts, “Makes you want to stop the clock on time, doesn't it?”

"Oh yes. It's all so glorious ... and so ephemeral. Times like this, I have such mixed emotions. I am happy and at peace with the

universe in the midst of such beauty ... and then this little ray of regret filters in because I know the moment can't last forever. Isn't that odd?"

"Nope. Or at least if it is, then I'm odd, too."

As they stood silently taking in the scene before them, Mark asked, "What do you plan to do with your new cooking skills once you leave here?"

"Probably nothing, although ..."

"What ... ?"

"Oh, off and on I've entertained the idea of opening my own tearoom someday. I hadn't thought of it for a long time, but the pastry classes brought the idea back to mind. Cooking all those delicacies and taking them back to the hotel to eat by myself has seemed such a waste. I keep thinking how gratifying it would be to prepare and share them in a quaint little tearoom with lace curtains at the windows and flowers and china teapots on the tables."

"So, why haven't you pursued that dream?" Shifting about, his elbows propped on the wall behind him, Mark waited for her answer.

"Oh, the usual reasons, I suppose. We were always busy with child rearing or some phase of Robert's career. Then with all the moves ... " Margaret's voice trailed off, and she looked away.

"I see, only one dream per family. Is that it?"

"Well, that's how it WAS in the era I grew up in," Margaret argued, a glint of defensiveness flashing in her eyes.

"Era ... or area?" he persisted.

She knew the question had to do with the fact that Mark's wife, more or less her own age when she died, had managed to earn a

doctorate and pursue a career as a college professor during the same span of time.

“Well,” she admitted, “probably both. Although I **was** fairly typical of the southern woman who married in the late fifties and early sixties.

“At any rate,” she said brightly, trying to end the subject that bordered on the contentious, “it's too late to do anything about it now.”

“Nonsense!” Mark said. “Our age is the perfect time to pursue dreams that eluded us when we were young ... as long as they were reasonable dreams to begin with.”

Despite his arguing, which Margaret, a confirmed dove, found discomfiting, she liked the inclusive way he had said “our age”.

“You're an energetic woman,” Mark continued, “and intelligent. There's nothing to keep you from opening a tearoom now if you want to, is there?”

“I'd like to, Mark ... I really would ... but I'm just not sure how to get there from here.”

“Well, all that culinary coaching at school is an important first step. All you have to do is build on it by planting one foot in front of the other until you reach your goal.”

Warming to his cause, he went on, “You realize, Margaret, you're a natural in pastry class. I've watched how easily you turn out all those fancy desserts, most of which are so elaborate you couldn't pay me to make them outside that classroom. And while everyone else in there is struggling, you are over there ginning about your work station with contentment written all over your face.”

At that moment a gust of wind caught the tissue Margaret was returning to her pants pocket, wafting it up and outward toward the

river. Unwilling to litter, she lunged for it in a comical sidestep, nearly losing her balance in the process.

Mark grabbed her arm to keep her from following the paper into the water. "CAREFUL!" he cautioned, "or you'll be taking an IN-Seine walk."

Margaret threw her head back and gave a full-throated laugh, her white teeth glistening in the sun. "Professors are supposed to be pedantic and dry," she said. "How come you're so funny?"

"An appreciative audience, I guess," Mark said. He was staring at her, a soft reflective look in his eyes. "Your whole face lights up when you laugh like that, Margaret. It's as though your very soul is on fire."

Unsure whether the compliment called for witticism or a word of thanks, Margaret merely smiled. Gently, she pulled free her arm he was still clinging to and tucked it beneath his, locking it in place with her other hand. As they resumed their stroll along the quay, closer now with their arms intertwined, Margaret was able to study Mark's face in repose.

A tiny bubble of happiness quickened within as she saw that the old sadness had been replaced by an expression of vitality and zest for life. Once again she sent up a message of gratitude for this special friend who was turning her Parisian exile into a pleasant adventure.

If she thought, however, that all talk of a tearoom had ended with her ungainly *tour jeté*, she hadn't reckoned on her companion's terrier-like tenacity for analyzing all facets of an issue. After wending their way further along the river walk, they sat down at a table near a soft drink stand, and Mark started in again.

"Margaret, this isn't a dress rehearsal down here, you know. It's life ... the real thing ... the only performance we'll ever give. It's as important to take responsibility for our dreams as it is anything else."

“Even our anger?” she teased. But seeing her companion's serious face, she hastened on, “you are absolutely right, Mark, but I'm still not certain how to go about it.”

He set his soda down and leaned back in the chair, arms folded across his chest. “Well, for sure, no little genie is going to pop out of that bottle and say, ‘Miz Ainsley, tell me your dream and I'll make it happen.’”

Margaret laughed at the poor falsetto delivered in a New England accent.

“You have to share a dream,” he continued, “or else it's just an exercise in introspection. Have you even mentioned the tearoom to your husband?”

“No!” Margaret quickly replied. She could just imagine Robert's face were she to even suggest such an idea.

“Well, you have to start talking about an idea to give it some validity. If ...”

“**Aaarggggg** ...” Margaret croaked, snatching up her paper napkin and waving it in surrender. “Okay, Dr. Whitman, I want you to be the first to know that I am considering opening a tearoom when I return to the States.”

“Not good enough,” Mark said, shaking his head in mock gravity. “Thinking is one thing; planning's another.”

“**Okay!** How's this? ...I may be the world's oldest new tearoom proprietress, but as soon as I get home, I am **going** to open a tearoom.” Margaret's eyes widened as she heard the words roll off her tongue.

“Atta girl!” Mark praised, reaching across to give her a hearty slap on the back. “Now that wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

“Easy enough for you to say. Now, may we ple-e-e-ze go browse the bookstalls on the quay? You have absolutely exhausted me.”

The following Sunday, as Margaret cut through the park to Mark’s apartment, she was comparing that idyllic outing of the previous week with the bad place, emotionally speaking, she was in right now.

Marveling at nature’s incredible balancing act--the yin and the yang, the ups and downs--she decided that all this meant was that if things clicked along smoothly one day, you had jolly well hold onto your hat the next. In fact, her insides still churned from the conversation she’d just had with Wilma.

Poor Thing, Margaret thought, all the confusion’s beginning to take its toll on her, too. The normally placid little woman hadn’t gone through her usual diplomatic greeting this morning. In an obvious state of agitation, she had cut directly to the heart of her message.

“Between what’s going on at the office, Mrs. Ainsley, and what’s going on at your house, I am beginning to think we need a big spool of baling wire to hold things together around here.”

“Why, Wilma, what’s going on?”

“Well, first of all, there’s that awful smell coming from somewhere around the master suite. Several people have been out to check ...”

“I didn’t do that, Wilma!” Margaret interrupted.

“Ma'am? But of course you didn't,” the bewildered secretary said. “Anyway,” she continued, “the gas company finally found the cause. It was a leak in the utility area off your bedroom...”

“*Oh!*” said an embarrassed Margaret.

“That meant cutting off the gas, then waiting for a plumber to fix the leak, which he did, and now we're having to wait till tomorrow for the gas company to go back out and turn the gas on. And, mind you, all this time poor Mr. Ainsley's been without air conditioning because it won't come on without the gas pilot light. It's already plenty hot here in May.”

“Oh, I wouldn't worry about Mr. Ainsley, Wilma. I'm sure he'll manage.”

“And that's not all,” the distressed little woman continued, “Now the gardener is threatening to quit!”

“Oh, no. Whatever for?” Margaret was genuinely appalled. Mr. Greene had been maintaining the grounds of their place as long as she and Robert had lived there.

“Mr. Greene says that **She** told him to plant daisies along the creek, and when he refused, saying that you always put caladiums in that spot, She got upset and they had a terrible row.”

“**SHE** who, Wilma? What are you talking about?”

“Shawn,” Wilma whispered as though the name would be more palatable that way. “Except that Mr. Greene doesn't call her that. He just refers to her as **She**.”

“Well...” Margaret said, “...he's right and **SHE's** wrong, Wilma. It's too shady along that creek bank for daisies. They need full sun. Tell Mr. Greene to stick by his pruning shears and that if she continues bothering him she'll be out pulling weeds with a “mow-

blow-and-go” outfit faster than she can say fertilizer. I have any number of friends who would gladly hire Mr. Greene this instant.

“That's the spirit, Mrs. Ainsley!”

But if Wilma felt better, Margaret felt worse.

“What's wrong?” asked an alarmed Mark when she stormed past him at his front door.

“I'm mad as hell!”

The shock on Mark's face eased into a slow grin, beginning at the center of his lips and working its way out to the corners. “Congratulations,” he said, “you **are** human after all.”

In the weeks ahead, the M and Ms, as their classmates affectionately referred to them, began sharing activities on days of the week other than the Sundays they set aside for practice cooking. Some were school-related market tours, oenology seminars, an evening cheese analysis class, and even a session on flower arranging.

But when there were no extra curricular activities at school, the pair quickly made plans of their own, taking in art exhibits, concerts, and even lectures on odd subjects they had never heard of but were curious about. They strolled the streets on the Left Bank becoming acquainted with the bistros and bookstores and funky boutiques.

“I know,” Margaret said one afternoon when class let out early and they had no plans. “Why don't we start doing a ‘mine, yours, ours’ thing?”

“Are we talking towels or kids?” Mark quipped with a faux leer.

“I’m **talking** about taking turns suggesting something interesting to do when we have free time like today. You could choose something one time and I would the next ...”

“I’ve got it;” Mark said, clearly pleased with the idea. “Then we’ll come up with something together. Okay, go ahead. You first.”

Pleased with his enthusiastic endorsement, Margaret said, “Well, there’s probably not enough time to do it today, but sometime I’d like for us to drive out to Giverny to see the Monet gardens. I’ve never done that.”

“Nor have I,” Mark said, checking his watch. “Why not do it today? If we get moving, we can make it.”

In little more than an hour, the two had rented a small sports car and driven out to the gardens outside Paris where impressionist Claude Monet had made his home the last half of his life.

“Oh, how lovely!” Margaret enthused as she raced up and down the nasturtium-lined paths ahead of Mark. “These are the old-fashioned flowers of my childhood. Every little lady in town raised holly hocks.” She backed up to one, and Mark measured with his hand to show her how far up the towering stalk she stood.

“And would you just look at those roses!” She reached for a long-stemmed yellow one and breathed in its fragrance, a dreamy smile on her face. “Mother raised the prettiest roses in town. She would send Jane and me off the first day of school every year with huge bouquets for our teachers.”

“The whole garden looks like a Monet painting, doesn’t it?” Mark said when Margaret stopped prattling.

“Oh, yes,” she gushed. Then, detecting a mysterious note in her friend’s voice, she cast him a sidelong glance and saw the confirming twinkle in his eyes as he waited to see if she had caught on.

"I know," she finally said after thinking about his comparison of the Monet garden to a Monet painting. "The garden came first, of course. Monet used it as a model for his painting which means his painting looks like his garden and not the other way around."

"Just checking to see if you were paying attention," Mark laughed.

She shook her head in exasperation. "Where did you get such a quirky sense of humor, Mark?"

"Ah, the quirky humor gene--that would be from my father, I suppose. It used to make Mother crazy. She would tell him all his kidding around displayed a certain lack of dignity."

"Hmmm ... she might have been onto something."

"That was a great suggestion," Mark said when they returned to their car an hour later. "It was a little walk down memory lane for me, too. Maine has many of those same flowers in the summers, especially those tall, spiky things ..."

"Lupines..." Margaret supplied.

"Yep, lupines."

She smiled. "I take it you're not much into gardening."

"Oh, I didn't say that. I can pick and prune with the best of 'em, especially when it comes to my herb garden. But Betsy always decided which flowers and where she wanted them planted."

"I know you miss her terribly, Mark. Would she have enjoyed the Bed and Breakfast business with you?"

"Actually, I'm not sure she would have. Betsy wasn't too crazy about cooking. And I'm fairly certain she wouldn't have cared for a

bunch of strangers running in and out of her home five months of the year. In all likelihood, we would have sold my parents' place in Bear Harbor and remained in a campus town. Our entire married life was spent on one campus or another.”

They stopped talking while Mark concentrated on his driving in the heavy rush hour traffic. A few minutes later, when the busy motorway paralleled several kilometer's of woodland on the western fringes of Paris, Mark broke the silence.

Pointing to the area, he said, “That's the Bois de Boulogne, an enormous park with lakes and waterfalls and gardens...even a couple of racecourses ...”

“Hey!” he exclaimed, suddenly remembering something. “That gives me an idea. It's my turn to pick now, right? That is my suggestion ... “

“Your suggestion for what?”

“Another place for us to explore. I know. We'll go biking. The park has great hike-and-bike trails and a place to rent bicycles as well.”

“Good grief, Mark, I haven't even been on a bicycle since I was twelve.”

“You'll love it, Margaret. Let's do it this weekend.”

That notion established, he took Margaret the following afternoon to a sports shop near the school to get her outfitted with the proper gear.

“Don't they have anything less ... uh, colorful?” she asked the young salesclerk who brought out bike shorts in shades of chartreuse,

fuchsia and orange. The stretchy lycra fabric reminded Margaret of the girdles her mother used to wear.

“But, Madame,” argued the young woman, “the bright colors are for your own protection. They enable motorists to see you.”

“Well, they will have to settle for my top half being lit up like a neon light. I refuse to wear anything but black on the bottom.”

The salesgirl returned to the stockroom and brought back two pair of black biking shorts. “Our last ones,” she sniffed.

Margaret bought both pair as well as a helmet, water bottle, wraparound sunglasses, and the padded gloves Mark insisted would absorb road vibration.

Oh my, she thought as they walked out of the store with her strange new purchases, may I never run into anyone I know in this Hell’s Angels outfit.

CHAPTER NINE

UNE EXCURSION ITALIENNE

“He wants you to do what, Mark? Start over from the beginning.” Margaret had been so intent on placing the letter **Z** on the Scrabble board's triple letter score that she had not been paying attention.

“Dr. Hal Coates, the professor who succeeded me as Head of the History Department when I retired, has asked me to do some research for him in Rome to supplement an article he's writing on Third Century Roman Emperors.”

“But you don't read Italian or Latin, do you?”

“Enough, but I won't be reading so much as examining the medallions that were coined for the emperors of that century and selecting the ones that will best illustrate his article. I've arranged with the Curator at *Museo Nazionale* to allow me access next Friday to the vaults where they keep the medallions. Then he will have his photography department send Hal photos of the ones I select.”

“Oh, Mark, I'm pleased for you. I had wondered if you didn't miss your academic milieu.”

“Well, don't feel too sorry for me,” he replied with a mischievous look as he used Margaret's high-count **Z** letter in his next

play. “What I don't miss is force feeding history into the unreceptive minds of college freshmen.”

Mark paused before writing down the score, something else apparently on in his mind. “Uh, since we finish our practical exams on Thursday, Margaret, I wonder if you would like to fly to Rome with me that evening.”

She was opening her mouth to say yes when Mark rushed on like an anxious suitor pressing his case, “I'll book us two rooms at a small hotel near the museum, then while I spend Friday in the vaults, you can hang around there or take off on your own. Then I thought we might drive on down to Pompeii Saturday and walk through the ruins. We would return to Paris on Sunday. If...”

“I would love to!” Margaret replied before his masculine pride could suffer further fear of rejection.

On exam day, just as Mark had predicted, there was a large fish at her work station along with other ingredients for Sole Bercy. Prepared by all the practice in Mark's kitchen, however, she put together the “randomly assigned” dish in half her original time and handily passed the exam.

The two flew off for Rome that evening with hearts as light as the chocolate soufflé Mark successfully whipped up for his own pastry exam.

Once in the air, Margaret suggested an extension to Mark's original itinerary that she had hesitated mentioning before. “As long as we're in Pompeii, Mark, I would love to take the Amalfi Drive on down the coast to Sorrento. A friend once told me what a lovely experience it is to linger over dinner there and watch the sunset out over the Isle of Capri.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mark agreed.

. On Friday, instead of visiting the museum intended for those steeped in the minutiae of antiquity, Margaret put in for repairs at a nearby salon, treating herself to a facial, haircut and manicure while Mark carried out his scholarly assignment.

The following morning, with the research completed, they departed Rome early, breezing down the shin of the boot in their rented sports car. In Pompeii they toured the excavated ruins left by Vesuvius' eruption, Mark supplementing the guide's broken English with enthusiastic asides, thus bringing the tragedy home to Margaret in a meaningful way.

"That was wonderful," Margaret said as they headed back to the car later. "You have such a remarkable gift for making the past come alive, Mark. Students must have clamored to get into your classes."

He acknowledged the compliment with a modest who-knows shrug then glanced up at the menacing clouds above. Throwing his arm about her waist, he swept her toward the parking lot. "Come on," he said, "we have promises to keep..."

"...and miles to go before we sleep," Margaret chimed in.

Having allowed plenty of time to make their sunset dinner, they set off for Sorrento at a leisurely pace, but an hour later, just as they turned off the predictable, fast-moving Autostrada onto Amalfi Drive, the dark and roiling Sicilian clouds unleashed a blinding rainstorm in their path, turning their narrow cornice road into a surrealistic nightmare.

"I don't dare stop," Mark said tersely as he slowed down to a crawl. "Someone might hit us from behind."

The somber tone of his voice confirmed Margaret's own impression of the danger they were in, and she leaned forward to help him peer into the opaqueness beyond the windshield. As each bolt of lightning limned the road's cantilevered edge, which fell away into darkness below, she nervously imagined the emblazoned headlines at home, WIFE OF AMERICAN EXECUTIVE IN FATAL CRASH..

Negotiating one hairpin turn after another as he followed obscure little road signs pointing the way to Sorrento, Mark at last drove them safely into the city's outskirts. By the time they turned onto the darkened hotel grounds, the worst of the storm behind them, they were so giddy with relief that neither of them expressed disappointment that inclement weather had gobbled up their sunset.

In high spirits now that they were out of danger, they sped along the allee of cypress trees, speculating on what each would have for dinner. "Well," said Mark, his wit fully recovered, "at least we won't have to *Eat Crow!*"

But he spoke too soon. Just ahead stood a small upright *ENTRATA* sign with an arrow indicating a hard left turn. With the same swift compliance he had given all road signs before, Mark steered sharply to the left, and with a loud and jarring ***whomp whomp whomp***, they suddenly found themselves, not in the parking area they expected, but bumping down a marbled stairway toward the hotel proper.

Lurching to a halt, they sat stunned and staring from their oblique perch down through the glassed lobby to the Bay of Naples beyond. An astonished portiere--eyes bulging, arms flailing, and round little body poised for flight--tried waving them off. Mark shifted into reverse, but the insulted little sports car refused to budge.

A crowd gathered, gawking spectators at first, then as eager volunteers. When their initial efforts to push the car back up the steps failed, Mark opened the door, and with a foot planted on the brake

instructed Margaret, "You'll have to scoot over here behind the wheel ..."

"I can't do that, Mark!"

"You **CAN** do it, Margaret! Just try. I need to help these fellows push. Just keep your foot on the brake until I tell you to **HIT IT**. Then step on the gas ... **HARD!**"

Great! thought Margaret as her foot replaced his on the brake, and she slid across the seat. Her hands had already begun to perspire.

The group alternately rocked and pushed and rocked and pushed, with Mark intermittently calling out, **HIT IT**, Margaret! as she tried in vain to accelerate the car in reverse gear up the steps. After each aborted effort, her moist death grip loosened on the steering wheel, while a convulsed foot flew from gas pedal to brake.

"Hold it!" said Mark at last. "This isn't working." Then he had another idea. Using a series of hand signals and sketchy Italian with some French thrown in, he convinced the worried portiere that weight was needed in the car's trunk to give the rear wheels traction.

Officiously snapping his fingers, the excited little Italian whom no hotelier's manual had prepared for such a crisis, summoned four hapless busboys from the kitchen and ordered them to provide the necessary ballast.

Casting incredulous glances at the car's yawning trunk and then at the pale faced woman clutching the steering wheel, they clearly felt they were being offered up as fodder for this tilting cannon aimed toward the sea with nothing but a terrified female in charge of the lanyard. After a frenzied exchange of gestures and staccato Italian with their boss, they reluctantly stuffed themselves into the car's trunk.

Then with Mark orchestrating, pushers pushing, Margaret steering and accelerating, and bystanders cheering them on, the car

finally strained its way back to the top of the marble steps where the portiere, in charge once more of his domain, politely but firmly insisted on parking it himself.

“Well, look at us!” Margaret teased when she joined her contrite looking friend later in the lobby. “We’re still alive! Let’s celebrate!”

As they followed the maitre’d through the dining room, a hush fell over the other diners, immediately replaced by a ripple of titters and tsks. The story of the crazy Americans had preceded them. As difficult as they found it to look at one another without dissolving into laughter, they found it even harder to face the mirthful grins of their fellow diners each time they looked up. As the two struggled to restore a sense of decorum to the charged atmosphere, Mark leaned over and said, *sotto voce*, “While I was waiting, I took the liberty of ordering our dinner.”

“Oh, good!” Margaret exclaimed, happily relieved of making any further decisions for the day. “What are we having?”

“A surprise,” Mark answered mysteriously.

The waiter appeared at that moment, brandishing a large domed tray. Placing it on a nearby serving stand, he removed the top with a flourish and made a loud and suspiciously well-coached announcement, first in English then Italian: “YOUR CROW, SIGNORI.”

With that the plug was pulled on the room’s pent-up laughter. Mark rose to his feet with a *mea culpa* grin and, holding his wine glass aloft, toasted one and all—diners, waiters and busboys alike.

Margaret looked on with admiration. Of all the nice qualities she had discovered about Mark thus far, his rare ability to laugh at himself impressed her the most.

CHAPTER TEN

AU SECOURS!

When she returned to her Paris hotel Sunday evening, Margaret found a stack of messages awaiting her at the reception desk. Having long since given up expectations of finding one from Robert, she casually thumbed through them on the way up to her room.

Jane had phoned twice--the last within the hour; Wilma's call had come the same early hour it did each Sunday; and there were three calls from Kate, unusual because the two never spoke by phone, their visits now limited to brief snatches of conversation over coffee at school.

Margaret sat down and dialed Kate's number first.

"*C'est impossible!*" said the toney female voice that answered. "Kate is **bee-zee** preparing our meal at the moment. You may try her again tomorrow."

Not to be intimidated, Margaret dusted off her own assertive voice. "This is Madame Ainsley at Hotel Au Bon Loisir. Would you be kind enough to have Mademoiselle Stone call me this evening at her earliest convenience. ***C'est urgent!***"

"Wilma ... Hi, it's me, Margaret," she said when the operator finally put her through to the secretary's home number.

“Oh, Mrs. Ainsley. I'm so relieved to hear your voice. I hope nothing is wrong. When I tried to reach you this morning, they said you were out of the city, and I thought...”

“Everything's fine, Wilma. I just skipped down to Rome for a couple of days. How are things in Dallas ... aside from the heat?”

“Well, I wanted to tell you about an unusual development in the company. And mind you, I wouldn't be passing it along even now if the office grapevine wasn't already having a field day ...”

Speculation stirred and spun in Margaret's head.

“Shawn has tendered her resignation from the company, effective immediately.”

“WHAT?”

“As you can imagine, the announcement has set the company on its ear because as Director of Planning she was in charge of the Pacific Rim project.”

The project that had taken Robert to China. “Was this of her own volition? Do you know?”

“No one knows whether she left on her own or was asked to leave. I do know that the Chinese delegation was not happy about something, but I don't know whether that had anything to do with or not.”

Before Margaret could speak, Wilma went on, “It's been a regular mad house around here for the past week. First the Chinese, then the directors running in and out of Mr. Ainsley's office. Mr. Casey's practically been camped in there, too.”

Casey was Chairman of Robert's board.

“And Mr. Ainsley doesn't look good either. He has dark circles under his eyes. I think he's working too hard, if you ask me.”

Margaret didn't ask what she most wanted to know--if Robert and Shawn were still seeing one another. She would simply have to wait and see how things played out.

After hanging up from the conversation with Wilma, Margaret had returned her sister's call. It was their annoying conversation that replayed in her mind as she stepped out of the shower. In her pique, she applied the terry towel too rigorously and winced at the sting.

Why can't I express myself better, she chastised herself, not for the first time in her life. She hadn't intended to mention the Rome trip at all, but Jane had sensed something and wheedled it out of her. Jane was good at that! Then she had proceeded to pass judgment not only on the trip but on Margaret's relationship with Mark in general.

Now Margaret would have to sit down and explain it all in a letter. Well maybe not explain so much as describe the innocent nature of her friendship with Mark. But not tonight, she decided. Tomorrow, maybe, when she was fresh and could form her words with a clear head. Right now, she just wanted to focus on the news from Wilma.

Opening a jar of night cream, Margaret continued her toilette, so routine it did not interfere with her introspection. *Effective immediately!* So ... had the affair turned sour, the resignation some sort of retaliatory ploy on Shawn's part? Briefly, a small pitter-pat of hope kicked up then died. No. More likely the job change had Robert's approval. Margaret thought of the nepotism rule she had cited Shawn: *If two executives in the company marry, one must resign.*

Hmmm. She frowned and shook her head, not liking where this line of reasoning was taking her. Her hands slowed their circular

motion on her face, then stopped altogether as she recalled Wilma's description of Robert.

If he looked so bad on the outside, then it was fairly certain he was suffering mightily on the inside. Not that Robert would ever admit it. Her husband of thirty-eight years had always concealed his thoughts and feelings as carefully as a sharp poker player his hand, a trait which undoubtedly had contributed to his business success, but one which had rendered in Margaret through the years an anxiety so insidious that it was obvious only now by its absence.

Concentrating on her life here these past three months and refusing to dwell on Robert's, an inner calm had filtered in, bringing with it (aside from occasional flare-ups!) a sense of well-being that was entirely new to her.

Margaret jumped as the nearby wall phone jangled sharply, echoing loudly in the cavernous bathroom. She wiped away the greasy residue on her fingers and answered. Straining to hear, she could hardly make out Kate's small voice at the other end.

"Can you speak up, Kate? I can barely hear you."

The young woman whispered more forcefully into the receiver, and Margaret heard muffled sobbing, then, for the first time.

"Oh, Margaret, I'm frantic. Gabriela wants sixty coquilles for her cocktail party tomorrow evening, and working at school the way I am now every day, I can't possibly get them done in time. I've made her *Profiteroles au Gruyere* ahead of time because they will keep, but the coquilles have to be prepared at the last minute. Could ...?"

"Kate," Margaret interrupted, "there IS no school this week. Oh, that's right! I had forgotten you are staying through the break to assist in that special Bread Making Course ..."

Kate rushed on, "I hate to impose on you like this, Margaret, but can you possibly help me? I promise never to ask such a huge favor again ..."

"Why, Kate, of course I'll help you! Count on it. It's just that I'm simply appalled at how overworked you are. You are supposed to be a part-time nanny in that household, not the resident cook!"

"I can't afford to lose this job," the girl whispered more forcefully into the receiver. "If I can just hold on a tad longer, I'll be out from under this situation once and for all." The small voice was anxious and pleading.

"Say no more, Little Friend. I'll be there! That is, if you promise not to tell Gabriela I'm the impudent woman who gave her such a hard time earlier on the phone."

The girl's relief poured through the line. "Oh, Margaret, I cannot thank you enough! I'll see you tomorrow afternoon. Come around four."

"Front door ... or back?" Margaret teased as they rang off.

Slipping into a nightgown, she crossed over to the bed and tossed her book onto the nightstand. No reading tonight! There were enough story-lines swirling the ether without indulging in the escapism of fiction.

Besides, she told herself as she switched off the lamp and snuggled down between the crisply ironed sheets, she needed to get some sleep. She had promised Mark to ride with him in the Bois de Bologne early the next day--and every morning that week--to help him get ready for his bicycle tour, starting on Saturday.

Funny Mark. Lying in the darkness Margaret drowsily relived the highlights of their Italian jaunt, laughing out loud when she thought again of the improbable drive down the hotel steps, Mark's

hollering, “You CAN do it, Margaret.” And that lopsided grin on his face as he toasted the Italians.

With a big smile on her own, Margaret was soon fast asleep.

The two thousand acre park was on the western edge of Paris proper. They had biked there twice before, but had come together directly from school. Today, they were meeting at the eastern entrance near the bicycle rental booth and would begin their ride from that point. The weather was cool enough at the moment, but with daylight breaking so much earlier these summer days, Margaret knew it wouldn't be long before temperatures began their heated ascent.

After waiting twenty minutes or so for her usually punctual friend, Margaret was about to give up and leave when he came tearing up the street, out of breath, looking immensely pleased about something.

“Sorry, I'm late. Margaret. I'll explain later.”

From the intricate network of trails which wagon wheeled off in several directions, Mark led them down one that meandered alongside a long, placid lake with a pair of swans serenely gliding its surface, then entered a dark thicket of trees where the air was cool and smelled of moss. Now and then he looked back to check on Margaret.

“Okay?” he hollered.

Conserving her breath, she waved him forward. With no one else out so early, they had the trail to themselves and rode for an hour before Mark pointed to a picnic table where they could stop.

“Let's rest here,” he said. “I have a proposal to put before the council.”

“Phew! Your timing's perfect,” said Margaret as she hopped off her bike and leaned it against a tree. “My legs had just reached altitude. Besides, I have something to discuss with you, too.”

They sat side by side on the picnic table, their feet resting on the attached bench while they took long, thirsty pulls from their water bottles.

“Okay,” said Mark as he drained his and set it aside, “what's on your mind?”

Margaret blotted her lips on her shirt sleeve and began describing for him Kate Stone's plight and the plea the girl had made the night before. “Of course, I'm going over there to help this afternoon. The poor thing was frantic. It just makes my blood boil to see how exploited she is in that sweatshop.”

“So why doesn't she quit?”

“She can't! She is so near graduating and leaving behind the meager circumstances she's been locked into all her life that she is determined to stick it out. And not only does she intend to graduate, Mark, she's determined to finish Number One in her class. Kate has heard, like everybody else, that one of Paris' top restaurants will be recruiting for a *sous* chef among Le Cordon Bleu's August graduates.”

“Margaret,” Mark said in his most professorial voice, “Kate may well finish near the top, from what you've told me about her, but I doubt that she or anyone else can knock Estafel out of that top slot. But even so, no restaurant, regardless how prestigious it is, would consider only the number one graduate. Even if she finishes second or third, she will still get their attention, I assure you.”

“I told Kate that very thing. But she insists that female chefs have to work harder to prove they are as good as male ones. She feels that with the Number One beside her name on the diploma, the restaurant will have to give her serious consideration. But aside from

all that, Mark, can you think of a way we might help her out of her dilemma?”

“That's a tough call, Margaret. As a rule I'm not one for taking on other people's problems...but I'll give it some thought.”

Pausing to let the dust settle on that issue, Mark then introduced his own. “I called today,” he said, “and there's space for another person on the bike tour. That is...” he continued, grinning, “...if you can get packed by Saturday.”

“You mean ... ME ... GO?”

“Sure, why not? You're as ready as you'll ever be. Besides,” he added with a pretense of embarrassment, “I want to prove to you I am capable of traveling without driving into the lobbies of strange hotels.”

“Oh dear, now let ME think,” Margaret said.

“What's to think about? You're outfitted and physically fit. And with school out again next week, why would you want to stay in Paris by yourself?”

She didn't.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HORS- D'OEUVRES

Judging from the number of *au pairs* out pushing prams on the street of turn-of-the-century apartment buildings built originally for large families with many servants, the upscale neighborhood in the St. Georges area of Paris was once again inhabited by the young and upwardly mobile.

The residential building Margaret sought in the middle of the long block was an imposing six-story affair, identified for her by its distinctive brass lions' heads doorknockers that Kate had told her to look for. Pushing the intercom button in the mouth of the lion on the right gained her access to a foyer inside which served two adjacent apartments.

By the time she had found the buzzer for the apartment where Kate lived and worked, the door was already swinging open for her.

"Oh, Margaret, you silly goose!" Kate's small face lit up when she saw her friend standing before her fully clad in chef's attire. The Cordon Blue logo on her jacket was discreetly covered with a pocket handkerchief, strategically folded, and a lock of hair was brushed up to hide the one on her *calot*.

"One-person kitchen brigade at your service, Ma'am," Margaret announced.

Kate's lighthearted giggle belied the dark circles under her eyes and the frizzled red hair, damp from exertion, plastered to her neck. With a cautionary finger to her lips, she beckoned Margaret to follow her back to the kitchen. They passed through a series of elegant, high-ceilinged rooms, the sound of their footsteps on the parquet intermittently muffled by a judicious spacing of oriental rugs.

Margaret took in the surroundings with a practiced eye. Observing the crystal chandeliers, expensive artwork and other accoutrements of a wealthy lifestyle, she asked in a stage whisper, "Where are the other nine servants it takes to run this place?"

"Ha!" Kate hooted, then clapped a hand over her mouth and lowered her voice. "That would be Marie the maid who comes once a week."

At that moment a heavily accented voice called down the wide, circular stairway they were passing at the moment. "Oh KA-ATE, there *eez* someone at the door."

"I have it, Gabriela. It's my friend from school who's come round to help with the party."

"Very good. Oh, and Kate, I do hope you can manage to keep the leetle ones in their quarters when the guests arrive."

Once they were in the privacy of the kitchen Margaret said, "Her accent doesn't sound very French to me."

"Oh, Gabriela and Alonzo aren't French. They are only living in Paris for a year, then he will be transferred someplace else. He's with Fianco, the international corporation that owns this apartment."

"Hmmm," Margaret mused. Familiar with corporate compensation for junior executives, she now understood. Rather than serving as a simple *au pair* for a monied French family, Kate was being

overworked and underpaid by a couple trying to make the most of appearances available to them.

The small, windowless room was the apartment's original kitchen, having never been updated through the years with more than the basic stove, oven, and refrigerator. There was no dishwasher, waste disposer, or microwave. And, without proper ventilation, it was hot.

Kate took charge with the same efficiency she did every day in the demonstration kitchen. Scurrying about, she identified for Margaret the various delicacies she had already prepared and set out for the party. "This goes in the oven at five-thirty, comes out at six. That stays in the fridge until the last guest arrives. These are to be uncovered and arranged on silver trays on the dining table after everything else is on.

"Now for the *Coquilles Saint-Jacques a La Landaise*." She handed Margaret the recipe and pointed out ingredients she had set aside to go into the dish. "Coquilles are quite easy, actually. It's just that tripling the recipe will take you longer. They should be served piping hot, so don't complete the last two steps until I give you the signal."

After scanning the recipe, Margaret washed her hands and turned her attention to a large sack of pine nuts, which were to be browned over low heat in a dry skillet.

Satisfied that her one-woman kitchen brigade was off and running, Kate headed for the door. "I'll scoot upstairs now and bathe the little poppets. If you need me, I'll be on the third level."

With only one large skillet to work with, Margaret repeated the browning process several times, then set aside the readied pine nuts and began preparing the containers of fresh scallops she found in the refrigerator. It took her some time merely to rinse and pat each one dry. Then she began the tedious process of cutting their white parts in half, making two thin discs out of each scallop.

The bustle and bumps of a young family in situ could be heard overhead. Doors opened, slammed; children shrieked. A dramatic plea for “SILENZIO!” issued from the nervous hostess on the second floor followed soon thereafter by the apologetic voice of a husband rushing in, apparently late from the office.

Kate popped back into the kitchen to check on Margaret's progress, then made a last minute inspection of the formal rooms where Gabriela had instructed her to switch on the tiny ceiling spotlights over all the paintings. Guests were due in twenty minutes.

“You haven't taken a break since you got here, Margaret. Come upstairs with me and freshen up while I change.”

Silently, Margaret followed Kate up the first flight of stairs, where they tiptoed past the master suite, then climbed another flight where Margaret paused on the landing to catch her breath while the affectionate nanny looked in on her pajama-clad charges sitting in front of a television watching cartoons.

“Sweet babies,” Kate smiled as she came out of the room. “They are the nicest part of my job. Now I'll show you the second-nicest.” She led a still-panting Margaret up a narrower and steeper flight of stairs to the tiny *chambre de bonne* above, which had served as servants' quarters in a previous era.

“Look at my view!” Kate said proudly, gesturing to the room's single window.

“It's lovely,” said Margaret, her heart still pounding as she looked out over the rooftops of Paris where patches of blue sky skirted the edges. “But when do you have time to enjoy it?”

There was no reply. Kate had slipped away to change her clothes, reappearing a few minutes later.

“For heaven's sake, what is THAT!” exclaimed Margaret when she turned from the window and spied the scanty outfit the girl wore.

Kate's face flushed. "I know, it's rather awful isn't it, but Gabriella likes for me to wear it when they entertain so that guests will know I'm the help."

If it had been Kate's chef's uniform or a simple aproned affair for a maid, Margaret would have understood. But this tacky bit of nothing made to fit a Barbie doll was a travesty. It reminded her of the old forties movies in which young women wearing such flashy costumes went around nightclubs calling out, 'Cigars ... cigarettes ... cigars ... cigarettes'.

"Please, Margaret! I know what you're thinking. But I've GOT to hang onto this job two more months--even if it harelips the Queen! Please don't say anything to jeopardize it!"

"TLL NOT SAY A WORD!" promised an apoplectic Margaret. "But we have GOT to get you out of this place, Kate!" She spun around then and descended the stairs, allowing the full force of her body to pound each step as she tromped noisily past the master suite on the second floor.

Not until the stroke of seven, the hour guests were to arrive, did the hostess make her appearance, heralded by the heavy scent of her perfume billowing down the stairs ahead of her.

Margaret did not bother to raise her head when the dark headed Gabriela looked in on her 'kitchen help'.

"You must be Kate's freend from school," the woman purred.

Busy removing heated scallops from a pan, Margaret did not reply.

Gabriela repeated the statement in French, but again Margaret remained silent. At that moment Kate ducked into the room in her ridiculous costume and stopped short, looking nervously from Margaret to Gabriela and back to Margaret again.

“Your freend, she does not speak Eeeng-lish or French?”

“Uh ...she's German,” Kate said quickly.

The evening was a blur of activity from that point on. Margaret remained in the kitchen warming foods, replenishing trays, washing plates and wine glasses, and following Kate's instructions. The petite employee was herself everywhere at once, opening wine bottles, passing canapés, replacing empty serving dishes--and, in the midst it all, racing up and down the stairs several times to check on the children, eventually putting them to bed.

When the last guests had departed, the triumphant hostess fluttered into the kitchen where Margaret and Kate were tidying up.

“It was a bootiful party. Bootiful party,” she exulted, waving a twenty-franc note in the air before pressing it into Margaret's palm.

“Danke,” retorted a stone-faced Margaret as she in turn thrust the paltry tip into the would-be cleavage of Kate's skimpy costume.

CHAPTER TWELVE

NOBLESSE OBLIGE

“I don't know WHAT I'm going to do ... but Something!” Margaret declared the next morning as she and Mark lingered over breakfast at a sidewalk cafe after their ride.

“Why don't you go talk to Madame Dessange,” he suggested. “It's possible that the school has some sort of assistance program Kate could apply for, something in addition to her Chef's Assistant job.”

“Good idea. I'll call her as soon as I get back to the hotel.”

When they got up to leave a short time later, Mark draped an arm casually over Margaret's shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. “You biked well this morning. You're getting stronger each day. Are you packed yet?” He did a little soft-shoe shuffle on the pavement.

“Not yet, but I'm getting there.” Margaret smiled at his obvious excitement. How could such a strong, virile, masculine male one minute turn into such an adorable little boy the next? “Don't worry,” she promised, “I'll be ready bright and early in the morning.”

Once in her room, she tossed her bike helmet on the bed and reached for the phone. After securing a two o'clock appointment with Madame Dessange, she jumped in the shower, forming as she did a mental checklist: Take Pierre a copy of her itinerary, write that darned letter to Jane, and call Wilma. All that to do when she returned from

the meeting with Madame Dessange. And she hadn't even started packing.

"Please, Margaret, call me Emily," the director responded to Margaret's formal greeting when she walked into the director's office an hour later and took a seat across the desk. "What can I do for you this afternoon?"

Margaret crossed her legs at the ankles and smoothed the hem of her linen skirt before plunging into the speech in French that she had rehearsed on the way over.

"Madame Dessange--Emily!--I wanted to call to your attention the plight of one of the school's most promising students ... Kate Stone."

At the mention of Kate's name, Madame Dessange leaned forward.

"As you know, Kate has only to take the Superior Course before graduating in August, and then she will make some lucky restaurant a truly fine chef. She will be a credit to this school."

Emily Dessange nodded. Listening attentively then, a frown slowly deepened between her blue eyes as she listened to Margaret describe first the heavy workload of Kate's job and then a lurid account of the previous evening's dinner party for which the girl had prepared all the food, then served and nannied in the tasteless costume foisted on her by her insensitive employers.

"*C'est horrible!*" Emily Dessange responded. "How can this be? I had no idea the girl was so over worked."

Margaret went on, slowly picking her way in French, "I know that Kate serves as a Chef's Assistant here to help with her expenses, but in addition to that, I wonder if there might be another program of assistance?"

Emily looked off and thought for a second. Then she spun about in her desk chair and picked up the phone. In rapid-fire French, of which Margaret only grasped a key word now and then, she tersely passed along significant details of Margaret's account. She then ended with her own high opinion of Kate's merits.

As Emily listened to the response she wanted to hear on the other end, a smile formed and brightened her serious face. "Okay," she said to Margaret when she hung up, "here's what we can do."

Putting their heads together, the two women drew up a plan of assistance so generous that it sent Margaret tripping back to the hotel in a state of elation.

Pulling her luggage out of the closet, she began filling it with two sets of clothes--those for biking during the day and for dressing up in the evenings. Then she sat down at her desk and wrote the letter to her sister she had been putting off.

June 7

Dear Jane,

I'm afraid I didn't express myself well when we talked last Sunday, so I'll try in this letter to clear up any wrong impressions I might have left or you might have perceived.

No. Maine Man is not the Main Man! Our relationship is nothing like THAT. In Mark I have a truly good friend with whom I can laugh and talk and be who I am--and through whose kind eyes I've made some pleasing discoveries about myself.

Because he considers me a strong person, I now recognize strengths I never gave myself credit for. And because he shares his bon mots and laughs at mine, I've rediscovered my long-buried sense of humor, finding in

the process that I indeed have a lot to laugh about--even myself.

But best of all, because Mark enjoys being with me, I know that I must be good company after all, something I had come to doubt in the past several months--if not years.

Who wouldn't treasure such a friend?

I agree that 'running off to Rome with him' (as you put it) was out of character for me, but the truth is, our travel arrangements, like our relationship, are based on mutual independence--meaning among other things, separate rooms and separate checks.

Having said this, I will now REALLY shock you! I'm 'running off' with him again tomorrow, this time on a bicycle tour in the South of France.

(I'm laughing as I write this because I know you probably haven't gotten past the word bicycle--Yes! As in two spoked wheels with a seat in between. And yes, I will be wearing the funny-looking clothes that go along with it, but you can rest assured that long, oversized tee shirts will cover what needs to be covered.

Mark has been planning for this trip a long time but inquired only yesterday about a spot for me. He says the Provence region is historically important because of its early Roman civilization.

With such a learning experience in store, what can possibly be wrong with expanding my mind while lifting my derriere?

As proof positive, I'll send photos tout de suite when I return.

Her writing juices flowing now, Margaret decided to follow up Jane's letter up with one to her son and daughter-in-law.

Dear Paul and Trish,

Thank you for the photos. Amy looks adorable in the Easter dress. Although I would hate to outfit a child at these prices, it WAS fun to add one Paris frock to her wardrobe.

As cooking school is out for summer break this week and next, I am leaving Saturday for an unusual (for me!) vacation in the South of France. I'll tell you all about it when I return. In the meantime, should you need me for any reason, the concierge here at the hotel will have the numbers where I can be reached.

The Monday after I get back, my Intermediate Cuisine and Pastry Courses begin. Which reminds me, have I told you that I'm giving serious thought to opening a tearoom when I get home? It's something I have wanted to do for a long time, and now with all the goodies I'm adding daily to my repertoire of desserts, the idea has become even more appealing.

Tell Amy that if and when I do, I'll need a good helper in the summers.

Having cleared two familial decks by mail, Margaret cleared another by phone.

“Wilma,” she said when the secretary's voice came on the line, “should Mr. Ainsley be overcome with curiosity at my whereabouts next week, please tell him I'll be savoring Sunday in Provence.”

Ready at last for her holiday to begin, Margaret dressed for bed and paused near the window for a minute to watch the City of Light begin to glow in the dusk as street lamps winked on in a chain of twinkling dominoes. A slight movement drew her eye to the figure of Pierre standing below watching an old gray Citroen creep down the street, its low-slung body hiccupping to a stop before the hotel.

From behind the wheel, a dark-haired woman flashed him a broad grin while small children hollered gleefully from the back as Pierre strutted towards them, arms outstretched like the Good Shepherd greeting his flock. Leaning first to kiss the woman, he tousled the small heads, then was borne away by the merry band.

Margaret sighed and went to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

VACANCES DE BICYCLETTE

Early Saturday the two excited travelers met at *Gare de Lyon* station for the four-hour train ride to Avignon, a trip that would take the average motorist twice the time. Rolling their bags down the platform alongside a sleek silver express train with a gold stripe running the length of each car, they finally found the car on which they held reserved seats.

“Wow!” Margaret exclaimed as the door to their compartment opened at her touch then magically closed behind them, “this is nice.”

They no sooner stacked their two pieces of luggage on the slatted metal rack and settled into their plush seats than the train began gliding soundlessly from the station, picking up speed as it went.

“We're on our way!” said Mark, leaning back and turning to flash Margaret an excited grin. “Now, I want to hear all about your meeting with Madame Dessange yesterday.”

Margaret was eager to give him the news. “Well, in short, she not only was as disturbed as I about that awful job of Kate's, but she agreed that it would be best for Kate to give it up and move someplace where she won't have all the distractions. She says the Superior Course will be so all-consuming that Kate won't have time for anything other than classes and her Chef's Assistant job.”

Marks' brows furrowed in concentration as he listened. "So, then you're saying the school can help her?"

"Not only can but will. In view of Kate's bright future in gastronomy, she says the Board will waive her tuition for the last course--PLUS, she is scouting about for a rent-free place for her to live until graduation."

Mark cocked a craggy eyebrow. "You're leaving something out, I can tell. What is it? Are you doing something on your own to help Kate?"

She nodded. "Yes, I am going to contribute a small amount each week for spending money--but I certainly don't want Kate knowing that. She would feel obligated to me. Emily will pass the money on as though it's an allowance from the school."

"Good going, Margaret! I'm glad you pursued the idea."

Margaret decided she had rambled on long enough about Kate. In fairness to her travel companion, so excited over this long-awaited bike tour, she signed off on the subject and handed him a copy of the *Herald Tribune* she had brought along for them to share the crossword puzzle.

The train sped south through the rolling countryside where a mosaic of lush greens was patched with colorful fields of flowers being raised for the perfume industry. Margaret stared out at the storybook villages they passed and the occasional chateaus perched on hillsides.

Idly, she wondered about the people who lived in them. Did they carry on the happy, uncomplicated lives she imagined? Sewing seeds, harvesting their crops, carrying on the traditions handed down to them. Or did they sometimes feel suffocated by the monotony of it all and yearn for a different kind of life--just as she herself sometimes longed for one that was simpler?

Her face turned somber as she speculated on the widespread notion that all Frenchmen kept mistresses while their wives, so the myth went, knowingly accepted their dalliances as part of the Gallic culture. But even if those wives appeared not to mind, she thought, didn't they feel somehow diminished and undesirable as women because their men strayed? In fact, weren't they FURIOUS?

"A penny for your thoughts," Mark's voice broke in.

Margaret spun around in her seat. "I'm mad as hell!"

Seeing the surprised look on his face, she giggled. "But I'm getting over it."

"Well, I'm glad I didn't offer you a dollar!"

Sometime later, their crossword puzzle finished and an air of anticipation suffusing the small compartment, their train rolled into the station in Avignon where fellow cyclists were waiting for them aboard a bus which would transport them all to a small country inn an hour's drive away.

From that point, they would begin their cycling trip through the Provencal countryside stopping each night at various chateau and inns along the way. Counting the two young guides, Chris and Rene, who had made the arrangements and would accompany them, there were twenty riders in all, couples ranging in age from their early forties to early sixties, all strangers and all American except for Rene who lived in the area and would do the necessary translating.

As Margaret alternately stared out the window and stole nervous glances at the physically fit passengers aboard the bus, her mounting excitement soared into anxiety range. With the moment of truth fast upon them, she was wondering whatever had possessed her to sign onto this seven day tour on the seat of a bicycle.

“Mark, are you sure I'm not going to hold these people back?” she pled for assurance.

“Remember what I told you, Margaret, everyone rides at his or her own pace. Besides,” he grinned, lightly bumping her shoulder, “you're riding with me, not them--just the way we've been doing the past week in the park.”

Mark's jostling movement brought their heads close together, and Margaret felt his breath, moist and warm, on her cheek. She turned and saw the teasing twinkle in his eyes soften to a look of undisguised tenderness.

Within her stirred a heated flash of awareness of the new chemistry between them and an urge of feminine surrender compelling her to say the word or make the gesture that would ease their relationship beyond some invisible boundary. Swallowing hard Margaret looked away, denying both the moment and the chemistry.

Emotions in check, she turned and gave Mark a faux grimace. “All right, Dr. Whitman, no more anxiety attacks from me. I am going to relax and enjoy this trip if it kills me!”

After the group checked into their rooms to unpack, they reassembled in the inn's courtyard in bright cycling gear, frolicking like colts set out to pasture. In a brief session called “Route Rap”, their guides explained a small change in the directions, namely that the blue mailbox that would have signaled a right turn had recently been repainted yellow.

Everyone then took possession of his or her assigned bicycle and completed a check list that would impress an airline pilot: tires checked, water bottles filled, seats adjusted.

“Good Grief, Margaret, I had no idea your legs were this long,” Mark said after he raised her bicycle seat yet another notch. “There! That's better. You want them almost fully extended when the

pedal is at the bottom so you don't put too much pressure on your knees."

Finally everyone was ready for the twenty-kilometer ride to an ancient Roman aqueduct from which they would return by a different route. The purpose of the first day's outing was to get the riders accustomed to their bikes and give the guides an idea how well each one rode.

"Hold up, Margaret," Mark hollered as she began queuing up behind the others, her heart making nervous *thrip thrips* inside her body.

"You forgot something," he teased as he reached over her handlebars to fasten the chin strap of her helmet.

"Okay," he said, giving her nose a playful poke, "Let's go for it!"

Amid a chorus of shifting gears and raucous laughter, the colorful two-wheeled brigade rolled out lycra-clad and carefree into its first stage of Tour de Provence. As the miles rolled by and Margaret's fears slowly fell away, she became caught up in the same childlike wonder that infected the entire group with what Mark termed "the lookah-thas:

"Oh looka tha vineyards!" "White?" "No, red, I think."

"Oh looka tha Aquaduct! Imagine! Nineteen BC and still here."

"Oh looka tha cherry orchards." Grinning cherry pickers atop their ladders posed for pictures and passed down handfuls of the succulent fruit.

At dinner that evening, as the comradely group toasted their first day's outing with glasses of wine as robust as the region itself, the road got longer, the hills steeper, and the stories funnier with each re-telling. They laughed at black zigzag marks greasy bicycle chains left

on their legs; they laughed at those with seat-sore bottoms who remained on their feet; and they laughed for no reason at all. The night was young, the air mildly intoxicating, and they had a whole week left to ride.

“Well, look who's finally arrived!” hollered a congenial doctor from Denver. The group turned as one toward the door and immediately began heckling the embarrassed couple trying to slip in unnoticed.

Margaret sympathized with the sunburned and exhausted-looking wife.

“Hey, Phil,” someone teased the husband, “can't you follow a simple map?”

The New Jersey couple had missed a crucial turn on the ride back from the aqueduct and gone countless kilometers out of the way before encountering a Frenchman with enough English to direct them back to the inn.

The husband lamely defended himself. “The map said ‘turn left at the blue mailbox’. How was I to know the mailbox is now yellow? We sailed right past it.” He glanced pointedly at Chris.

Diplomatically, the young guide apologized, not mentioning what the other riders were undoubtedly thinking. Had the couple not missed “route rap” where such changes were duly noted before each day's ride, they would have learned about the freshly painted mailbox along with everyone else.

The following morning, after route rap which was attended by one and all, Mark and Margaret set out with two other couples.

“You go on up and ride with the guys,” Margaret urged him. “I'll tag along with Florene and Pat.”

“Sure, join us,” the women chimed in.

Margaret fell in with their easier pace, relieved that she would not have to worry about holding Mark back--or kill herself trying to keep up with him. The men, eager to ride full bore, disappeared down the road in three clouds of dust.

Limbering up as they rode, the women were making their way up a gentle hill when, near the top, Florene's pedals began spinning furiously, and the chain fell from her bike with a noisy clank. As the two wheeler wobbled precariously, she hopped one foot onto the ground to break her fall.

“Oh, Great!” she said. “And John's probably in the next county.”

Pat and Margaret immediately stopped to help. Staring at one another and the dangling chain coiled like a snake in the dust, the three women shrugged in turn as if to say, “I don't do bicycle chains!”

“Well, here goes nothing,” Florene said, delicately picking up the chain between thumb and forefinger. As the other two looked on, she tried stretching it back over the chain ring. After several fruitless attempts she threw the chain back down on the road. “It looked a lot easier in demonstration,” she fumed, thrusting her blackened fingers out for her companions to see.

Pat laughed, “Chris probably did it on purpose to see if we were paying attention to his instructions.”

“Here, hold the bike a sec,” said Margaret. “Let me try something.” Scouting about, she found a small stick, then returned and with Florene's help turned the bike upside down. Slowly rotating the pedals with left hand, she tried feeding the chain onto the sprocket. At first, it slipped and dangled free as it had for Florene. But when she tried a second time, the chain attached itself first to one sprocket

tooth, then another sprocket tooth until, all at once, pedals and chain were turning as one.

“You're a genius,” shouted Pat.

“How on earth did you do that?” asked an incredulous Florene.

Margaret smile. “Just lucky, I guess,” she said with modesty even as a surge of exhilaration rushed through her for accomplishing a task she ordinarily would not have tried. She smiled, remembering Mark’s words: *You CAN do it, Margaret. Just try.*

On their bikes once more, they crested the hill and met Mark furiously pumping his way back up the other side. “You girls okay?” he called out with a worried look on his face.

“Sure, why not?” Margaret hollered with a conspiratorial wink at her friends. “We just stop and smell the roses more than you guys do.”

Mark escorted them the remaining distance to Uzes, a small medieval town he had already explored with the men. John and Ken were waiting for them at a table at a sidewalk cafe in the town's deserted main square. Being Sunday, residents were noticeably absent.

“Better carb it up, Girls,” said one of the men. “We still have a lot of road to cover.”

“Does garlic soup count as a carbohydrate?” Pat inquired of no one in particular. “I'm dying to have some--especially if it's as good as that one last night.”

But the desultory waiter dashed her plans by informing them all by an irritating process of elimination that other dishes on the soiled menu, including garlic soup, were *sold out*. However, he highly

recommended the Aubergine, a spicy eggplant dish they would find quite tasty.

“Well, that settles it,” said Ken cryptically. “I think I’ll have the Aubergine.”

The others laughed and dutifully ordered the eggplant dish as well.

Mark polished his off first then disappeared inside a small shop next door and came back with a double dip ice cream cone.

“Hey, Whitman,” Ken hurrahed, “how many those things you gonna eat today?”

Margaret whipped out her camera and photographed Mark’s obvious delight as he licked around the dripping edges of the cone.

“You folks go ahead,” he said then as everyone stood to leave. “I wanna show my girl around this town.”

Margaret felt a blush creeping up from her neck and quickly stooped to busy herself with a shoelace. When she stood again, recovered, the others had mounted their bikes and pedaled away.

“Come on,” Mark said, “you’re in for a treat.” Taking her by the hand, he walked her down the narrow streets bordered by high stone walls on either side, their footsteps echoing hollowly in the cavernous passageways. Tall massive towers blocked the sun, leaving them to meander in the shaded areas below.

“Can you imagine the manpower it took for all this stonework?” he asked when they stopped to crane their necks upward. “And these streets! Think how many hands it took to level the soil and fit all these stones in place.”

Margaret oohed and ah-ed the proper responses, but all the while her entire being was focused on the strong hand that clasped hers, its steady pulse keeping time with her heart.

Late that afternoon when the group straggled into the country inn which would be their home for the night, Mark helped Margaret locate her room first, a charming converted loft in what had once been a barn, then set off to find his own quarters in the main building. They would meet their fellow cyclists before dinner to exchange road stories and visit.

Somewhat concerned with her protesting knees, Margaret was delighted to find sitting center stage in her capacious bathroom a footed, free-standing bathtub with a tall gooseneck spout. Filling the deep tub to the brim with hot sudsy water, she climbed in to soak.

Staring out the un-curtained window at contented cows grazing in the pasture below, she recollected each small detail of the day. She thought of bicycle chains and fortified cities, of eggplant and ice-cream, and most of all she thought of Mark's infectious *joie de vivre*. It was all so idyllic, so absolutely perfect but...

Tiny frown lines began to track up the dreamy look on her face. *My girl*, he had said. With a peculiar warmth in her loins, she recalled the seductive pull of Mark's hand holding hers, the overpowering desire she had had to melt into his body, convention be damned, and ease them across that line.

Abruptly, Margaret sat up in the tub with a loud *whooshing* splash. *This has got to stop.*

Her face grew sad. Notwithstanding the emotional upheaval of an affair should there be one, she would not for all the world hurt the cherished friend who had made her the gift of herself, a man who had suffered enough grief in a lifetime without their friendship adding more.

For in her heart, Margaret knew that Mark, with his vulnerability, would be the one left lonely and alone should she and Robert miraculously work things out. It would not be easy, but she would have to put some distance back into their relationship. If touching was the culprit, then there would be no more touching. It was as simple as that!

How ironical, she mused as she dressed, how she was spending more time thinking of Mark these days and less time thinking of Robert--not exactly what she had in mind when she came to France to "let things cool down".

How could it be--a marriage of so many years limping its way like this to the finish line? Unless, of course, it had died long ago, the possibility which Mark himself suggested in their first serious conversation.

She had not been willing to face that fact then, but now... Margaret picked up her hair brush. Later...I'll deal with this later. The important thing now was to keep from compounding the prime issue with the tempting side issue of Mark.

Hearing the first lively strains of music drift up from the dining room in the main building, she quickly donned black silk hostess pajamas and a filmy white chiffon blouse and hurried down to join the festive group.

When she walked in, a local combo was playing, if not well at least loudly, a medley of old songs popular in the Fifties. Two couples were dancing in a cleared space in the middle of the room while others, including Mark, sat around a table singing along as each familiar tune segued into the next.

*Mr. Sandman,
send me a dream
Make her complexion
like peaches and cream*

Seeing her enter, Mark jumped up from the table and crossed the room in his easy rolling gait. "I was beginning to wonder about you ..." He stopped and gave a low whistle. "I take that back. It was well worth the wait."

"Thanks," Margaret smiled, appearing not to notice the arm he proffered to escort her back across the room. "Sorry I'm late; I got lost in a delicious bubble bath and couldn't find my way back."

*Only yoooooooo ...
can make this world seem right
Only yoooooooo ...
can make the darkness bright*

Happy, road weary faces, crooning the familiar melodies from the past nodded their greetings when she joined them at the table next to Mark. As she chimed in, the words of the sentimental love songs heightened the sensuous touch of Mark's arm burning through her blouse, his citrusy aftershave teasing the air. She shifted slightly to make space between their bodies.

*Isn't it romantic
merely to be young
On an evening
such as this?*

"There's a good slow number," Mark said as he began to get up. "How about it?"

"Oh, do you mind, Mark? My knees are killing me after what I put them through today."

"Ah shucks," he said, feigning disappointment. But as they continued singing and talking with the others, Margaret felt his gaze on

her every now and then as he tried to understand the subtle change that had taken place .

A captive audience that night to a chorus of frogs croaking beneath her open window, Margaret fidgeted and flounced, trying in vain to get into a comfortable position. Hot one minute, she kicked off the covers, then at the sound of a mosquito's whiney solo pulled them back up again. When the songbirds awakened her at dawn, she had a throbbing headache and was certain she had not slept at all.

Despite the sleepless night and ones to follow as Margaret tried to restore Platonism to her relationship with Mark, the days flowed by like a good dream as each offered up its own unique experience for the group's collective memory bank. They sampled the heady products of a vineyard in Chateauneuf-du-Pape; played Boules on the lawn of a country chateau; and mixed with the locals on market day in the little village of Cavaillon where melons by the same name were displayed in every stall.

Thursday, the day for their toughest ride of the trip, finally dawned. Over dinner the night before, the comradely group had spoken of little else but the challenging ride up to the ancient city of Les Baux. Scrambling out of bed, Margaret dressed and hurried to meet Mark for breakfast.

Riders already assembled in the dining room were clustered about Chris asking questions, too anxious to wait until route-rap for their answers.

"It's really not all that hard," he repeated each time someone else wandered up to manifest his or her anxiety.

"Easy enough for him to say," Margaret kidded. "He's all of twenty-five."

“Take your time,” he advised them, one and all. “When you get tired, just get off your bikes and stand for a couple of minutes till the blood works its way back down to your legs. Rene will sweep with the van, so if you find you can't make it to the top, just give him the high sign and he'll pick you up.”

The advice, however, only served to crank up anxiety levels a notch higher. Not one of the competitive group would admit defeat and ride in the "sag wagon" as they called the van. It had now become a peer pressure thing: *If Hokey-Pokey can make it up that hill, then I can jolly well make it up there too!*

In truth, the first part of the climb to Les Baux was easy enough, leading Margaret to believe that maybe Chris was right after all. However, her optimism was short lived.

Oh no! Looka tha ...

She heard the shout of dismay from the first rider who rounded the bend and saw their destination perched high atop a promontory of the Alpilles (translated little Alps). All at once a chorus of *Looka-thas* echoed behind as each rider in turn caught a glimpse for him or herself.

CLICK went the first person's gearshift as he began the steep ascent; *CLICK CLICK* sounded others as they followed close behind; then frantic *CLICK CLICK ... CLICK CLICK CLICKs* as the women, bringing up the rear, grappled for granny gears and strained against their pedals for the slow, lung-searing climb to the top.

Margaret struggled along, hopping off her bike when her legs and lungs protested for relief, tacking like a sailboat for momentum when she remounted. I think I can, I think I can, she mentally coaxed herself like the proverbial little steam engine. Another short distance later she would have to stop again, like her huffing and puffing companions, to refill her lungs and get the blood circulating in her legs.

After a climb she had thought would never end, she neared the goal along with the other women, their male counterparts waiting at the top to cheer them on. Reaching that final lofty destination herself, Margaret stumbled from her bike and leaned panting against a tree. Head thrown back, she took long thirsty gulps from her water bottle then emptied the remainder on her head and face.

A jubilant Mark raced to her side. “Atta Girl!” he praised her, whipping off the bandana around his neck to swab the water and perspiration dripping from her chin.

“I did it!” she cried. “Oh Mark, I did it!”

“Come here, and I’ll show you the view you’ve earned for yourself,” Mark said, his eyes lit with pride. He drew her over to a stark limestone ridge standing sentinel above the arid plain streaked yellow with sunflowers. Standing behind, his arms encircling her waist, he pointed out a dot on the sweeping vista below where their ride had begun hours earlier.

Knowing she shouldn’t but wanting to anyway, Margaret willingly leaned into Mark’s embrace. “Looks like a Van Gogh painting, doesn’t it?” she said when she finally caught her breath.

“Yep. Bet he set his easel up on this very spot.” Mark’s arms tightened their grasp, drawing her close.

Powerless to resist, Margaret did not move away. In the sweet simplicity of the moment, there was no other place she wanted to be.

The following morning, the two met for breakfast early to get a jump on their final day of biking. Setting out well ahead of the others, they crossed and re-crossed the Rhone River, meandering past groves of olive trees and fields of artichokes and melons, soaking up the pastoral setting in slow motion as they tried to make the experience last.

“Hey, we need to start thinking about food for a *pique-nique*,” Mark called out.

In the next small village, they loaded their handlebar baskets with cheese and sausage from the local charcuterie, olives and bright red tomatoes freshly harvested from the fields they had just passed, and a crusty baguette from the *boulangerie*.

“Wait a minute,” Margaret hollered, jumping off her bicycle to run back inside the bakery. “No French picnic is complete without éclairs.”

Following their route maps over narrow tree-shaded lanes and quaint stone bridges for another hour, they rounded a bend in the road and stopped dead in their tracks.

“LOOKA-THA POPPIES!” they both yelled at once as a blazing sea of red stretched before them in every direction.

“This is it!” said Mark, getting off his bicycle.

“This is what?”

“Our picnic spot.”

He pushed his bicycle out through the flowering stalks with Margaret trailing close behind. Fashioning their windbreakers into a patchwork cloth to sit on, they settled beneath a large, leafy tree in the middle of the field.

“Stay where you are,” commanded Mark as he balanced a camera on his bicycle seat, set the timer, then threw himself down to be in the snapshot with her.

Greedily they dove into their cache of food like starving teenagers, neither speaking until they had dulled the ravenous edges of their appetites.

“Food has never tasted so good!” said Margaret finally, licking her fingers as she polished off the last of her éclair.

Mark gathered up the remnants and stored them in his bike basket. Sitting back down on their co-mingled jackets, he reached over and affectionately mussed her hair.

“You look like a Maggie,” he said grinning. “Has anyone ever called you that?”

“Nope,” she said, self-consciously raking her fingers through her helmet crushed hair. “Just good ole reliable Margaret, I’m afraid.”

“Well, Maggie suits you. It sounds spirited and young-at-heart...like you.” He reached out to break off a long-stemmed poppy, then bobbed it ritual-fashion above her head.

“I hereby dub you Maggie, Queen of the Poppy Field.”

“Okay, whatever you say,” Margaret laughed, happy that the moniker had nothing to do with the frazzled-looking Maggie in a Maggie and Jiggs comic strip. Contented, she lay back on the jacket-quilt and gazed up through the branches of the overhanging branches.

“Do you suppose the sky’s that incredible blue because it contrasts with the red of the poppies? I read once that if an artist isn’t satisfied with one color, he can get the effect he wants simply by changing the color next to it.”

Mark didn’t answer. He had stretched out full length beside her, his head propped on one elbow. “Margaret,” he said with a huskiness she had not heard in his voice before, “you are a truly beautiful person...inside out.”

She looked at him, wondering if some qualifying statement was about to follow--or one of his quips. Instead, Mark’s dark eyes

reflected the same tenderness she had seen that first day on the bus, and she knew he was speaking, not from humor, but from his heart.

Unwilling to look away and kill the moment as she had before, Margaret went still inside, daring not even to breathe lest the spell be broken. If this man could look past the road dust and disheveled hair and all that was superficial and still call her beautiful, he was esteeming the treasured core of her that mattered most. The part which had nothing to do with looks and everything to do with being. The part that time wouldn't diminish and others couldn't take away. Tears sprang to her eyes at the unexpected gift.

Silently, Mark continued to look at her ... an adoring look that kindled through her and deep into the very soul of her. Slowly, very slowly, he cradled her head in his hands and brushed away her tears with his thumbs.

Then with their eyes locked, their bodies aligned and breathing as one, Mark lowered his lips to hers, gently at first, then insistently as his need and passion awakened.

The moment was timeless. No sight or sound intruded. Only the magic of the kiss and their awareness of one another. And as their bodies were aligned, so were their minds, their vanquished fears, and the answers to those fears each had found in the other. With that kiss their relationship crossed the invisible boundary.

And then a sound did intrude. Mark groaned as they heard in the distance the boisterous hoorahs of their fellow cyclists. They jumped up and pushed their bicycles back to the road just as the raucous group rounded the bend, each hollering in turn,

LOOKA-THA ...

LOOKA-THA

LOOKA-THA POPPIES!

While Mark, looking at the woman beside him, whispered softly in her ear,

“I’ll see **you** later.”

And he did.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PROBLÉMES

On Saturday, the magical vacation ended at the Avignon train station where Mark and *Maggie* said their goodbyes to the cycling group, which flew off in all directions like a flushed covey of quail. Margaret had conflicting emotions about their own return trip to Paris.

On one hand she was sad that the train was whisking them too quickly away from this sunny land that had warmed their hearts and rekindled their spirits. On the other, she feared the four-hour journey was leaving them too much time to dwell on the strong currents, which had swept their relationship beyond the calm harbor of friendship into the emotionally charged waters where they now found themselves bobbing.

Yesterday's heady beginning in the poppy field had culminated in a celebratory night of love in which the two had lain in one another's arms until dawn. Their ardor, now released, would be as impossible to return to the recesses of their minds as the misted scent to its atomizer.

Alternately, their hands clasped in heated remembrance of the night, then separated again as reality washed over them anew. When words seemed inadequate, they rode for long stretches of time without speaking, watching the vista sweep past outside as they contemplated the unknown horizons ahead.

“The irony of it is,” said Mark, drumming his knee with a fist, “that after doubting all these years I could ever again be close to another woman, I’ve stumbled into a relationship that surpasses anything I could ever have hoped for--and the one with the most impossible odds against it.”

Margaret was just as miserable as Mark, with no more answers than he had. She closed her eyes and lay her head back against the seat, drawing comfort from Mark's strong hand on hers and the sighs that echoed her own.

He reached up and gently turned her head, his liquid brown eyes pouring their message into hers. “Hear me, Maggie,” he said, his voice husky and low, “I love you and I want you for my own. I want us to work together and play together ... and spend the rest of our lives together.”

“Mark, please don't. I can't bear to talk about this right now.”

“But we must talk, Maggie. We have to be able to communicate.”

“Maybe so ... but not now ... please.” She pressed her fingers hard against her temples. “There are just too many emotions to work through at once.”

When the train pulled into the Paris station, they agreed to take Sunday off from one another and meet on Monday to talk after they had both had a chance to sort things out.

The taxi dropped Margaret off first. As it pulled up in front of the hotel, Mark drew her close and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. “Monday's an eternity away,” he said. “I'm missing you already.”

“Me too,” she whispered.

Something about Pierre's rigid stance in the hotel entrance, and the way his black raisin eyes fastened on her as she approached, alerted Margaret to something amiss. Undoubtedly he had observed the farewell kiss in the taxi, but something told her that wasn't what she read in his body language.

"Good evening, Pierre," she said, slowing to speak, allowing the bellman to go ahead of her with her bag.

"And how was your holiday in Provence, Madame?"

"Wonderful, Pierre. I didn't want it to end."

He gave a discreet little cough. "Madame, your husband has been waiting in the lobby for you until just five minutes ago."

"Oh my," replied Margaret. "Did he say when he's coming back?"

"I believe he left a message for you at the desk."

"Oh my," Margaret repeated.

"Ah ... les affaires de coeur," Pierre said, shaking his head mournfully as he watched her walk inside.

The sealed envelope with Robert's handwriting felt hot in her hand as she carried it unopened to her room where she could read in private a message she knew was going to further complicate her life.

Stalling, she first returned a call from Kate, but when Gabriela's dramatic contralto answered at the other end, she hung up, deciding she would catch the early train on Monday and talk with her young friend then.

She tore open the envelope and read Robert's hastily written note.

*MARGARET, SORRY TO MISS YOU. WE NEED TO
TALK. KEEP NEXT WEEKEND OPEN FOR ME. I'LL
CALL SATURDAY FROM THE AIRPORT WHEN I
RETURN FROM LONDON. ROBERT*

Hands trembling, Margaret reread the note, trying to glean some meaning behind the terse words. In the straight-backed chair at her desk, she sat immobile, thoughts chasing about in her head until she felt it would explode.

Robert. Mark. Robert. Why was he here? Why now? She considered the possibilities. Her husband, after three months, might merely be checking her emotional pulse (which wasn't faring too well right now). He could be making a belated effort to get their marriage back on track (which she doubted). Or, in light of Shawn's strange resignation, there was the more likely possibility he wanted to discuss its dissolution.

The only thing Margaret was certain of was that she wouldn't know what Robert wanted until Robert himself was ready for her to know. There was no point in calling him to ask.

A soft look melted the tension on her face as she thought of Mark, the tender lover whose touch had taken her places last night she had never been before, the profound and unified spirit of their lovemaking an unknown experience in the hormonal rush of her youth.

She considered calling him. No. Sufficient unto the day was the "emotion" thereof. At last, giving in to mental and emotional exhaustion, Margaret drew closed the heavy draperies and crawled into bed to keep an uneasy peace with the darkness.

On Sunday, Margaret busied herself unpacking and sorting laundry and preparing for the new school term starting the next day. By evening, she finally reached the decision that had been forming in

her mind--a decision which, sadly, wouldn't set well with Mark because, for his own good, she would not be able to explain it.

The next morning she raced to the station to catch the early train. With her own emotional overload right now, she almost dreaded running into Kate and hearing about whatever problem might have befallen the young woman in her absence.

But Kate was in high spirits bordering on mania. "Margaret, you'll never believe what has happened while you were away." Immediately she launched into an animated account of being summoned to the Director's office and advised that her tuition for the final term was being waived by the school.

Margaret, in the confusion of her own life, had completely forgotten about the good tidings in Kate's.

"PLUS, they're finding me a place to live free until graduation and giving me a weekly allowance for expenses to boot. Isn't that wonderful news?"

"Terrific news, Kate. And you deserve every bit of it."

Mark was saving her a seat in the amphitheater. As she settled in beside him, his eyes eagerly searched hers for the answers he wanted to read. Margaret saw the strained lines on his face and knew that his nights had been as sleepless as hers. Nor, she thought with an unhappy twinge, would tonight's be any better after she told him what she had to say.

The minute they finished their assigned dishes in practical class that afternoon, they hurried to Mark's apartment where they could finally talk in private.

Kicking the door shut behind them, Mark gathered her into his arms where they stood embraced and clinging, neither willing to be the first to speak. With her cheek nuzzled into his throat, Margaret felt the

steady throbbing of his pulse and smelled his scrubbed essence, memorizing as she did, the comforting nearness of his body. Their union was undeniable. There was a oneness in spirit which no amount of reasoning would be able to diffuse.

Mark brought his lips close to hers then and with all her being Margaret wanted to yield to that kiss, to melt into his body and postpone forever what she knew they must face. But the cautious, careful part of her held back. Gently, she pulled away and sat down at the small game table where the Scrabble board was still in place from their last game.

“Mark, there's more,” she said, barely able to look him in the eyes and see the hurt she knew would follow. As she told him about Robert's unexpected visit to the hotel over the weekend and his plan to return on the following one, Mark's bright, happy eyes clouded over just as she had known they would. What she didn't expect, however, was the explosion of disbelief from him when she finally had to insist that, YES, she WOULD see her husband this weekend.

“It's something I have to do, Mark.”

“The very least he could have done, Margaret, was let you know what to expect. In fact, why don't you call him and insist on some explanation?”

“Oh, Mark, don't you see, it's always been this way. It does no good to press Robert. All I've ever been able to do was wait for a scenario to play itself out at his pace. The man simply will not communicate.”

“Well, you don't do such a hot job of it yourself, Margaret! You two must work hand in glove on this thing. You've been so afraid all these years that he would find you human that you've gone to great lengths to hide your feelings and bury your dreams. All in the name of being the 'perfect wife'. And look what it's gotten you.”

“That's not fair, Mark,” she protested, a knot forming in her stomach. His accusation had an unsettling ring of truth about it.

“The truth is, Margaret, the man doesn't treat you right and you will not acknowledge that fact. How can you consider staying with someone who leaves you emotionally starved and dangling like a puppet for months on end ... ?”

“THAT'S ENOUGH, MARK!” Her lips pressed thin, Margaret jumped to her feet and raced for the door. “I'm afraid we can't talk about this anymore,” she said, turning back to face him. “In fact, it will be best if we don't even see each other alone again.”

The anger on Mark's face suddenly wilted into sorrow and remorse. Clearly he regretted his harsh analysis. Stunned and disbelieving at the turn of events, he opened his mouth to speak then closed it, shaking his head.

Margaret saw in his pleading eyes the deep, caring love he felt for her--and a look of dejection that threatened to break her resolve. She hurried away before she could change her mind.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TETE-A-TETE

The following Saturday, Margaret waited in the hotel lobby for Robert to drive in from Charles de Gaulle airport. Trying not to indulge in useless speculation about the confrontation ahead, she idly gazed about the lovely receiving area which she never used for more than an extravagant pass-through.

A long gallery-shaped room, it was divided into grouped seating areas with Oriental carpets whose rich colors reflected off the polished parquet beneath. An opulent crystal chandelier hung suspended in the middle above a marble-topped table supporting a porcelain fishbowl with a lavish arrangement of fresh flowers.

The only other person in the room was a young woman sitting at a desk in the corner addressing postcards.

Margaret heard Robert's voice even before she saw him. He was greeting Pierre at the reception desk, his pleasant bonhomie reverberating throughout the lobby as he discussed the hotel's extensive refurbishing since he had last been here. "Capital improvements like these are good for business," she heard him saying. Robert's mantra: Good for Business.

Then he stepped through the arched doorway, and she saw her husband for the first time since that dreadful night in March. Remaining seated where she was at the far end of the lobby, she

watched as he strode the length of it, brandishing the look of power and authority bequeathed him by his corporate position.

She had forgotten how Robert always seemed to fill up a space. Aside from the fact he was a tall and powerfully-built man who carried himself proudly erect, there was a presence about him that transcended mere physicality, a charisma that compelled others to take notice whether he was presiding in the boardroom or walking down a city street.

Especially women. Women watched him, like the woman at the desk was watching him now with that hungry “how-do-you-get-a-man-like-that?” look in their eyes.

Blessed with strong, chiseled features and sand-colored hair that only now was beginning to fade, Robert remained ageless in appearance. How many times through the years had she wished him a potbelly or receding hairline or some visible sign that he had started out life the same year as she.

Conscious of the woman's curious eyes, Margaret stood up as Robert approached and tentatively stuck out her hand. Ignoring it, he swept her into the signature bear hug he reserved for old friends, then held her away from him as he pivoted her slowly (*like a puppet?*) to assess the changes.

“You look great, Margaret. Paris certainly agrees with you.”

She knew what his glacial green eyes were taking in. Her hair, freed of its lacquered coif and streaked by the Provencal sun, now framed her patrician face in soft becoming waves; her body, toned and tan from the days of cycling, was smartly presented in a tailored white suit.

Satisfied with his inspection, Robert clapped his hands and announced, “Now, I want you to run upstairs and grab an overnight

bag. I'm going to whisk you away to a place in the country where we can talk."

"Why can't we talk here, Robert? I have classes Monday."

"Because," he said, rubbing his hands in simulated glee--an affectation Margaret knew was a cover for his own nervousness, "I've selected a special spot where roses are in full bloom, the kir royales chilled to perfection, and the cuisine the best in all France."

She stood unsmiling and unmoved.

"Remember that chateau where the DuPont group entertained us a couple of years ago? I've reserved a suite there for the night ... and I promise to have you back here early tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

His expression quickly turned solemn. With a discreet nod toward the curious woman in the corner, he lowered his voice and went on, "What I want to discuss, Margaret, can't be said in a rush ... or in public."

"That's fine," she responded coolly. "I have some things I want to say to you, too."

She packed a bag, and they were headed southwest out of Paris a short time later. The two-hour drive wasn't strained so much as it was silent, both of them, or Margaret anyway, busy with the words they would say later on.

Margaret dreaded the talk. She still smarted from that last one in Dallas when he had walked out of the room without letting her have her say. Any face-off with Robert was a lose-lose situation as far as she was concerned. If he didn't slam the door on an unfinished discussion, he would either bombard her with questions and pronouncements to confuse her, or walk on her words with his big voice.

If only she could argue by correspondence--he talk; she write.

Robert turned his head, his eyes traveling the length of her white suit before coming to rest at its short hemline. "Wilma tells me you've been in the south of France. Is that where you got so tan?"

"Yes. I was on a bicycle tour."

"Bicycle!" A look of distaste crossed his face, one eyebrow raised in a skeptical arch. "Somehow I can't see you doing that, Margaret."

Meaning it wasn't good for her image. "No, you wouldn't," she said, then added brightly, "On the contrary, I rather enjoyed the simple delight of being on a bicycle again. It was a refreshing way to experience the countryside up close."

"Well," he laughed thinly as he stroked the padded leather steering wheel, "experiencing it from the inside of a Mercedes is close enough for me." Pressing his foot to the accelerator, he deftly passed a pickup truck sagging under the weight of produce the farmer was carrying to market.

"I've arranged for a suite overlooking the formal gardens on the east side. I know how you enjoy that view," Robert said when they eventually turned up the long graveled drive, double-lined with plane trees on both sides, to an imposing chateau at the end.

The suite indeed offered a breathtaking view not only of the gardens but of the vast green panorama beyond. A high-ceilinged sitting room separating the bedrooms at either end was dressed to impress in plush velvets and silk brocades, showcasing an Aubusson tapestry on one wall, opening onto a private terrace on the other. But the magnificent setting which otherwise would have delighted Margaret made cruel mockery of the estranged couple within.

Robert cut into her darkening mood with a show of cheerfulness. "What I propose is that we freshen up and meet on the terrace for our talk. Then later on, we'll go down and find out if the chef's *Magrets de Canard aux Poires* are as delectable as the last time."

Margaret went to her room to freshen up. As she splashed cool water on her drawn face, she practiced her speech in the mirror, mumbling over and over: *Simpler richer more fulfilling ... simpler richer more fulfilling.*

When she stepped out on the terrace a short time later, Robert was already seated at a small wrought iron table, his shirt open at the collar and a carafe of red wine with two glasses set out before him. He brightened when he saw her and quickly stood up to hold her chair.

"There's something different about you, Margaret, but for the life of me, I can't figure out what it is." Sitting back down, he continued to stare at her with open admiration.

Margaret squirmed. For an uncomfortable moment she wondered if the blissful night she had spent with Mark still shone on her face. She certainly didn't want him mixed in with whatever Robert had come to say. But no, she decided after studying his face. It was the packaging. How she looked and what she wore had always been important to Robert; after all she was a reflection on him.

Taking care not to be the one to initiate their discussion, she pulled the scented country air deep into her nostrils and sat back to admire the gardeners' handiwork of precision-clipped hedges and rosebushes in a profusion of showy colors. Above, a noisy family of swifts darted and swooped in the deepening shadows of the turrets. She sighed. To all outward appearances they were the golden couple, enthroned in this bucolic setting with the world at their feet.

Robert placed his hand on hers. "Margaret, I have to tell you first of all that you are a wise woman."

Wise Woman! She had finally made it. Warily, she waited for Robert to continue.

“It was smart of you to go away and let me figure out some things for myself.”

Margaret eased her hand from beneath his. If her husband had spoken these words even a month ago--before she had started figuring things out for herself, she would be jumping into his arms this very minute from sheer relief and joy.

“When are you coming back?” he asked. “Things are starting to fall apart at home without you.”

Margaret straightened in her chair so hard the metal legs screeched their protest on the obdurate terrazzo. “That's IT? THINGS ARE FALLING APART? NOT I miss you, I love you and OH YES BY THE WAY, I'm sorry I left you for another woman?”

“For the record, Margaret, you're the one who left.”

“SHAWN, Robert! I want to know about SHAWN.”

He was silent a second before answering. “It's over.”

“Over?” Margaret watched her husband's face closely. If he looked away from her when he answered, he wasn't telling the truth. Forty years of marriage to the man had taught her that much.

“Yes,” Robert said with a sigh as he turned his head and looked out on the vista below. “I'm going to break it off as soon as I get back.”

“But you HAVEN'T!”

“I WILL!”

“Then don't do it on my account because I'm not coming back, at least not to our old life.” Inwardly, Margaret flinched. She hadn't meant to say this yet, knowing it would trigger Robert's defense mechanism: that is, the best defense is a strong offense.

“What's wrong with our life?”

Too late! She had no choice but to jump into the fray. “There's no life to our life, Robert, outside your work. I'm sick to death with all the going and doing for the sake of business. I want a richer ...”

“How rich do you want to be, for God's sake?”

“Let me finish...I want a richer, more fulfilling life ... a-a simpler life...” She had it all wrong. Simpler was supposed to be first.

Robert slapped an open palm upside his temple. “I thought we were talking about Shawn.”

“We were ... we are. I mean it all started with her...but she was merely a symptom of our problems, Robert, not the cause. The Shawns of this world are nothing more than predators preying on ailing relationships because they aren't capable of developing stable ones of their own. I can deal with them. In fact, I have! But the mistress I cannot hold a candle to is your work.”

“Gosh-o-mighty, now my work! It's my WORK, Margaret, that bought the house in Dallas. It's my WORK that put that expensive suit on your back and pays for your fancy cooking lessons at the Core-Don Blue...”

Margaret banged her fist down on the table. “Those are **things**, Robert, things I could easily do without. They are not what I'm talking about ...”

“Well, would you please tell me what you ARE talking about?”

“I - I was trying to say that I have danced attendance around you and your career for forty years, and you have never once asked me what **I** want. What’s even sadder, I never asked myself until I came over here and started thinking ...”

“All right. Exactly what **DO** you want?”

Margaret's mouth, still open, snapped shut. Her rehearsed argument died where it crouched, ready to spring to her defense. For what the wife wanted more than anything else was the kind of relationship that her husband wouldn't understand and she could not explain.

Just watching him sitting there with his jaw clenched, his nostrils flared, and those glaring green eyes daring her to convince, Margaret realized that she could not name the simple things which were as indispensable to her idea of a good relationship as beautiful sunsets were to the soul.

No, but there was a small tangible something she might be able to explain. If she could find the right words.

“Robert, I know I've never mentioned this before, but I have often dreamed of owning my own tearoom, and since I've been here in France, the idea has grown to the point that I want to go back and open one ...”

“A tearoom!” Robert exploded, the expression on his face more wounded than had she announced she was opening a bordello. “If you are going to start dreaming impossible dreams at this stage in your life, Margaret, you could at least set your sights a little higher.”

“And given my age and experience, Robert, just what would that be? The point is, a tearoom happens to be what I **WANT**.”

“For your information, Margaret, statistics show that tearooms rank right up there with baby stores and dress boutiques in business mortality rates.”

“Robert, how can you duck back into your world of profits and percentages when I'm trying to tell you about something important to me for a change?”

“A tearoom is out of the question, Margaret.” Then invoking one of Robert's Rules, he arbitrarily dismissed the subject he refused to discuss further by picking up the telephone and calling the dining room.

In his most resonant CEO voice he said, “Madame Ainsley and I will be seated for dinner now.”

In the sudden stark silence, the unhappy couple sat glowering at one another, seething with impotent rage that sent them limping once again from the uneven playing fields of social intercourse. For as had ever been the pattern of their pathetic attempts to communicate, the one who could, wouldn't; while the one who would, couldn't.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

AU REVOIR

The Ainsleys, now more hopelessly estranged than ever, drove away from the chateau Sunday after brunch and headed back to Paris, discovering along the way that their return trip would take much longer than yesterday's breezy jaunt into the countryside. Not only was the highway clogged with Parisians streaming back into the city from their weekend country homes, the two strained passengers had nothing left to say.

Robert fiddled with the radio dial, searching for a station playing unsentimental music, while Margaret silently rehearsed the apology she would make to Mark when she called to explain why she had had to handle things the way she had with him.

Mentally, she retraced the unhappy events of the past week, the distant way she and Mark had acted toward one another after the scene in his apartment. Mark had been stiffly polite thereafter, nodding when their eyes met from opposite sides of the amphitheater, ignoring her altogether in practical class.

She was still haunted by the anguished look on his face when she had told him they shouldn't see each other again. If only she'd been able to qualify the harsh words: We can't see each other again UNTIL ...

But she could not do that, not without telling him what she planned to say to Robert and running the risk of embroiling him, by guilt or association, in a domestic issue she had to resolve alone. She wished again, as she had every day since, that she had been able at least to tell him how dear he was to her, to express the same love for him that he had had the courage to express to her.

Silently she cursed the stop-and-go, bumper-to-bumper traffic that held her captive in this car with someone who felt as caged as she. I'll call Mark the second I get in, she thought. In fact, she had said as much on Friday when they happened to walk out of class at the same time. "I'll call you Sunday," she had said, "and let you know how my meeting with Robert turns out."

But Mark, a far-away look in his eyes, had merely shrugged.

Mark is a compassionate person, she assured herself now. He'll understand it all when I explain.

Robert flipped off the radio. "I'm gonna miss that darned flight the rate we're going." His fingers drummed an impatient tap dance on the wheel. Matter-of-factly, he went on, "By the way, I don't know whether I've told you or not, but it looks like we're getting close to a done-deal with the Chinese."

"That's good."

"I thought we had it locked up when I was in Beijing, but when I got back, they sent another negotiating team to look things over again. They've been throwing up roadblocks ever since, like they owned the place."

Margaret, watching her husband's face as he spoke, saw the muscles stretch taut into an expression she knew very well when he was wanting something.

“It all hinges, now, on a visit by Mr. Kwan, the head man out of Beijing. He's coming to Dallas in early September and bringing his wife.” Almost as an afterthought, he added, “I don't suppose I could talk you into putting together one of your nice dinner parties while they're there, could I? The Chinese are very family oriented people, you know ...”

“ ... and you want to show them you're family oriented too?”

Immediately Margaret was ashamed of the hateful remark. “I'm sorry,
Robert. That was uncalled for.

“No,” she continued thoughtfully, “I'll be finishing up and taking exams here about the time I would need to be making preparations for your dinner party. I'm afraid I can't help you.”

They reached the central part of Paris, and Robert turned off the main thoroughfare to maneuver less crowded streets to the hotel. Before she lost the opportunity, Margaret voiced aloud the nosy little question that had poked itself into her head during the discussion of family-oriented Chinese. “Robert, why did Shawn resign? Did the Chinese not like her?”

“Something like that.”

She would have pursued the subject further, but the sharp glance Robert shot her stopped Margaret from asking further questions. She would just have to live with the missing pieces of the puzzle until he decided to fill her in.

Pierre was standing just inside the hotel lobby when they walked in. He watched the couple approach, his dark eyes traveling from one sad face to the other. When it became apparent to him that one Ainsley was staying and the other going, they turned moist and

mournful as he said his goodbyes to Robert, then discreetly excused himself to allow the couple a private farewell.

But Pierre and all the guests in the hotel could as easily have remained. There were no conjugal murmurings in this suddenly quiet corner of the room. The couple, painfully aware of their impasse was at a loss for words.

Robert put his arms about Margaret, not with yesterday's generic hug, but in a heartfelt embrace--holding her tight as though he hated to let her go. But then he did. Kissing her lightly on both cheeks, he turned and walked away.

And Margaret, Wise Woman that he had proclaimed her to be, knew that it was not just this hotel her husband was walking out of. He was walking out of her life.

For someone supposedly past her prime for emotional upheaval, she was overwhelmed with too many feelings all at once. Fleeing to the sanctuary of her room to sort through them, she found that the emotional overload had rendered her numb and hollow inside, unable to think or reason. She fell across her bed and sought the oblivion of sleep.

Awakening several hours later, she reached for the telephone to call Mark, the man who loved her, who would listen to her and help her sort things out. Allowing the phone to ring several times, she redialed and waited through a second series of empty-sounding rings. Neither man nor machine answered.

To contain her mounting anxiety, she snatched up her pocketbook and fled to a small sidewalk cafe around the corner from the hotel. There at a small table, with its umbrella folded in the dusk of the evening, she absently stirred the onion soup the waiter set before her hoping that the warmth and nourishment would right her upside-down world. But eating proved as impossible as rational

thinking. She paid the check and hurried back to her room to try calling Mark again.

With no better results on the telephone and too anxious to do anything else, she got back in bed and fitfully tossed the night away.

The following morning, Margaret caught the early train to school, but if Kate was aboard, she couldn't spot her red hair in the crush of commuters. At school, she planted herself in front of the building and watched with longing eyes the direction from which Mark would come.

After a long and futile wait, she gave up and went inside to save him a seat in the amphitheater. Each time someone walked in, she turned expecting it to be Mark. But he never walked in. The chef's assistant closed the door, and demonstration class began.

By mid-morning, Margaret's imagination had taken off in full gallop. He's ill. No, he's pouting. But she knew Mark better than that. He had probably just decided the "flame wasn't worth the candle," an odd expression he often used when something didn't seem worth the effort.

She sat upright in her seat. That was it! He simply decided the emotional risk he faced wasn't worth the uncertainty of their relationship. He was probably waiting a day or so for the dust to settle then coming back to face her on a different basis.

Margaret jumped up and stumbled over three sets of feet to get out of the classroom. She raced from school and hurried the two blocks to Mark's apartment. *Oh, Mark, the flame IS worth the candle*, she kept saying over and over as she ran. *But it's such a tiny flicker it needs time to grow*. She would say that. She would say that and, oh, so much more--now that she no longer had to guard her feelings or her words.

But when Margaret cut through the small park across from the Apartment, she saw Mark's weekend *Tribune* still lying on the front stoop. She slowed to a walk as her mind tried to process the unwelcome new information. Just as she started up the front walk, the door opened and Kate Stone stepped out to toss an empty box on the porch. Margaret stood rooted on the sidewalk, not believing her eyes.

"Oh Margaret!" cried the young woman, flying off the porch to embrace her friend. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Staring over the girl's shoulder into the open doorway of Mark's apartment, Margaret saw the boxes and clothes stacked inside. Weakly, she said, "I'm afraid I don't understand." But with a sinking feeling, she understood all too well.

"Madame Dessange can explain it better than I can," Kate was burbling, "but apparently Mark knew she was looking for a place for me to live, and when he learned he had to go back to the States, he talked the apartment's owner into allowing me to stay here until I graduate.

"With the stipulation," she continued, beaming, "that you can continue your practice cooking here whenever you like. Isn't it all just too good to be true!"

It was indeed all too true, Margaret learned when she rushed back to the school and headed directly to Emily Dessange's office.

The Director repeated Kate's words but from a different perspective. "It's truly remarkable what you and Mark have done for Kate, Margaret. First of all, it was kind of you to bring her problem to the school's attention--and to provide an allowance for her. And it was generous of Mark to arrange for her free use of the apartment."

"But did he say why he had to go home?"

Emily hesitated a moment. “No ...” she finally replied. “He just said he was needed back in the States. We were happy to refund his tuition on a prorated basis. That was the least we could do after his generosity on Kate’s behalf.”

“Oh, Emily, I’m simply devastated.” Margaret threw her hands over her face and sobbed through them, “I love that man, and I never even got to tell him so.”

“There, there,” Emily soothed, handing a tissue across the desk. Her deep-set eyes were sympathetic as she listened to Margaret pour out the story, first, of the marital separation that had sent her into the arms of another man, of her husband’s weekend visit and her own botched effort to keep Mark from becoming involved.

When the tears finally subsided, Emily went around the desk to put her arm about Margaret’s shoulders. “Things will work out, Margaret. In affairs of the heart, one must be patient. I feel sure you will hear from Mark in due course.”

It was then that Margaret remembered that in the confusion of the previous evening, she had not picked up her messages at the hotel upon her return from the country. It was all she could do to make it through practical class that afternoon. The instant Chef DuBois gave his nod of approval for her *Noisettes d’Agneau au Thym*, she bolted for the door.

“But no, Madame Ainsley...” the young desk clerk at the hotel replied, “those two messages I gave you are the only ones you have.”

Disappointed, Margaret turned and, ignoring the elevator, started up the steps with the two messages the clerk had handed her: a letter from Paul and a telephone message from Jane. There was no word from Mark. As she climbed the steps a wave of strong feelings engulfed her in quick succession:

First came disbelief: *He actually left without saying goodbye.*

Then hurt: *What did I do to him to deserve such anguish?*
And, finally, anger: *He ran away when the going got tough!*
The incredible sadness would come later.

That evening, as Margaret picked indifferently at her lamb dish from class, she decided that, at a minimum, she should give Mark a chance to explain. After telling first the hotel operator and then an international one that, no, she did not have the number in Maine, she finally learned from the operator in Bear Harbor that, yes, there was a listing for a Dr. Whitman, but that telephone had been disconnected some three months earlier.

The ball was in Mark's court. She would not try again to reach him. Before retiring that night, Margaret sifted through the pictures of their bicycle vacation, allowing herself one more nostalgic peek at a chapter in her life she was turning the page on:

A shot of Mark on his bicycle, the aqueduct behind—
“Okay, let's go for it!”
With an ice cream cone in Uzes—“I wanna show my girl
this town.”

And finally the photo she stared at the longest while memories rustled in the air like dry leaves--The two of them sitting in the poppy field, their faces transformed with happiness.

But Margaret drew no consolation from the glossy proof that their happiness had not been a figment of her imagination. The simple truth of the matter was, Mark was gone.

Carefully, she rewrapped the pictures and placed them gently on the closet shelf. If only it would be as easy to store away the memories.

“This isn't a dress rehearsal, Margaret,” she heard his voice say. “It's life ... the real thing ... the only performance you'll ever give.”

“Yes Mark,” she whispered into the stillness of the room, “and the show must go on.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DÉCISIONS, DÉCISIONS

The sultry heat, so long in coming to Paris after the extended cool of spring, bore down on the city with a vengeance the first Sunday in July, slipping stealthily through the drawn draperies and awakening Margaret with a dull headache.

She seized on the nagging malady as an excuse to indulge herself with room-service. Just as quickly she decided she could ill afford a morning of isolation at a time when she was feeling so cut off from the world.

Not only had she not heard from Robert since last weekend's stalemate, she fiercely missed the friend who had become such a comfortable fixture in her Paris life. She and Mark had explored so much of the city together that his presence was everywhere.

Having already made plans to spend the afternoon in Mark's (no, Kate's!) kitchen practicing her *Paves de Rumsteak au Poivre Vert*, Margaret realized she had to get out of her comfortable cocoon sooner than that and think about something besides the unraveling seams of her life.

As she adjusted the showerhead and stepped beneath its prickly spray, she thought of Wilma, wondering why she had not heard from her as she generally did on Sundays. What with the bicycle trip,

then Robert's visit, it had been two weeks since the two women had last spoken.

I'll call her this evening, she decided, and I will not, will not, pump her for information.

To vary her habits somewhat the past week, Margaret had started dropping in for breakfast each morning at a small brasserie on *rue Royale*. The young man behind the counter greeted her warmly as she walked in with the *Tribune* tucked beneath her arm.

"Ah, Madame. Always you breeeng with you the sunshine!"

"No, Jacques, this is where I come for my sunshine!" she flirted back. After three months in Paris, Margaret had discovered for herself the intrinsic value of this national pastime.

Left to herself in the leather-cushioned booth then to eat while leisurely reading her newspaper, she was cheered by the hum of voices in the background, glancing up occasionally as concierges from nearby hotels stopped in for an exchange of industry gossip on their coffee breaks. A cocksure group, each wore the crossed keys on his jacket lapel with understandable pride, symbolizing as the badge did the many years it took to earn one.

Margaret had planned afterwards to window shop the fashionable dress shops along *rue du Fauborg St. Honoré* until time to go out to Kate's, but clothes had lost the appeal they once held for her when she could spend an entire day shopping for accessories for a dress.

Out on the street in the heat once more, she decided a visit to the cool interior of the Musée de Orsay would be a better choice. Now was as good a time as any to challenge her reluctance to go places that held memories of Mark. Perhaps it might even toughen her up for the emotional hurdle of cooking in his apartment later on that afternoon.

Setting off on foot to cross *Pont de la Concord* over the Seine, she glanced down the *avenue des Champs-Élysées* and noticed the scaffolding in place for viewing stands for the Bastille Day parade two weeks hence. In considering the celebration, complete with a spectacular fireworks display, she quickly vetoed the idea of coming to watch. It would be easier to remain alone in her room that evening than mix with a festive crowd of strangers.

Before she was tempted to dwell on what might or might not have been had Mark still been here, she mentally shifted gears. Next Wednesday would be Independence Day in the States when things would shut down for all the hoopla and fireworks; while here in Paris, life would go on as usual, classes at school included.

Thoughts of the American holiday reminded Margaret of the party Emily Dessange and her husband were hosting on the Fourth for their expatriate friends in Paris.

“After all, Margaret,” Emily had said when she called her aside at school to extend the invitation, “you simply must have some fun in your life, or you'll turn into a regular drudge.”

Margaret had not needed coaxing. She looked forward to a social outing in what promised to be an otherwise monotonous last half of summer.

She approached the entrance of the Musée d'Orsay which had seen as much change in its long life as she had in hers. Its metamorphosis from palace to hotel to railway station to theatrical center was complete now in its refined role as a museum for nineteenth century art, thus bridging the gap between the old of the Louvre and the contemporary of the Georges Pompidou Centre.

Depending on her mood on any given day, the massive building could affect Margaret in one of two ways. Looking up through the soaring glass-and-iron roof, she could feel as big as life and capable of reaching the stars; while on another day, like today, the mass

of granite and marble and steel rendered her vulnerable and insignificant and sad.

She hurried past the central sculpture gallery on ground level, bounded by oversized paintings, allegorical and dark, to catch the escalator to the top floor where the Impressionist wing was flooded with light--and tourists! She hadn't counted on the crowd which made impossible a smooth flow from Renoir to Seurat to Manet as had been the case when she and Mark had come earlier in the season.

Today, with all the stop and go traffic, she sometimes gave up on a painting altogether, moving on to one without so many viewers. But always, the familiar little refrain she and Mark had enjoyed together kept running through her head: Looks like a Monet ... looks like a Van Gogh.

Giving up finally, she walked to the closest Metro stop to wait for a train out to Kate's. Once aboard, she found herself seated behind a young couple amorously engaged and difficult to ignore. In the middle of a long and passionate kiss, their lips and faces were sandwiched from view between their two dark heads of hair.

Unable to see beyond them, Margaret rummaged in her handbag for something to read and brought out the museum floor plan. But even as she trained her eyes on the diagram of exhibitions, she could still hear the rapturous smacking and murmuring from the seat ahead, made worse by the girl's thick hair hanging over the seat practically in her lap. She was about to move when the train slowed for the next stop, and the pair stood up to get off.

Why, I know him, thought Margaret with surprise. It was Estafel, Kate's fellow student in the Superior Course who, until she started gaining on him in the race for number one graduate designee, had been the rumored shoe-in for the spot at next month's graduation.

Margaret watched the cocky young man as he swayed on the train's leather hand strap. He was so handsome as to be beautiful with

flashing black eyes, even white teeth, and wavy dark hair that tumbled down the back of his neck. At school Margaret had seen the adoring female faces he left in his wake.

Curious, her eyes fell on the vaguely familiar, rather plain looking girl who trailed him like an eager puppy from the train. What a mismatch, she thought. The amusing idea occurred to her that perhaps men of Estafel's nationality had the same affinity for fleshy women that Frenchmen professed for older ones.

When Margaret reached the small park across from Mark's apartment, the enormity of the emotional battle ahead fully dawned on her. She barely remembered to speak when Kate opened the front door, so overwhelming was the impact of finding the small living room inside unchanged yet so vacant and cold without Mark's presence to bring it to life.

She followed Kate past the empty game table and the bookcase above with the dictionary still open on the shelf; past the dining table where they had palate-tested their food, back to the long galley kitchen where they had spent so many happy hours preparing it.

"I'm sorry, Margaret," said Kate, looking as though she herself might cry. "I know how much you must miss him. You were such good friends and all. A pity, really, I thought the two of you were rather right together."

Touched at the girl's compassionate nature, Margaret responded, "There's an old saying, Kate: When one door closes, another one opens. In this case, I'm just coming back through the same door to a different friend, that's all."

That's all! she thought as the pain of nostalgia threatened to eat a hole in her heart.

Later, as she and Kate worked on their respective cooking projects at the familiar kitchen counter, the pensive young woman cleared her throat and said, “You know, Margaret, I used to watch you and Mark together and tell myself that if a man ever looked at me the way he looked at you—those adoring brown eyes following your every move—I would know for sure I'd found the right one.

“It will happen, Kate. But you've been so busy up to this point scratching out a niche for yourself in the culinary world that you haven't been ready for it to happen. My guess is that no sooner than you get yourself established in your career, Mr. Right will come along.”

“I hope so,” Kate sighed.

Margaret remembered to tell her then about the unlikely pair of love-birds she had seen on the subway.

“Hah!” hooted Kate, giving her puff pastry dough a brisk turn before setting it back in the fridge to chill, “he has a regular harem, that one. But I will say this much for Estafel: He knows his way around a kitchen every bit as well as he does a boudoir. I don't sell him short. I do not!” she repeated for emphasis.

Margaret didn't mention the speculation she had been hearing among students at school on Kate's growing chances of overtaking Estafel in the competition for number one graduate. Given his natural flair for gastronomy, no one had thought it possible only a few weeks ago, but now there were those who not only believed Kate could pull it off, they openly rooted for the plucky young Englishwoman whose hard work and determination had brought her to the forefront of the debate.

Margaret drew in a healing breath of the spicy aroma being released by green peppercorns she was crushing on the counter beneath a heavy skillet. “Do you think it's true,” she asked, “that the reason there are still more male chefs than female is because of the physical labor involved?”

Kate was removing the lid to a large pan simmering on the stove. Eyes squinted and redhead reared back to escape the steam, she stirred the pot's contents as she replied, "That probably was a valid argument back when kitchens still used those heavy copper cauldrons that women could barely lift. But now with lighter cookware and modern appliances that make the job less strenuous, I personally don't buy it."

She paused long enough to bring the long spoon to her lips to test the broth for seasoning. "Then there's that other argument that women continually have to disprove in every field ... the old PMS poppycock. It's said that we are not emotionally equipped for the stress of a kitchen brigade where a hard-nosed head chef barks out orders and chastises his underlings when they make mistakes.

"Although, I'm sure ... " she continued, frowning as she played the devil's advocate, "there are women who simply can't handle the pressure. But it's a business after all, and as one of your own presidents said, if they can't take the heat, they should get out of the kitchen. Personally I think I'll be able to handle it."

Margaret laughed. "Oh, no doubt about that, Kate! I'm convinced you can handle anything you set your mind to."

Having proven that she herself was capable of handling the emotional transition from cooking in Mark's apartment to cooking at Kate's, Margaret returned to the hotel that evening satisfied with the long day and feeling good about her ability to adapt. Nonetheless, the feeling did not keep her from checking for some message from Mark each time she came in--just as she had once checked for one from Robert.

It was after eleven o'clock and her lights out when Margaret remembered her intention to call Wilma. She turned the light back on and checked the clock--three p.m. in Dallas. Pulling the telephone onto the bed, she dialed.

“Wilma,” she said when the call went through, “I’ve missed hearing your cheery voice.”

“Oh, Mrs. Ainsley. I’m so glad you called. You’ve been on my mind all this past week, but under the circumstances I was afraid to call. Are you okay?”

“Well ... yes. Is there some reason I shouldn’t be?”

Wilma hesitated. “Mr. Ainsley WAS in Paris last weekend, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. But it was an unsatisfactory visit in that nothing has really changed.

There was a brief silence on the phone.

“If you know something, Wilma, please tell me.” Margaret was pleading. She had completely forgotten her vow not to pump the secretary for information.

Wilma finally spoke, “Well, since the papers were still unsigned and still here, I thought perhaps...”

“What papers, Wilma?”

“The...the ones his attorney drew up...the divorce papers,” Wilma whispered.

The ugly D word--the big shoe Margaret had half expected to drop since the day she arrived in Paris.

Wilma was still talking. “They were in Mr. Ainsley’s desk drawer even before the Chinese delegation came, then they sat in there all that next week before he left for London. I figured he was planning to take them along with him. But he would put them in his briefcase, take ‘em out, put ‘em in, take ‘em out. That’s why I didn’t call you.

When he ended up leaving them here, I thought maybe things were going to work out for you two after all.”

Margaret hadn’t taken a breath the whole time Wilma was talking. All she could manage was a weak, “Hmmm...”

“Then when he got back, and Shawn started calling again, I figured things hadn’t gone so well after all.”

When Wilma stopped talking long enough to realize Margaret hadn't spoken, she guiltily misread the silence. “Oh, Mrs. Ainsley, I shouldn't have told you all this. That's really why I didn't call; I was afraid I might spill the beans like this ...”

By now, Margaret wasn't listening so much as she was adding things up. Now she understood Robert's dilemma. With his career on the line with the all-important Pacific Rim Project, he had been willing to fire Shawn whose dual role as his mistress and the person in charge of the project hadn't set well with the "family-oriented" Chinese. He would temporarily scrap the affair and return to his wife just so he could add another star in the crown of his career.

The incontrovertible fact: Robert WAS his career. The two were inseparable, and she had never had any more chance separating them than Shawn would have someday when she began to chafe in the number two spot in his affections.

Instead of feeling sad or diminished by the sudden insight, Margaret was overcome with a peculiar sense of peace; for in recognizing Robert's right to be who he was, she could now claim for herself that same right. They no longer had to turn themselves upside-down, inside out trying to be what the other wanted or expected. Instead of continuing her parasitic role nibbling around the edges of her husband's dreams, Margaret would now follow her own.

In soothing tones, she addressed the distraught little secretary. "Wilma, you have done me a tremendous favor, telling me what you did, although I know you did so at great cost to your professional pride. But I'm more grateful to you than you will ever know.

"Now, there are two more things I want you to do for me," she continued. "First of all, don't ever let Mr. Ainsley know that you told me about the papers in his desk."

"Oh, no ma'am, never!" An audible sigh of relief gushed through the telephone.

"The other thing, Wilma, and this is very important: Tomorrow at one o'clock Dallas time, I'll be sending Mr. Ainsley a letter, and I want you standing near the FAX machine ready to seal it in an envelope for him when it comes in. Will you do that for me?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Ainsley ... and anything else you want," Wilma responded.

"Well, as a matter of fact, there is something else," Margaret said lightly in an attempt to further assuage the secretary's conscience. "You can stop calling me Mrs. Ainsley and start scouting out a location for my new tearoom!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

PLUS, PLUS LETTRES

*Monday, July 3
(1 p.m. Dallas time)*

Dear Robert:

It's taken me a while, but I have finally come to understand the dilemma you must have faced these past months in trying to do what you probably consider to be the "right" thing--that is, staying in a marriage we have both outgrown--as opposed to doing what your heart was urging you to do.

This letter brings with it my blessings for you to listen to your heart--to feel free to build a new life for yourself with Shawn.

It would be as painfully impossible for you and me to put our own house in order now as it would be to force last year's shoes on a child's feet. We would be hobbled in any effort to walk together again.

Nor does there have to be any bete noir here. Long before Shawn entered the picture, you and I had already begun to grow in different directions, leading me to agree with something she said the day the two of us had lunch in Dallas: People change; their needs change.

With your guidance, then, I will take the necessary steps to legally end our marriage when I return in late

August--unless of course you prefer to take action sooner, in which case I will cooperate by courier.

I love you, Robert. And why would I not? You are the sweetheart of my youth, the father of our son, and the friend I would have you remain.

My best,

Margaret

July 3

(9 p.m. Paris time)

Dear Jane,

Although we agreed to visit by telephone rather than wait the interminable length of time it takes our letters to crisscross the Atlantic, it is important that I write this one (which I am sending with a quick delivery service) because our emotions (both yours and mine) might get in the way of my message if we talk by phone.

In retrospect, when I think back over all the conversations you and I have had since I came to Paris, I feel that you will not be surprised to learn that Robert and I are taking steps for divorce. What may surprise you, however, is that I'm the one initiating it.

I sent him that message yesterday, and he called me back immediately--with obvious relief, I might add--to discuss the arrangements. After a long and amicable conversation we agreed to expedite the process, which means that we will forego Texas' waiting period by filing in Nevada and having a mutual attorney/friend handle the necessary paper work. Assuming things progress as smoothly as we anticipate, it should all be finalized by the end of the week.

You are NOT to worry, Sis. Oddly enough, I am quite sanguine about it all. The value of the separation for me

has been the time, up front, it's given me for the grieving process. For make no mistake about it, divorce is a death. In some ways it's even more painful than death because of the sense of failure that goes along with it. That said, I want to thank you, Sis, for your support.

From the beginning, you were realistic about the slim odds of our working things out, but you wisely allowed me my naiveté' until my emotional wings were strong enough to carry me on their own.

And now for brighter news. In addition to the fact that Wilma is looking for tearoom sites for me in Dallas, I have something on my social calendar--in ink! The school's director has invited me for a Fourth of July celebration tomorrow evening in her home.

THOSE fireworks I can handle with ease.

***Love,
Margaret***

Brows knit in concentration, Margaret got up from the desk and walked over to the window to look at the traffic below while she considered an appropriate message to her son. It wouldn't be so easy. She stood staring down at the street for several minutes before it occurred to her that there was still enough daylight outside for her to take a long "Seine Walk" and perhaps gain inspiration for the letter to Paul. She threw on a pair of slacks and silk shirt and went out, tossing off a friendly *Bonsoir* to a startled Pierre as she walked by.

Summer tourists still crowded the streets, and as she threaded her way down *rue du Rivoli* in the direction of the Louvre, she played her usual guessing game as to which countries they hailed from. By the time she returned to the hotel an hour later, she had figured out two things: what she would say in the letter to Paul and something the *Office du Tourisme* already knew--there were more Japanese tourists in Paris this summer than any other nationality.

*Monday, July 3
(11 p.m. Paris time)*

Dear Paul,

I'm addressing this letter to you alone to share as you wish with Trish. If it comes across sounding businesslike and impersonal, please remember that it's because I am trying to express myself objectively to avoid distorting facts with emotion.

Very simply, your father and I are divorcing. Perhaps this comes as a shock. Perhaps not. Having lived with us for the first eighteen years of your life, you no doubt have a better perspective on our marriage than anyone else.

This is a mutual decision, and we have agreed that I should be the one to tell you about it. You needn't worry that your parents will become embroiled in a nasty tug of war over their assets—or your affections.

We will cooperate in the same way we have always cooperated, with neither of us resorting to any of those tacky maneuvers that divorcing couples sometimes get caught up in.

There's only one thing for you to remember: We both love you. And we both want the best for you—even as we know you will want that for us.

Love,

Mother

CHAPTER NINETEEN

UN JOUR D'INDÉPENDANCE

As she got out of a taxi in front of the grand old apartment building on *quai Henri IV* in the Bastille area, Margaret heard laughter and music drifting down from the party on the fourth floor.

Following instructions Emily had given her, she approached the tall wooden doors, built originally as a gated entrance for the carriage trade, and announced herself by intercom. When the buzzer sounded, she pushed open one of the tall doors and found herself inside a cobblestone courtyard with a gnarled old tree in the center, and a sky lighted dome high above. From the courtyard, she gained electronic entrance through another doorway to a gleaming black-marbled foyer where she then stepped into a mahogany-paneled elevator.

You had to WANT to get to the Dessange apartment, she mused. Which Margaret did. With nothing but solitary summer evenings ahead of her, not only was it nice to have an occasion to dress up, but dining in a Parisian's home was a noteworthy experience in that the French usually extended that invitation only to those they had known very well and for a very long time.

Not that Emily Dessange was French. She wasn't. American born and educated, she had lived and worked in Paris for the past twenty years, having in the interim married Gerard, a Frenchman serving the American Embassy in Paris as chief finance officer. When

the elevator opened on four, Emily was waiting for her in firecracker-red hostess pajamas infinitely more glamorous than the business suits she wore daily to the school.

"Tres chic, Margaret, tres chic," Emily said, gesturing to Margaret's ensemble reflecting as well the holiday they were celebrating--a white silk dress with a red white and blue Hermes scarf tossed, a la French chic, across one shoulder.

"I wasn't sure you would recognize me out of a chef's jacket," Margaret laughed.

Inside, the Independence Day party was in full swing. Glancing about at the other guests--some thirty or forty in all--she assured herself that she was ... just right. ... neither over nor under-dressed.

Emily's husband sauntered up with a glass of champagne.

"Gerard," said Emily, taking his arm and looking up like an adoring courtesan, "this is my friend Margaret, the one I've told you about from school. Be a dear and introduce her around while I look in on the kitchen." A Cordon Bleu graduate herself and reputedly an excellent cook, Emily had told Margaret that she herself was preparing all the food for her party.

Urbane and darkly handsome, Gerard extended his arm and led Margaret about the room introducing her to the other guests. Most were American and all--judging from snatches of conversations she overheard in an odd mix of French and English "did" something in Paris, having come directly to the party from work.

What do you do? they asked her and one another in a variety of ways. What do you do? What exactly do you do in Paris? The first time the ubiquitous question was directed at her, Margaret felt naked and exposed--as though she had left her credentials back in Dallas. Coming from a generation of women who were asked only what their husbands did, she had never had to form a stock reply for herself.

“I - I'm studying cooking at Le Cordon Bleu,” she replied to the first inquisitor, a striking brunette in her early forties who headed the American securities division of a French bank.

The brunette, seeing that nothing more was forthcoming from Margaret, concluded the conversation with a feeble “oh ... I see.”

Feeling frivolous and dilettante-ish, Margaret was ready the next time she was asked. “I'm studying classic French cuisine at the Cordon Bleu,” she answered brightly, “Then I'm returning to Dallas to open a tearoom.”

“Oh ... I see! *Quelle interessante.*” That was good; Margaret was doing something.

“*Excusez-moi,*” said Jerard, leaving Margaret on her own as he retreated to the door to greet a late arriving guest.

A pudgy Casper Milquetoast type in olive sport coat with trousers meant to match, sidled over to introduce himself with a soft, moist hand and a doleful smile. In spite of herself, Margaret grinned broadly, not from the delight the man probably assumed, but because his all-green attire, although similar to that worn by other businessmen in Paris in the summer, reminded her, all at once, of the little flashing green men on the city's traffic lights at pedestrian crosswalks.

Pleased with his perceived social success, he peered through thick wire-rimmed glasses and asked, in what he obviously considered a debonair manner, “And how is it that a good-looking woman like you is all alone in Paris?”

Margaret did not point out that she wasn't exactly alone in the room full of people. Without acknowledging the crass remark with so much as a glare, she seized upon the opportunity to polish her “do” credentials to a higher luster. Unasked, she launched into a credible description of her current training program at Le Cordon Bleu Institute after which she would open a tearoom in Dallas.

“A tearoom. How nice,” he said. “Then surely you have been to *A Priori Thé*.”

“No, I'm afraid I haven't. Where is that?”

“In the *Galerie Vivienne*,” he replied. At Margaret's blank stare he went on to describe the iron-and-glass shopping arcade that had been built in Paris at the turn of the century in the *Place des Victoires*. With a swagger of self-importance, he said, “Luis Bunuel used it as the setting for his movie classic, *Passage du Désir*.” Emphasizing the French word for desire, he gave Margaret a knowing look. “You must allow me to take you there sometime.”

All things considered, Margaret preferred a root canal. “Perhaps ...”, she said coolly then turned away to attach herself to the outer fringe of a nearby group.

“*Au contraire*,” one was saying, “The weak dollar is the culprit!”

“And whose fault is that? The Fed lowered interest rates ...”

Unnoticed, Margaret slipped outside to a small plant-covered balcony overlooking the Seine. Using her elbows for a prop, she leaned on the brick parapet and gazed mesmerized at the vista stretched out before her. Across the river shone the lights of the Left Bank where students and artier types congregated in small sidewalk cafes. In the darkened middle of the river rested the *îles* that she and Mark had explored together; and downstream, beyond all the bridges in between, stood the towering sentinel of the Paris night.

Approaching from that direction was one of the beloved *Bateaux Mouches*, an enormous sightseeing boat with thousands of tiny white lights strung bow to stern. She watched as it slowly drew near, then made a wide arcing circle beneath her before heading back downriver toward the Eiffel Tower. Dinner guests aboard it crowded a small dance floor, swaying to music she could not hear over the noise inside the apartment.

It was all so achingly beautiful, truly a city for lovers. She sighed. Where is he? What is he doing this very minute? Working on his inn? Cooking? Does he think of me? And if so, does he remember the good times, the joyous times we shared and not just that last miserable week?

At that moment, Emily called from the doorway. "Oh, here you are. Buffet is now being served in the dining room."

Margaret turned to go inside, but Emily stepped out on the balcony instead, joining her guest at the wall. Cocking her head, she took Margaret's hand in hers. "*Les peines de coeur*?" she asked sympathetically.

Margaret considered the literal translation: trouble of the heart. She had also heard it stated *les problèmes de coeur* as well as Pierre's favorite expression, *les affaires de coeur*. To have so many ways of saying the same thing, there must be a lot of this heart thing going around in Paris, she mused.

"I **was** thinking about Mark, as a matter of fact," she replied. Gesturing down to the river, she said, "We once spent an entire Sunday afternoon checking out both those islands down there as well as both sides of the Seine."

"I take it you haven't heard from him. Patience, *Mon Amie*, you will. I'm sure you will. In the meantime there's someone I want you to meet. He was supposed to come tonight, but at the last minute he had a business problem arise and couldn't make it. Very attractive. French. A friend of my husband's from the Embassy."

Margaret knew there were women who desperately sought out male companionship the instant they were without a man in their lives. But she think of nothing worse right now than to meet someone to replace the someone--the two someones--she had so recently lost.

“Thank you, Emily. That's lovely of you; but I'm just not ready. I'm sure I will be in time.”

“Yes,” Emily agreed, “timing is everything in life, is it not? And now, it is time that we go try some of my *boeuf à la ficelle*. I think you will find it quite delicious.”

After dinner Margaret allowed the appropriate amount of time to pass before she sought out her host couple to thank them for their hospitality. “*Merci, j'ai passé une merveilleuse soirée,*” she said in her best schoolgirl French. She then asked Emily where she might catch a taxi back to her hotel downtown.

“Oh, allow ME,” cried the Little Green Man popping up from nowhere.

“But I couldn't possibly inconvenience you that way,” Margaret quickly protested.

“No no no. It's right on my way,” he insisted. “And I was just leaving as well.”

Trapped, Margaret shot her hostess an inquiring look, but either because Emily didn't pick up on her silent plea or because she thought it a satisfactory solution to the problem, she offered no alternative.

“Well, if you're certain it's no trouble ...,” Margaret spoke lamely into the silence. Embarrassed, she added more decisively, “Sure, why not?”

She soon found out *why not*. The first thing her escort did after tucking her into the cramped passenger seat of his overgrown soap box derby car was to don the beret he had left perched on the stick shift. Using his rear view mirror to seat the hat at a rakish angle, he revved the tenor-singing engine, then tore out onto the busy thoroughfare as though he himself were qualifying for a race. As the

small car skimmed in and out of traffic like an erratic water bug on a pond, Margaret searched in vain for a seat belt, then, failing that, a handhold of some sort above the door. Giving up, she braced both feet on the floorboard and gripped the edge of the seat with her hands. In record time, they careened up before the entrance of her hotel and lurched to a stop.

She sighed with relief. *Home safe!* “Bonsoir and thank you for the ride, she said, grasping for the door handle to make a hasty exit.

Sweeping her an unctuous smile, the driver inquired in a low, suggestive voice, “Would you care for some company?”

Without answering, Margaret continued frantically slapping at the door in search of the elusive handle. With a sigh of disgust, the scorned suitor brusquely leaned across her and threw open the door.

Margaret fled into the hotel, dashed past a startled Pierre at the nightstand, and into the waiting elevator. Not until the elevator door opened to deposit her on the third floor did her heart quit pounding. She pulled out her room key and hurried the short distance down the hall.

No sooner had she unlocked the door to her room, however, than the Little Green Man came bounding up a nearby stairway, red faced and panting, waving her Hermes scarf above his head in a blurry pom-pom of red, white, and blue.

“Oh thank you,” Margaret said, mentally chastising herself as she retrieved the problematical scarf. “How careless of me ... well, goodnight again.”

As she started to turn away, the disappointed-looking man extended both arms in a gesture Margaret took as an effort to seal their farewell with an innocent air kiss planted Continental-style on both cheeks. Feeling foolish for her adolescent behavior in the car she reluctantly proffered a cheek.

But the leaping Lothario meant KISS, as in French, sweeping Margaret backward over one arm while his free hand went fast to work on the buttons of her dress. With a strength she did not know she possessed, she wrenched herself upright and with all her might shoved him into the hallway and slammed the door, her knees going weak as she fumbled the safety bolt home.

From the other side of the door, a plaintive voice beseeched in injured protest. And almost immediately Margaret heard another, the commanding voice of Pierre--dear Pierre--ordering the intruder from the premises *tout de suite*.

Then all was quiet. Still trembling as she leaned against the door, Margaret reviewed the last moments of her first Fourth of July on her own. If this was independence, she was not celebrating.

CHAPTER TWENTY

CHANGE

For Margaret, that entire week was a series of happenings, each one following hard on the heels of another. After getting herself primed at the party with all her talk about a tearoom, she experienced a minor setback early the following morning when Wilma called to report the results of her search for possible sites.

The lease prices she quoted were shockingly high. And those did not even include large shopping malls, which Margaret had ruled out as too commercial for the quaint throwback to a more genteel era she envisioned as a setting for her tiny business--a business that would be open only a few hours each day at that.

She wanted her guests to be able to drop in for the mid-afternoon repast so popular with the English, check their Type-A personalities at the door, and sit down to sip and visit and actually taste the delicacies she would have prepared earlier in the day. The mere thought of someone dashing in for take-out made her blood pressure rise.

"Thank you for all your effort, Wilma," she finally concluded, "but I think I'd best put off further search for a location until I get back and look around for myself."

This did not stop Margaret from pursuing her plans, however. That same afternoon after class she invited Emily Dessange to join her for tea at the Ritz. The proximity of the luxurious hotel to her own allowed Margaret to dash by her room, change into “lady” clothes, and be waiting serenely at a reserved table amidst the potted palms when her guest walked in.

“How elegant. I had almost forgotten,” Emily said as the Maitre d' seated her, and the tuxedo-clad waiter standing at attention nearby whipped open a starched napkin to place delicately across her lap. “Is this what you have in mind for your own tearoom?” she asked with a wry smile.

Margaret grinned. “Not exactly. I'm thinking cozy: lace curtains, chintz tablecloths; dainty China teacups and saucers. I just wanted to check out the Ritz's Paris version of high tea--what they serve and how they serve it. I've been to the one in London.”

“So have I. This one is more elegant, don't you think?”

“Yes ... and less crowded. We can actually hear the music. In the background, the sweet strains of a harp playing Debussy blended with the linen-muffled tinkle of china and silver and the hushed conversations at other tables.

A cloth-draped teacart rolled alongside them, the waiter behind announcing, “You are welcome to smell the teas, Mesdames. We have twenty-six varieties.” With a snap of his wrist, he opened one tin after another as Margaret and Emily sniffed first the black teas, then the black blended teas, and finally the green teas.

“Hmmm, the blend of Earl Grey with Orange Spice for me,” said Margaret.

“And I shall have the Jasmine. Although ... ,” Emily stopped and cast her hostess a mischievous look, “perhaps you should try the Jasmine. The tin calls it a 'romance enhancer'.”

For the next hour, the two chatted amiably throughout the continual service of delicate tea sandwiches, assorted nuts and fruits, scones with jam and, the *pièce de résistance*, a silver tray of tiny tortes and pies.

“That was exquisite,” Emily said as they got up to leave. “The English have done the world a tremendous favor introducing us to such a pleasant afternoon pastime.”

As they exited the shiny brass doors of the Ritz, a brown uniformed doorman touched the bill of his cap in courtly salute.

Once outside, Emily said, “By the way, just down the street, I have a friend in the china export business who could probably make you an attractive discount on china for your tearoom. That is, if you're interested.”

Margaret was interested. Margaret was thrilled.

“Oh, Phillipe,” Emily called out with a wave as they neared his shop, the doors of which he had just locked. “Please, can't you spare us a few minutes of your time?”

Margaret looked on with amusement as Emily, ordinarily so reserved and businesslike, flirted and cajoled and soon convinced the protesting proprietor to reopen his doors. Her heart lifted as she went inside and quickly moved up and down the narrow aisles crammed with every available pattern of fine china--some plain, some pretentious and grand, and some--like the one she made a beeline for when she spied it moments later--flowered and femininely inspired.

Margaret, having been described more than once in her life as “often wrong but never in doubt”, excitedly called out, “I've found it!”

Emily and Phillipe hurried across to give their nods of approval to the white China cups with dainty scalloped rims and a soft

pattern of yellow and pink and lavender flowers intertwined with soft green leaves.

“There’s only one small problem, Madame,” Phillipe explained when he wrote up her order, “I can’t guarantee shipment until late October or early November.”

“That will be fine,” Margaret said with a knowing glance at Emily, “I am not sure at the moment where I want it shipped. I’ll be back in touch in late September to give you an address.”

“Congratulations,” Emily said as they stepped out onto the street, choked now with late afternoon traffic, “Your tearoom is launched.”

“Yes,” Margaret laughed, “and if it doesn’t float, I can look forward to entertaining my two hundred closest friends with daily tea parties for the rest of my life.”

On Thursday afternoon Margaret repeated the tea ceremony at the Ritz, this time with the attorney-friend she and Robert had mutually selected to courier the divorce papers for her signature. While she had never doubted that Robert would be fair to her in their settlement, the figure he proposed was, in fact, quite generous. While she had known he earned them an enviable living, she had not translated the figures into net worth, a word the attorney used frequently as he explained the terms over tea.

While Margaret would not live so lavishly as she had in the past, with careful husbanding and investing of her assets, she would have a comfortable--but simple!--lifestyle whether her tearoom ended up on the obituary pages or not. At least, she thought, I can pay for all that china I ordered yesterday.

“There **is** one other thing, Margaret,” the attorney said solemnly after gathering the signed documents and slipping them back

into his briefcase. “Robert wanted me to advise you that he plans to remarry right away.” He was watching her face carefully as he spoke.

Margaret allowed no emotion to ripple its surface. “Give him my best,” she replied softly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

ONE EN FAMILLE

Saturday morning Margaret paced the foot-worn marble where anxious thousands had paced before. Crossing to the flight arrival board once more, she stood staring at the flashing numbers as though they had not already confirmed the fact that the plane from San Antonio was on the ground.

Suddenly reality sank in, and she felt as though she could not bear another moment's wait for her family to clear customs and walk through that forbidden door less than twenty feet away. The rising excitement she had kept tightly tethered since Paul had called yesterday to announce that he and Trish and Amy were coming to Paris for a week threatened now to spring loose. The very thought of melting into the enveloping warmth of her family was enough to make Margaret's eyes mist over with happiness.

Must not cry! she warned herself. Who, family or not, wanted to find a weepy, red-eyed woman waiting at the gate?

Family. The very word was a balm to her soul. A self-disciplined person, Margaret had always been one to wait out bleak times like a burro hunkered down in a rainstorm waiting for it to pass. Alone in Paris since the middle of March, she had kept on keeping on, doggedly placing one foot in front of the other, as she waited for better

times. Now, with her children on the other side of that wall, skies were sunny once more, and her cup was full to the brim.

“Grandmother!” Amy squealed, breaking loose from her parents as they emerged from the customs area with a bag-laden mass of weary travelers. Arms outstretched, Margaret swooped down on the tow-headed child like a mother hen to her chick, hungrily swallowing her up in her arms.

“Oh, Amy ... Amy. Just look at you! Seven years old and all grown up,” Margaret cried as she smothered the angelic face with kisses. Liquid pools of blue glistened back into her own.

“Hey Mom!” Paul said as he gathered them both up in a hearty embrace and kissed his mother's forehead.

Trish, a short peaches-and-cream blonde in her mid-thirties, stood patiently by smiling her blessings on the happy trio as she waited her turn. Extending an arm, Margaret drew her daughter-in-law into the circle. “Trish, you darling thing, nobody would ever know you've just spent ten hours on an airplane.”

Sitting between Trish and Amy in the taxi that bore them full speed along the busy freeway skirting an industrial district, Margaret leaned forward to ruffle her son's sandy blond hair, thinking as she did how much he resembled his father.

“I didn't realize,” she said, “just how homesick I was for you all until you told me you were coming.”

Working his tall frame around in the front seat, Paul, studious looking behind wire-rimmed glasses, leveled a green-eyed gaze on his mother. “We would have been here sooner, Mom, if you'd told us from the beginning what was going on.” He studied her with an expression Margaret knew well--the consummate doctor assessing his patient's health.

She quickly dismissed his concern, "Oh, I never intended for you to come at all, Paul. Although ..." She stopped and cleared her throat. "...I'm awfully glad you did. But you can see for yourself, I'm fine."

"Is that it?" Amy interrupted as she bounced forward on the edge of the seat to point out an object in the distance.

"Is that what, sugar?"

"The Awful Tower, Grandmother. The one Mother told me about." Margaret checked the smile which was about to spread across her cheeks, glancing as she did to see if her daughter-in-law had heard as well.

"No, honey, that isn't the Eiffel Tower. But we will see it any second now. In fact, as soon as we get past these trees ..." She leaned low to peer through the front windshield, pointing seconds later. "There! w-a-y off over there."

"Where? Oh ..." Amy replied in a small voice, disappointed that the needle-nosed structure she saw from this distance didn't measure up to her expectations of a tower from which Rapunzel might let down her hair. "It just looks like an old oil well to me."

Shortly, however, when the taxi left the freeway to approach the heart of the city on a thoroughfare paralleling the Seine, closer proximity to the imposing latticework of iron elicited a more excited response from the wide-eyed child.

"When can we climb to the top?" she asked.

"Does all this look familiar?" Paul asked, reaching back to pat his wife on the knee.

"Hmmm..." she responded, covering his hand with her own. "Has it really been eight years since our honeymoon?"

After Margaret had settled her exhausted brood into the hotel, she treated them to a light supper in the dining room, after which Paul and Trish retired to their room, and Margaret tucked an unresisting Amy into her own bed. Lying down beside her with a book, she kept a contented vigil over the child, watching with a lump in her throat as the small form slowly turned itself over to the Land of Nod.

After breakfast on Sunday, the four gathered for the carefree day of sightseeing they had agreed upon the evening before. Because Amy's first choice was to "climb the awful tower", and her parents didn't want too much piled on her plate that first day, the tower and immediate vicinity would be their major undertaking.

But the child's excitement soared even before they reached their destination. As they were descending the Metro steps, her father pointed to the Seine River that separated them from the Eiffel Tower on the other side.

"Our train's gonna carry us right under that river, Amy."

"But HOW?" she asked as the subway car whooshed them from the underground station. With cupped hands she peered through the darkened windows, straining to catch a glimpse of water.

As they climbed the steps on the other side, her curiosity immediately riveted itself on the unintelligible words of French being spoken by passengers coming and going. Waiting politely until they were out of earshot, she tugged Margaret's arm and repeated something that obviously had been explained earlier by her parents.

"Those people don't talk like us, Grandmother," she whispered. "Did you hear them?"

"That's right, honey. They were speaking French." Reaching for Amy's hand, she continued, "And it's important that you learn to speak a few words of French as well."

“But why?”

“Well ...” Margaret stalled, trying to frame an answer a six-year old could understand. “It’s good manners to learn some words in the language of countries we visit. We’re being good American citizens when we do.”

Seeing the bewildered look on her granddaughter’s face, she went on. “Sometimes when Americans come to Europe and complain about things and are demanding and rude and insist on speaking only our language, the people here call us Ugly Americans.”

Amy’s blue eyes clouded as she considered the undesirable moniker. “But I don’t know any French words,” she protested, unwilling to be associated with any group labeled “ugly”.

“Well, then I’ll teach you some,” said Margaret as they set off across the sun-baked *Champ de Mars* behind Paul and Trish. “Let’s start with the two most important words in any language, please and thank you. *Merci* means thank you; *s’il vous plaît* means please.”

“Mercy means thank you, civil play means please,” Amy repeated the lyrical singsong in her flat, little-girl Texanese. When she finally succeeded, Margaret lengthened it to *merci beaucoup*, thank you very much. They were still going through the drill when, ahead of them, Paul stopped and pointed.

“Great Scott, Mother, look at that line!”

Margaret, at that moment blotting beads of moisture from her forehead, tried to cover her dismay when she saw the long line of people extending out from the base of the Eiffel tower.

“Actually,” she said, trying to sound a positive note, “it’s not as bad as it could be, considering this is peak tourist season. Surely it won’t take all that long.”

As they neared the line, Amy exclaimed in a stage whisper, "They talk like us Grandmother!" She was solemnly scanning faces of the people to ferret out any Ugly Americans.

"That's right, honey. There are lots of visitors here from our own country right now. They're conversing with each other," she added quickly to ward off further talk about "ugly".

As it turned out, the wait proved even longer than either mother or son had thought possible. Even with diversions of an ice-cream stand and two trips to the bathroom, Amy had turned quarrelsome and cross by the time the elevator finally carried them up to the tower's nine hundred foot deck on top.

The four lined up with other tourists jammed shoulder to shoulder around the platform's perimeter to gaze out on the bird's-eye view of the city. Paul boosted his daughter onto his shoulders for a better vantage point, but the once-pert little body now sagged with fatigue, and the child's unsmiling face told an unhappy tale.

Uh oh, Margaret thought as Mark's apt expression crossed her mind: The flame is definitely not worth the candle. Grandmotherly concern kicked in, and she said, "I'll tell you what, Amy, how about the two of us leaving your mom and dad here and going someplace to have ourselves a tea party?"

The small face brightened, adoring eyes lighting up at the welcome suggestion.

"I know a tearoom not far away where they serve all kinds of delicious things to eat."

"Like what?"

"Like crisp salads with vegetables cut to look like roses ... and tiny sandwiches made for elves ... and the best hot chocolate in the world with whipped cream so high on top it'll touch your nose."

Margaret punctuated this last bit of salesmanship with a playful poke at Amy's small, tip-tilted nose.

The child grinned and began clambering down from her father's shoulders. Paul and Trish, eager to recapture the flavor of the city on their own, exchanged relieved glances.

"And we don't expect to see you guys until tomorrow," Margaret added with a wink as they started off. "I'll drop Amy by your room in the morning when I leave for class."

In the pretty pink and white tearoom with a ceiling fan stirring the sultry air, Amy's good humor resurfaced as quickly as it had vanished. She sat upright at the white wrought-iron table in her most grown-up pose, phonetically lip-syncing words on the tearoom menu. Margaret listened with amusement as the child tried one that was too difficult for her second grade reading level.

"POY-son ... poy-ZON ... ," Amy repeated, trying a different inflection each time. Then all at once she stopped, comprehension lighting up her eyes. "Grandmother, this says POISON!"

Margaret smiled. "You're quite the reader, aren't you? Actually, the word you're looking at is a French word for fish. Here is how you can tell the difference. See ..." Margaret pointed at the word on the menu, "It has two *esses*. If it had only one, it would mean the same as our own word for poison. In fact, we inherited the word "poison" from the French. But this one on the menu has two *esses* and is pronounced *pnah-sawn* in French."

Amy watched her grandmother's mouth, then pursed her own small lips to frame the word, swallowing the end of it as her grandmother had to effect the nasal sound. She repeated it over and over, looking to Margaret occasionally for approval.

At a nearby table an older couple looked on. "*Est-ce-que c'est ta petite-fille?*" the woman inquired with a smile.

“Yes, she is my granddaughter,” Margaret replied in French.

Amy stopped her recitation and listened to the exchange between the two women. Her grandmother smiled at something the woman said, then turned back to Amy to translate.

“She says you are very pretty, Amy.”

The child smiled shyly at the lady. “Mercy,” she stammered. “Mercy bo-koo.”

The remainder of the week flew by much too fast for Margaret, who hurried to school and back each day to spend as much time as she could with her family whose mornings were spent sightseeing.

Margaret spelled the parents in the afternoons, planning lighthearted excursions that were less taxing and more fun for Amy: a shop where rows of antique porcelain dolls stared, glassy-eyed, from the shelves; a puppet show in a park where she stood mesmerized though she knew no French; and then her favorite spot of all, an ice-cream parlor down the block where she tried a new flavor each day.

One afternoon they dropped Trish and Paul off at a fabric house on *rue du Quatre-Septembre*, where Margaret commissioned her daughter-in-law to keep an eye out for lace as she did her own shopping. Then she and Amy continued by taxi to the Georges Pompidou Center in the Halles area where Paris' central market had once thrived.

The Center, if the taxi driver's cryptic remark was any indication, was apparently a thorn in some Parisians' sides. “Welcome to the Georges Pompidou Factory,” he muttered before speeding away.

To the newcomer without any background knowledge, the Center probably did resemble a factory--an unfinished one at that. Instead of taking Amy inside it to view yet another display of art, Margaret led her a short distance from the building to point out its unusual facade. The scaffolding-like exterior supported a tangle of pipes and tubes running willy-nilly across the glassed walls behind it; and Margaret explained that it had been designed that way on purpose so all the utilitarian things like corridors and ventilation shafts and water and gas conduits would be on the outside of the building, thus freeing up more space for the art inside.

“See those big plastic tubes that look like caterpillars climbing the side of the building?”

Amy’s eyes widened with speculation. “What are they?”

“There are escalators inside them.”

“Ohh, can we go see?”

“Sure. There’s a wonderful view of the city at the top.”

Amy’s happy expression fell away.

Realizing that “good views” were associated in the child’s mind with long waits at the Eiffel tower, Margaret quickly amended, “Actually, there’s something around the corner I think you’ll like more.”

Amy happily followed her grandmother around the building to a whimsical display of spouting fountains in a pool of water. As they drew near, an enormous pair of bright red plastic lips spewed out a horizontal stream of water while a gargoyle-looking statue nearby sent a vertical flume of water ten-feet up in the air. Colorful cartoon-like characters made of steel dipped and splashed, while a big red heart on the far side of the pool palpitated eerily as it turned on its axis.

Fascinated with all the moving parts, Amy would have been content to watch longer had she not at that moment been distracted by a juggler entertaining a crowd behind them. She stood watching him add more and more balls to his performance until Margaret finally placed her hands on the small shoulders and gently steered her granddaughter away.

“Oh, can't we stay? It's fun here.”

“No, we need to hurry back so we can get ready to meet your mama and daddy for dinner.”

They set off on foot for the hotel, munching green apples they purchased at a fruit stand along the way.

The following morning, long before daylight, Margaret awakened with the dark thought that this was to be her family's last day in Paris. Tomorrow they were leaving, and a curtain of loneliness began unfolding about her at the thought of being alone once again.

She lay quietly, listening to Amy's rhythmic breathing on the other side of the bed. Barely visible in the dark, the child sprawled on her stomach, her head a mass of curls, her small body throwing off heat that Margaret could feel from her side of the bed.

It was amazing, she thought, how young a child could make you feel. How differently the world appeared when you looked at it through a child's eyes. It would be so easy, she thought, to idle down her own life and live vicariously through that of her kids--the same way she had once lived through her husband. It was far easier to siphon off the strength of others than to become a strong person in one's own right.

Margaret sighed. It was time to go back to that old reservoir within and dredge up some of the independence she had developed before her family came to town.

For their last night together, Margaret had long since made dinner reservations for the four of them as well as Kate Stone aboard one of the sightseeing boats that moved up and down the Seine nightly showing off the city. It was one of those touristy things she might never have considered had it not been for Amy's enthusiastic endorsement.

As it turned out, the river tour proved to be the perfect ending to an ideal week. As the boat pulled away from *Pont de L'Alma*, band playing, a reflection of city lights dancing on the water, Margaret was as caught up in the festive spirit as the laughing young guests at her table. Cheerful waiters plied them with champagne before starting service of the three-course meal.

Lively music beckoned Paul and Trish to the tiny dance floor, where they were soon joined by a radiant-looking Kate and a young tourist who had come from the other side of the boat to ask her to dance. Amy, giddy with the excitement of it all, tugged at Margaret's hand.

“Come on, Grandmother, let's dance, too!”

A more reserved Margaret of the past, concerned with appearances, might easily have refused. But the newer “Maggie” jumped to her feet and began two-stepping the proud youngster around the dance floor as though she had lived her whole life with such spontaneity. It was an evening she knew Amy would remember forever.

As the boat moved slowly up river, a loudspeaker announced the noteworthy sights on both banks as they passed them while a photographer roamed the deck taking photos at each table. As luck would have it, he approached theirs just as the boat was passing the Eiffel Tower and snapped their picture with the famous landmark in the background.

Not until they were well into the second course of dinner did Paul set aside his fork and clear his throat to signal the serious nature of something he wanted to say.

“Mom, Trish and I have been talking ... ,” He stopped, and with an index finger tightened his glasses on the bridge of his nose. “... and we both think you should move to San Antonio to be close to us.”

“Oh, Grandmother, could you?”

Gently stunned, Margaret looked from Paul to Trish and back to her son again. “I don't understand,” she said, although she understood very well.

“The way we figure,” Paul continued, “you're still young enough to make new friends and start life over again someplace else. In San Antonio, we could be there for you when you need someone.”

Trish nodded and smiled her agreement while Amy perched on the edge of her seat with her fingers crossed.

“I know you'd love the place, Mom, if you gave it a chance.” With a disarming grin, Paul added, “Besides, your granddaughter might even wanna come sleep over now and then.”

“Grandmother, pleeeze? You could come to all my soccer games.”

Kate sat politely, listening and watching with a half-smile on her face, taking care not to intrude on the family discussion.

Touched to the core, Margaret answered with an air of cheerfulness lest she puddle up and embarrass them all. “I'll tell you one thing,” she said, “that's about the nicest invitation any mother or mother-in-law-or GRANDmother,” she added for Amy's benefit, “could ever receive. It thrills me that you would want me to come.”

Amy's face brightened, ready to declare victory.

"But the fact is, there is plenty of room in Dallas for both your father and myself and ..."

Seeing the exchange of looks between Paul and Trish, she stopped to explain, "Don't worry, Son. I know he's planning to remarry soon. But the point is," she went on with the message she wanted to convey, "each person is responsible for his or her own happiness in life. We can't live off that of others as tempting and easy as it might be.

"Through the years, your little family is going to have enough problems of its own to work out without adding mine. Besides, should I allow that to happen, I would be shortchanging my own personal growth in the process. I would never know my own inner strength if I didn't allow it to work for me. But thank you," she concluded, reaching to give each of their hands an affectionate squeeze. "It means a lot to me that you even asked."

"Oh, phooey!" Amy scowled at her father for losing the argument.

"Who's the doctor here, anyway?" Paul teased as he caught hold of his mother's hand. "Okay, we'll let you off this time, but if you should ever change your mind, just remember, you're welcome." He laughed and quickly added, "I don't know why we worried about you in the first place. I predict that in no time at all, you will meet someone special of your own."

At that moment, the boat began its big arc in the Seine to go back down the other side. Margaret carefully turned her head so she wouldn't have to see the islands they were circling. "Perhaps, Son," she replied softly. "Perhaps."

Kate blinked fiercely and looked away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LA VIE CONTINUE

With the advent of Bastille Day, Paris changed overnight from a light-hearted courtesan to a dyspeptic dowager as Parisians filed out of the city in droves for their annual month-long holiday. Left behind was a sulky core of service people to face the heat and the tourists.

Trying to overcome the distractions that had plagued her ever since Intermediate Course had begun, Margaret applied herself to her culinary studies with renewed vigor. Spending longer days at school, she attended guest-chef lectures on Thursdays, took a weekend seminar on catering, another on French Floral Art and a special half-day course on chocolate.

In addition to the regular Sunday cooking sessions with Kate, she now cooked in what they referred to as their “community” kitchen on weekdays as well. The additional practice not only allowed her to become familiar with her own recipes, it provided her an opportunity to stock the kitchen with ingredients Kate's recipes called for as well. She didn't want the star pupil stinting on her practice cooking for a lack of funds.

The competition between Kate and Estafel had heated up at school along with the weather, and it was that subject the two women discussed as they worked side by side in the steamy kitchen the first Sunday in August.

“As I've said before, Kate, it cannot possibly matter whether you are number one, two, OR, three. To end up in any of those slots would be a feather in your cap and land you a good job.”

“Intellectually, I know that, Margaret. And ordinarily I might let up on myself. But it's a rare occasion when Le Couronne Restaurant is searching for a new Sous Chef. Their kitchen brigade is so highly paid that no one ever willingly leaves.”

She gave her head a vehement shake. “No, I want to make certain that I am given serious consideration for that job, and the best way I can make it happen is to finish number one. I won't give up until the last cake comes out of the oven!”

“Well then,” Margaret teased, “just make sure yours is well marked!” Although she said this as a joke, Margaret had actually observed the more cautious students in her own pastry class devising clever marking systems to identify their creations and avoid having them mixed up with those of other students.

Leaning on the kitchen counter, she redirected her attention to the recipe for *choucroute alsacienne*, her salivary glands anticipating the dish she knew better as sauerkraut. The telephone rang.

“Oh bother!” said Kate, in the messy process of de-boning a saddle of lamb. “Would you get that?”

Margaret raced into the living room and picked up the receiver on the third ring. “Bonjour,” she sang out.

There was no response at the other end of the line. And then the dial tone. Oddly, in the split second of silence, Margaret sensed the intense listening ear of someone's presence. Mark's face flashed across her mind. She shook her head, warding off the idea. “I'm just being silly,” she told herself.

“Hmmm...” she said when she returned to the kitchen, “have you been getting obscene phone calls you haven't told me about?”

An idea that germinated during that day's cooking session and the conversation about Le Couronne Restaurant sprouted into a seedling the following week in school when Margaret overheard a conversation between two Superior Course students who were visiting over coffee in the solarium.

“Personally, I don't think she has a chance,” one was saying. “Mark my word,” the other replied, “the two will go down to the wire, but Kate will finish strong on exams and win by a nose. The only reason Estafel is ahead now is because he has had more experience with sauces for fowl. But, I tell you, Raoul, I've watched her. She's improving.”

He stopped and grinned. “Let's just say, if she can get her sauce together in time for the Cuisine Exam, she could pull even with Estafel and shoot ahead of him in Pastry, which is her strong suit.”

“We'll see,” said the other student.

We certainly shall see! thought Margaret, as she sat quietly by listening to the exchange.

On Saturday she was up early and waiting outside the exclusive dress boutique on *rue du Fauborg St. Honoré* when it opened for business. Unable to find what she had in mind, Margaret walked in and out of stores up and down the long street before finding the perfect dress. Then she accessorized it at a nearby boutique with the perfect shoe.

The next day when she went out to Kate's for their Sunday cooking session, she took along her purchases and set them aside while the two spent the next three hours working in the kitchen.

“Go ahead,” she told a curious Kate later on when they had completed their respective culinary projects. “Open them. The big one first.”

Kate was speechless when she discovered the understated black silk dress inside the first gift-wrapped box. “For me?” she asked, wide-eyed.

“Who else?” Margaret said, smiling tenderly. “Every young woman in Paris needs a good basic black dress in her wardrobe. The graduation ceremony is only two weeks away, you know. Look in the other box,” she prompted, as excited now as Kate.

“Oh, Margaret, thank you!” the young woman squealed when she found the pair of black dress shoes inside. Batting back tears, she jumped up and threw her arms around her friend. “I’m so overwhelmed I don’t know what to say.”

“You’ve said it!” replied Margaret, slightly embarrassed by the girl’s gratitude. “Now go put it all on and fix yourself up,” she said with an air of mystery. “I want to take you someplace really special.”

While Kate was out of the room, Margaret slipped into the dinner dress she had brought along for herself and called for a taxi.

She was stunned to see how pretty Kate was when she returned to model her new outfit. “You look positively radiant!” she exclaimed as the girl pirouetted proudly about the room. Her dewy English complexion, enhanced with makeup that she rarely wore, glowed from beneath her freckles; and her red hair, brushed free of its pony tail and the frizzies that were always springing loose, cascaded loose and shiny over her shoulders.

“Come now,” Margaret said. “We have a taxi waiting for us outside.”

Except for the fact that one was very short and the other very tall, the two women in black could easily have been any mother-daughter duo visiting Paris as they got out of the taxi and entered one of Paris' finest restaurants.

The handsome maitre'd hotel could barely take his admiring eyes off Kate as he seated the two of them at a flower-topped table set with silver water goblets and small lamps under pleated silk shades.

When he finally tore himself away, Margaret explained to a starry-eyed Kate, "I thought you should experience this side of Le Couronne Restaurant before you do the other. And I strongly suggest, Young Lady, that your palate pay close attention to their sauce for *le chartreuse de pigeons*."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

L'EXAMEN

Margaret buckled down in earnest to prepare for exams. Being prepared meant that she would have practiced cooking all the dishes introduced during her Intermediate Cuisine and Pastry classes--some ninety in one, thirty in the other. She would have committed to memory the ingredients and cooking directions in proper sequence for every recipe so that no matter which dishes were “randomly” assigned, she could reproduce them without hesitation, second guessing--or notes!

On exam day there would be no time for an attack of nerves. When she walked into the class kitchen and found at her work station a slip of paper naming the dishes she was to cook, she would either be prepared or unprepared. There was no middle ground.

Unprepared meant that if she couldn't remember whether puff pastry should bake at 200 or 230 degrees Celsius, her finished product would come out of the oven underdone and doughy--or too tough to chew.

And if she hadn't carefully marked the dough each time she turned it and come up with a precise total of six, she risked a five-turn pastry that lacked layers and refinement or a seven-turn pastry that lost elasticity and fell apart.

Walking into class the following week for her pastry exam, Margaret passed Kate in the hall as the girl was heading upstairs for her exam in Superior Cuisine.

“Bon chance, Kate. And remember that old adage about the sauce that's good enough for the goose!” she said with a grin, trying to ease the girl's tension.

Inside the classroom, Margaret washed her hands, then stood with them clasped behind her as she waited with the other students for the Chef's nod. Watching as the wall clock's second hand swept up to the stroke of nine, he announced, “The exam will begin.”

Margaret turned to her box of ingredients and quickly unfolded the piece of paper naming her assigned dessert. *Feuillantines aux Framboises Coulis de Framboises*--a stack of layered wafers with fresh raspberries and chantilly cream in between, served in a sauce of sweetened, pureed raspberries (the coulis) then decorated with whole raspberries, mint leaves and a piped decoration of heavy cream.

Although there were numerous steps that she must follow in precise order, Margaret had made the wafers several times before--sometimes without even completing the dessert--because their crisp, crunchy texture was the secret to the dessert's success. She put her mind on automatic pilot and began the long series of steps.

The room was hot from the ovens inside and the August heat out. Students, perspiring both from heat and nerves, worked silently at their stations while the Chef prowled the room looking on.

Margaret worked calmly, her hands obeying the directions her brain sent down. When she came to the step of piping wafer batter from the pastry bag onto the cooking sheets, she carefully placed her hands in between the mounds as she piped, taking care to leave ample space so they would not run together. She then gave each baking sheet a firm whack against the counter so that the mounds of batter would flatten, then put them into the oven to bake for ten minutes.

With an eye on the clock, Margaret tidied up her station, unwilling to become absorbed in any other detail of preparation, which would add the risk of burning her wafers. She looked about the room.

The other students were fast at work on their assignments, not racing one another or the clock, but racing because adrenaline drove them steadily forward. There was no wasted motion, no pausing to admire one's handiwork. The exam would not be over until the last decorative touch--the cook's signature--embellished the top of his or her presentation.

Margaret's timer went off, and she opened the oven door to peek at the pale golden *Feuillantines*. Perfect. She removed them from the oven and transferred them to a rack to cool while she started on the chantilly cream. At that moment a groan sounded from across the room, followed immediately by the unpleasant smell of scorched food. A flame too high? Oven too hot? Margaret glanced at the clock. An hour and twenty minutes into the exam, it was too late for someone to start over. Concentrate, she ordered herself, or your own chantilly cream will turn to butter.

Moving into the final stage of preparation, she fitted a medium star tip on the pastry bag and filled it with the prepared cream. Deftly she piped it in concentric circles around the top of a cooled wafer, then arranged whole raspberries on top. Piping an additional rosette of cream in the middle to hold the next wafer in place, she repeated the process until four wafers were stacked and layered in this fashion. She decorated the top wafer with raspberries, a piped rosette of chantilly, and two mint leaves which gave the finished *Feuillantines aux Framboises* a fresh and flowery appearance.

Setting aside the assembled delicacy, Margaret then prepared eleven more like it. Almost there, she thought. Preparing these lovely creations under the pressure of an exam gave her none of the pleasure she ordinarily felt when she was cooking. At those times, she was an artist at the easel; today, she was an engineer building a bridge, one technical step at a time.

She poured the chilled raspberry coulis onto a shiny stainless serving tray and then gently--ever so gently--transferred the delicate stacks of *Fenillantines* into the pool of bright red sauce and piped thin white wavelets in a circle around them. Beautiful. Well done!

Margaret wiped clean the rim of the tray which displayed her ambrosial delight then stepped back confidently for the Chef's approval.

She hurried downstairs to the locker to store her uniform, then joined other students in the solarium where they drank iced coffee and held exam postmortems. She had hoped to find out how Kate was doing, but the Superior class was still hard at work, and no one at the table knew anything.

It wasn't until that evening when an excited Kate called her that she heard the good news.

"Can you believe it, Margaret? Chef Dupuis told me I received the maximum number of points for my *Poule faisane en salmis* today." She giggled. "He that said I have at last developed my palate for sauce for fowl. I didn't tell him that the whole time I was working on the one for my pheasant, I kept remembering that piquant sauce at Le Couronne's."

Margaret waited until her friend had exhausted the subject of the rigorous exam in which she had had to pluck, gut, singe and truss a pheasant hen, then season and stuff it with thyme and juniper berries along with the heart, lungs and liver. While it roasted in the oven, she had prepared the intricate sauce to go over it and cooked an accompanying dish of *Compote d'endives à la crème*.

"Kate, I am so proud of you. That's one down and one to go."

Margaret was tempted to ask about Estafel's results, but carefully held her tongue. She didn't want to risk raising Kate's anxiety

level by even mentioning the competitor's name. Recalling the conversation she had overheard in the Solarium two weeks earlier, however, she knew that the girl's excellent showing on the cuisine exam today boded well for her chances of graduating number one, assuming of course that she lived up to her reputation in pastry tomorrow.

The women wished one another good luck for the following day and said goodnight.

If Margaret had looked in on Kate's exam room the following morning on the way to her own, she most certainly could have saved her friend a lot of anxiety and grief. At least that's what she told herself later. The door to the room would have still been open, and she could simply have called Kate aside and warned her about the student working next to her at the pastry counter.

But Margaret had been running late and gone straight to her own classroom where she had to stroke and wheedle her memory as she prepared her assigned *Terrine de Foie de Porc*.

Since spices for that dish were not included in the box of ingredients but rather co-mingled on the kitchen shelf with all the other spices, she could not remember exactly which ones the recipe called for. In addition to the *épices fines*, she knew there were three others, but which three? Nutmeg, cayenne, and ginger? No, somehow that did not sound right. The ginger! Fortunately, she settled on the correct choice of allspice instead, but in the time she had been trying to decide, she had come very close to burning her rice panade.

After several more near-misses, she eventually turned out a passable (not great, but passable) pork-liver pate--palatable enough to earn her a certificate for Intermediate Cuisine.

She then rushed to Kate's exam room and peeked through the small port hole window in the door. At the long chilled pastry counter

running down the center of the room, Kate had just finished the decorative sugar work on the *Le Fraisier* cake that Superior students had to master before being awarded their *Certificat de Pâtisserie Supérieure*.

A classic French cake, it was made with two layers of sponge cake separated by a layer of fresh strawberries and mousseline cream and topped with almond paste on which the word *Fraisier* was scrolled in fancy letters and embellished with sugar paste fleurettes. Not only could the Chef observe the student's skill in sugar work, he could test his or her ability to prepare the sponge cake that served as the crucial top and bottom layers of the *Fraisier* cake.

Kate, with a strained look on her face, was plainly unhappy with hers. Tight-lipped and grim looking, she reluctantly stepped back from the counter to receive Chef Dorot's inspection.

Margaret saw him smile and gesticulate his appreciation for the girl's flawless scrolls of sugar work, but his brows knit together and he sorrowfully shook his head as he pointed out the difference between Kate's cake, squatting low on its haunches, and the one beside it, standing high and proud even though it wasn't so perfectly decorated.

It was then that Margaret glanced over at the student to whom the higher cake belonged, and her antennae stood on tiny tiptoes. It was the same girl she had seen with Estafel that Sunday on the Metro.

At that moment, Kate came tearing out of the classroom, her small face pinched and crestfallen.

"I just don't understand," she cried over her shoulder as she raced down the steps to the solarium with Margaret running along behind.

Miserable, she threw herself down into a chair, and Margaret pulled one up close to console her.

“My sponge cakes have always turned out light as snow,” Kate sobbed. “But today for some stupid reason, after I layered them with the strawberries and mousseline and set them in the fridge to chill while I prepared the marzapan, it was like the air just went out of both layers. They just totally deflated.”

“Kate, is it possible that your cake layers could have gotten mixed up with someone else's?”

“No, I toothpicked a piece of paper with my name on the top one.”

“But ... Kate, what I'm getting at is, could someone have switched their cake with you on purpose ... perhaps before you took it out of the refrigerator to finish decorating it?”

Kate's naive face registered her inability to conceive of such a wicked notion.

“That girl next to you ...”

“Alandra? Heavens no.”

“Kate, that's the girl I saw making out with Estafel on the train that Sunday. Remember my telling you?”

A dim light went on in Kate's eyes, gradually brightening to an understanding glow.

“Did you mark your cake any other way?”

But Kate didn't hear. She not only had caught up with Margaret's reasoning, she had passed her by. Leaping to her feet, she flew back up the stairs to the classroom.

Margaret hurried after her and watched again from the door as Kate pulled the chef aside and began explaining something to him.

The teaching chef gave his head an abrupt shake and turned away. But an insistent Kate followed him, pleading her case.

Alandra was among the curious onlookers still in the room. Margaret watched the gloating look melt from the girl's face and turn to worry as Kate led Chef Dorot back to the pastry counter where the two cakes still sat side by side.

Margaret could see other students' mouths gaping and Alandra edging away as tiny, determined Kate Stone removed the top layer of "Alandra's" cake and set it aside, then turned the bottom layer upside down on a platter and triumphantly pointed out something to the nodding chef.

Only later would Margaret learn what the chef saw scratched clearly on the bottom layer of "Alandra's" cake: The initials **K S**.

His face turning a deep unhealthy shade of red, Chef Dorot spun around to face Alandra, the words from his mouth assaulting her as she tried in vain to sneak out the door.

Margaret held the door shut with her foot from outside, then edged it ajar so she could hear.

"For this, this flagrant and shameful act, Alandra, you will not graduate," Chef Dorot declared. "And you will apologize to the person you tried to cheat!"

"I did it for him; it's his fault," Alandra wailed, pointing toward the door. All eyes turned as one to look out the door's window beyond Margaret.

Behind her Margaret heard a rat-scuttling noise and turned to see Estafal fleeing down the staircase. The classroom door burst open, and Alandra stumbled over Margaret's foot as she tore after him, screaming his name all the way down the steps.

But Margaret's chief concern was Kate's fate. She stepped boldly inside the classroom so she could hear what the chef was saying.

“It would be unfair of me, Kate, to give you outright the perfect score I know you are capable of. I am very sorry, but I must ask you to repeat the exam.”

“I can do that,” Kate replied brightly. “Shall we begin?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

LE DIPLÔME

As Margaret sat at her desk checking off another item on her to-do list, she looked across the room at her luggage, packed and stacked near the door, ready for the early morning flight to Dallas. A porter knelt on the floor nearby taping up boxes of kitchen utensils and supplies that the hotel would ship for her separately.

Once more, she surveyed the cheery room, the home-away-from-home that had seen her through a range of emotions and a spate of personal growth during her months in Paris. It was a room she had slept in and at times couldn't sleep in, a room which had fulfilled a need in her life that would never need filling again--a room, the likes of which, she would not see again once she checked out.

Divested of the perks of the CEO-wife along with the title, she would be traveling neither so often nor so well in the future. Luxury hotels like this would be a thing of her past.

Thinking back over her five months here, it was as though she were two people. One frightened, unsure woman had come to Paris in March; another, a Wise Woman, was departing in August.

"Will there be anything else, Madame Ainsley?" asked the eager young porter.

“No, that is all, Grégoire,” she replied. “Thank you for helping me pack and for all the nice things you have done for me during my long stay.” She handed him a generous gratuity.

“Oh, and will you please tell Pierre that I shall be down to say goodbye as well. This is his late night, is it not?”

“Oui, Madame.”

Now all that remained was the ceremony itself. For her last visit to the halls of Le Cordon Bleu, Margaret put on the same smart-looking black dress she had worn to dinner with Kate at Le Couronne and asked the doorman to hail her a taxi.

It seemed strange to be sitting in the back seat, covering the same miles above-ground which she had ridden beneath for the past several months. As the taxi crossed the Seine and skirted the perimeter of *Champs de Mars*, an image of Mark flashed through her mind as he had looked that day when he cycled up before her on the park bench, appearing in his biking gear like some alien dropped into her life from outer space.

She smiled. She still missed the man--missed his companionship and droll sense of humor, missed the irreverent witticisms that rolled off his tongue and the mirthful twinkle in his eyes that presaged them. Suddenly, her heart ached at the thought of Mark's tremendous capacity for love--the gentle, nurturing love that had fed his interest in everything she did, his concern for everything she felt.

Never, aside from her parents while they were still living, had someone believed in her so totally, pulled for her so fiercely, or loved her so unconditionally.

She would always regret the unsatisfactory ending of their relationship, its lack of closure. There had been no sense of “That's it! Let's face it and move on.”

Margaret shook her head as though that would clear the memories, memories that did nothing more now than threaten the equanimity she had fought for since Mark left. Here she was, after six weeks of good behavior, breaking her strict vow of refusing to dwell on the past—especially that happy recent past with Mark.

Keep your mind where your body is, Margaret. What was, WAS. What is, IS.

She turned her thoughts to what would be tomorrow—a very early wakeup call to herald her journey home, even if it was to be home for only a few weeks more. Robert had offered to sign over the deed to the house, suggesting she would be more comfortable in the old familiar neighborhood; but she had not wanted to be burdened with its upkeep. A high-rise apartment on Turtle Creek would suit her just fine until she got her life together.

The first person Margaret saw when she walked into the school that evening was the busy director, preparing for the upcoming ceremony. Emily was rushing from the plant-filled solarium where it would take place toward her office.

“Remind me later,” she said quietly to Margaret as they passed, “I have something in my office to give you after the ceremony this evening.”

Margaret smiled. Tucked in her own purse was the nice writing pen she had brought along as a farewell gift for Emily.

Having missed graduation ceremonies at the end of her first course because she had been on the bicycle trip with Mark at the time, Margaret was pleasantly surprised to look around and see the school chefs and her peers, usually clad in their uniforms, so handsomely attired for the occasion. The room began to fill, and she took a seat near the front where she would have an unobstructed view for the

picture she wanted to take of Kate when she received her diploma and signed the Book, a ritual reserved for a proud few.

Emily, crisp and articulate, opened the ceremonies with brief remarks in French, followed by the same ones in English. Then she presented to the largest group of students present certificates for Basic Cuisine and Basic Pastry.

For the next presentation--*Certificats de Cuisine Intermediaire* and *Pâtisserie Intermediaire*--Margaret lined up with her classmates behind the podium, her patrician face glowing with as much pride as any of the smiling young faces about her.

"I'll be back," she whispered and winked when she stepped forward to receive her certificate from Emily. Yes, she would be back. She would finish and graduate--maybe not this year, but certainly the next.

Finally came the presentation for the proudest group of all, the thinned and coveted ranks of those being awarded the distinguished *Le Grand Diplôme Le Cordon Bleu* for having completed all three Cuisine Courses and all three Pastry Courses.

Margaret watched Kate as proudly as if she were a daughter when her small group clustered behind the school director in the order in which their names were to be called to receive the Grand Diploma. Grinning broadly, each graduate then leaned down to sign the famous book containing only the signatures of those who had earned the school's coveted diploma.

Estafel was not among them. He had slipped quietly out of Paris to assume his new Sous Chef duties in a Michelin-starred restaurant on the Mediterranean. Embarrassed by Alandra's accusation that he had put her up to the cake-switching debacle so that he could graduate Number One, he had arranged to have his diploma mailed;

and it was doubtful, so rumors went, that he would ever come back to sign the book.

No one had seen Alandra since the afternoon she had been exposed in her nasty attempt to cheat Kate Stone out of the prize she had worked so hard to achieve.

“And now ladies and gentlemen,” continued Madame Dessange in her lyrical French patois, “it is my pleasure on behalf of the Directors and Staff of Le Cordon Bleu, to present to you the Number One Graduate of the August Graduating Class, who next week will begin her new position as Sous Chef in the distinguished kitchen of Le Couronne Restaurant ... Mademoiselle Kathryn ‘Kate’ Stone.”

Kate, wearing her new black silk dress, her petite frame teetering slightly on high heels, was at this point the only new graduate remaining behind the podium with the school director. She stepped forward to the room's hearty applause, her freckled face reddening to the shade of her hair as her classmates whistled and cheered her accomplishment. She acknowledged the cheers with bright eyes and a shy grin, then began her speech to the hushed audience.

“There are big-hearted people in this world,” she said, her eyes resting gently on Margaret's, “people we have come to love and appreciate even before we discover how much we have unknowingly benefited from their friendship and generosity.

“But that same generous spirit is so rare in an institution, that when I unexpectedly found myself the beneficiary of its largess, I not only was overwhelmed and grateful, but forever after, will try to justify that Institution's faith in me and make it proud.

“This evening I want to say thank you to Le Cordon Bleu, the institution with the biggest heart of all ... and to assure its directors and staff that in the field of Gastronomy, I promise to make them all proud!”

Margaret's eyes welled up at Kate's surprising eloquence, and she was enthusiastically applauding along with everyone else until she suddenly remembered the camera in her lap. Jumping to her feet, she quickly focused the lens and snapped a picture of the new graduate just as she signed the prestigious Book.

Students and guests then made a polite assault on the laden banquet tables, feasting informally while they milled about the room and greeted and congratulated one another.

Bon chance they said to those they likely would not see again. "So you're off to sea," said Margaret to the young man she still called California. He had landed a job as a yacht chef and was ending his culinary training with the Intermediate course, the same as she was—for now.

"Lucky him," said another student who walked up at that moment. "I'm still interviewing restaurants right and left."

"Try the hotels," advised another new graduate, the ink still wet on her signature in the Book. "They are your best bet." She was going back to the States to work for a large hotel chain.

A teary-eyed Kate came bounding up to throw her arms about Margaret. "I'm really going to miss you," she cried. She stepped back and looked her benefactor squarely in the eye, "And, Margaret ...," she said softly, "thank you for everything you've done for me. Madame Dessange told me today about the allowance and all."

"Well, Madame Dessange wasn't supposed to mention that," said Margaret as she wiped away the mascara spilling down Kate's cheeks with the tears, "but I guess we can't very well kick her out of school, can we?"

Margaret felt her grip slipping on the reins of her own emotions and hurried on with the message she wanted to leave with her young protégée. "That was a lovely speech, Kate; and I want you

to know that I am already terribly proud of you. Just do me a favor, dear, and remember that you are never required to give more than your best effort. That's all any reasonable employer can expect of you or anyone else."

Kate smiled and nodded. "And I want you to remember that you have a place to stay whenever you come back to Paris. It may be only a sleeper sofa for a while," she laughed, "but I'll get there!"

"Oh, you'll get there. You'll get there and beyond--I have no doubt about it. And I may very well take you up on your offer of a place to stay when I come back next year for my own diploma."

The two women hugged in farewell, then Margaret turned quickly away before her own mascara began to run. She was waiting in Emily's office when the school director came rushing in a few minutes later with a worried look on her face.

"Oh, thank goodness, you're still here," she said. "I thought I had let you slip away."

"You know I couldn't leave without saying goodbye," Margaret replied.

Emily quickly crossed the office to her filing cabinet and pulled out a sealed envelope. "I wish I had a hundred francs for every time I've been tempted to give you this sooner than tonight. But I made a promise, and I've kept it.

"I don't know what's in the letter. I only know from what little Mark Whitman told me before he left Paris that he was trying to protect you--even, as I learned later, you were trying to protect him. He made me promise to keep this letter in safekeeping for you until tonight after graduation. I couldn't very well not honor the only condition he placed on his offer of the apartment for Kate until her graduation--even though I could see your heart was breaking.

Margaret heard Mark's name at the same instant she saw his familiar scrawl on the front of the envelope. From that point on, her mind spun off without absorbing another word Emily said. She fingered and caressed and stared longingly at the sealed envelope while nodding silently at unheard words.

She stood numbly and exchanged with her friend air kisses of farewell on both cheeks. "Oh dear, I nearly forgot," she said, stopping near the door to rummage in her purse. She handed Emily the gift-wrapped pen she had brought.

"Merci, Mon Amie ... et bon chance."

She would not open it in the taxi even though it's dry papery touch beckoned and coaxed. She would not open it, could not BEAR to open and read it piecemeal and frustrated by the dim light of street lamps and passing traffic. No, she would ride with it clutched to her heart until the taxi dropped her at the hotel, and she could fly up to her room on wings of anticipation.

Her hands were shaking by the time she finally opened the envelope and read:

Friday, June 23

My dearest Maggie,

By the time you read this letter on graduation night, it will have been sitting in Emily Dessange's office for nearly two months. But do not hold her accountable. It was a promise I extracted for making the apartment arrangements I did for Kate.

Forgive me this long silence, My Darling Maggie, but I could think of no other way out of this no-win situation I find

myself in—brought more sharply into focus by the advent of your husband's visit this weekend.

If I stay in Paris and act upon the love I feel you have for me—and by some miracle convince you to leave him and come share the sunset years with me--I not only will compromise the integrity I value in you and set you up for possible guilt and regret in the future, I would be robbing you of a lifestyle I cannot replace.

All this to say that having watched one love of my life slip away, I refuse to hang around Paris and watch another. I am leaving tomorrow--the day Robert arrives--and returning to Maine to get my inn ready for opening next summer.

Tough old coot that I am, though, I know that time has a way of working wonders, and should one of those wonders be that, given that passage of time, you come to feel as I do--that our love is a rare and special blessing which life does not offer up every day--then you know where to find me.

But no matter how things turn out--even if Robert is back in your life to stay and a proud spectator at tonight's ceremonies, it is important to me that you know I love you, Maggie, not for what you might HAVE or might HAVE DONE for me but for the light and laughter you have brought my soul.

While I might not be able to give you things, you could always count on my everlasting and single-minded devotion.

Sincerely,

Mark

Sincerely. Margaret felt her heart do Loop-the-Loops inside her chest as she remembered Mark's words that first evening in his

apartment: If I ever do share my life with someone else, she will have to be old enough to remember you can sing *Sincerely* as well as sign it.

She read and reread the letter, pacing the room in a feverish mix of emotions while she considered her options. At last she made a decision.

Checking her watch--eleven here, four o'clock there--she called Wilma and made one final request of Robert's secretary. "Sorry to ask such a big favor of you at the last minute like this, Wilma, but would you be kind enough to change my plane reservations for tomorrow. Instead of flying directly to Dallas, I want to go by way of Maine ... to... to visit that friend I told you about meeting here ... you know, the-the one I did all my practice cooking with." She couldn't seem to quit explaining.

"O-o-o-h, Mrs. Ains--Margaret--I am so happy you have that new friend in your life."

"So am I, Wilma, so am I."

The sudden turn of events was too wonderful to keep locked up inside. Margaret had to share it with someone. She thought of Pierre--the first person to greet her in Paris, the last to bid her farewell. She raced downstairs.

"Pierre," she said, her hand outstretched to shake his, "I wanted to thank you for the marvelous service you and your staff have given me during my long stay."

Feeling the thickly folded gratuity she transferred to his palm, Pierre's black eyes flashed their pleasure, and his professional hauteur roiled to the surface. Bowing low over her hand he declared, "My pleasure, Madame Ainsley, always with a lovely lady, it is my pleasure."

“But that's not all, Pierre. Come sit with me in the lobby--oh, and we must have a glass of champagne to celebrate!”

Settling themselves in a corner of the vacant lobby, Margaret began, “You have not only been a concierge extraordinaire these past few months, Pierre, you have also become my good friend and confidant--and, yes, occasionally even my protector.”

The suave, inscrutable face, without so much as the blink of an eye, gave evidence of having witnessed the Little Green Man high-tailing it out of the hotel at his invitation some weeks before--an occurrence Pierre had discreetly not mentioned since.

Margaret told him then about her “school” friend, the friend he no doubt had seen kissing her in the taxi, the friend she had not seen since, but would see again tomorrow, *and then maybe, just maybe, well you know how these things go, Pierre ... maybe ...*

A broadening smile slowly transformed the suave, inscrutable face into one of Gallic rapture. “*Ah, les affaires de coeur,*” he said, thumping his chest with his fist, “tell me more ...”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

L'HOMME MAINE

It was a marathon travel day, this first day of the rest of her life. Had it not been for the self-imposed deadline and adrenaline pumping through her jet-lagged body when the plane landed mid-afternoon in Bangor, Maine, Margaret might easily have given up and sought lodging for the night to start afresh tomorrow.

But her excitement was too great. She pushed on after clearing customs, picking up the rental car Wilma had reserved, and headed south along the Penobscot River to Down East Maine. She was still pondering this strange term she had heard from the young woman at the car-rental counter when she had marked Margaret's map.

South to Down East? How could that be? Checking the sun's position in the sky against the time she had been told it would take her to reach Bear Harbor, Margaret figured there were just enough daylight hours left for her to make the entrance she had in mind.

And that was taking into consideration the tentative way she was driving. Behind the wheel of a car for the first time in five months, she had to concentrate so intently on routine motions like braking and passing that she felt as though she had just emerged from a time capsule. To keep herself alert, she lowered the car window and instantly felt a polar bite in the New England air, hinting at frosty nights to come.

Racing alongside the fast-flowing Penobscot, she tried envisioning the tens of thousands of logs that had coursed its stream from the State's northern wilderness down to this area where numerous factories and signs testified to a still-thriving paper mill industry. Approaching the town of Budsport on the east side of the Penobscot where her map showed the river would begin its flare into a large bay by the same name, she turned onto Route One and immediately found herself caught up in a long procession of cars and vans moving slowly in the same direction.

If the billboards on the side of the road were any clue, the folks inside them were headed for the annual Berry Hill Fair.

She grinned as she recalled Mark's boast one evening when they were discussing the cooking school's upcoming centennial celebration. "Why, the Berry Hill Fair is older than the Cordon Bleu!" he said.

A few miles down Route One, she left the fair traffic behind and turned south again where she sped several miles along a straight and narrow stretch of road, then slowed to follow rocky, winding shores around countless tidal bays. A salt-aired breeze off the water had lowered the temperature even more now, and she closed the car window, stealing a quick glance to the west again as she did.

The sun had mellowed into a large colorful ball over the bay, and a sense of urgency propelled her onward through white clapboard villages and dark woods, past mysterious little lanes leading to bird sanctuaries and fish hatcheries and waterfront houses unseen from the road.

She smiled at the image of a teenaged Mark tearing over the countryside in his family's Ford, exploring the countless coves in his dory. Her mind flashed back in time to the English and French who had struggled for control here and yet further back to the native residents who had roamed the region before them all.

Maine was rich in history, some Mark had shared with her, more she was eager to learn. She had passed the village of Brookerville and the last of the **Artist's Studio** signs when she saw towering ahead a high arching suspension bridge spanning a wide body of water where a heavy stream of yacht traffic flowed--yacht traffic that Mark had said would provide much of his Inn's clientele.

As she ascended the tall bridge and looked out on the breathtaking view for miles around, her spirits soared like the sea gulls she saw dipping and swirling on invisible wind currents. She remembered then Mark's passionate discourse one Sunday on bridges.

"We are the bridge generation, Margaret. Think about it. We span the shores of two entirely different generations on either side of us. The strict moral codes in place for us and our parents are nothing but blurry boundaries for young folks now. While we knew the patriotism of World War II and a thrift borne of the great Depression, those after us know only the confusion of more recent wars and the materialism of postwar plenty.

"Our parents--and we--were allowed time to discover the mystery and sweetness of romance, while later generations were robbed early of their innocence by R-rated movies and permissive sex. We understand both of those generations, but neither of them understands the other. That makes us the bridge in between!"

"That's a wonderful premise, Mark. But after us ... who will be the bridge?"

"We will build some," he had answered with a fiery zeal. It was then that he told her about the historical account of America's postwar years he planned to write during the winter months when his inn was closed.

"That will be my bridge," he said, "and you ... you could do something as simple as setting down your childhood memories of those same years for your own granddaughter--and those after her."

But for now, the only bridge Margaret wanted to cross was this one leading to Mark. Descending its high span at the opposite end, she drove the length of narrow causeway leading into Bear Harbor, a picturesque seaport, Mark had described to her, the population of which quadrupled each June with summer residents and eager tourists arriving in cars and on their yachts.

She began searching for someone to ask directions to the Whitman house. A few minutes later, she spied a pickup truck sitting beside the road, a sign taped on the back reading **Fresh Potatoes for Sale**.

She stopped alongside the pickup and addressed the ruddy-faced driver behind the wheel, "Sir, can you tell me how to find Piney Point?"

"Yup ," he replied.

Margaret waited.

"Yewmusbefumaway," he finally said, looking at her expectantly.

The response sounded so much like some of Mark's droll wordplay that she wondered for a comical instant if she had stumbled across one of his relatives. Replaying his words at a slower speed, however, she was able to transcribe them.

"Oh ... yes, I am from away."

The man waited for her to continue, then looked disappointed when she did not reveal where she was away from.

Sneaking an anxious glance at the filtered sunlight sliding through the pines, Margaret repeated her request for directions, rephrasing it this time. "Would you be kind enough to direct me to Piney Point? I'm in a terrible hurry!" she coaxed.

Yup ... he ... could ... and would ... and ... eventually ... did, his formerly abbreviated Mainer speech downshifted to a maddeningly slow pace. Margaret gripped the steering wheel in frustration as she waited for him to finish.

Fortunately, his directions took longer in the giving than in the following, for when she was finally able to drive away, it took her no more than five minutes to reach Mark's home site on the west side of Bear Harbor.

The instant she turned into the long gravel driveway that sliced through a copse of pine trees, she recognized from Mark's photos the splendid white two-story Victorian house at the end, complete with an inviting wrap-around porch. As she got closer she could just imagine a beautiful mix of roses and hollyhocks and lupines surrounding the porch in the summer.

A roofing company pickup with three men inside was pulling away when she stopped in front of the house and hopped out. Tracing with her eyes the parallel lines of a ladder still in place on the left side of the house, she saw Mark standing atop a tiny landing on the second floor, peering over the edge to see who had driven up.

Shading her eyes from the ball of orange now reflected low off the water, she hollered up, "You had better come down from there, Dr. Whitman. I've come a long way to share this sunset with you!"

"Margaret? MAGGIE ... you came!" He dropped his hammer over the side of the house and clambered down the ladder.

She was waiting below, her heart pumping wildly, her face transfixed in a mirthful smile.

Without a word, Mark scooped her into his arms and held her—held her and continued holding her, burrowing his cold, stubbled cheek into the warmth of her neck as though assuring himself she was

not a dream. Finally he released her and stepped back to study her face.

Hopeful brown eyes searched hers, and a spark of awareness leaped into full flame when they found the answer they sought.

"I've broken all records to get here in time for the sunset," Margaret teased, "and here you are blocking my view."

Mark shrugged out of the sweater he wore and wrapped it gently about her shoulders. Then, tucking his arm beneath the sweater and about her waist, he shepherded her around the house, past a well-tended herb garden, to a rocky promontory overlooking the dazzling crimson-and-orange-streaked waters of Penobscot Bay.

Silently, they stood side by side as the sun, within minutes, made its final showy descent, sliding majestically behind the Camden Hills on the opposite shore. Slowly, slowly its last trailing rays vanished, and the darkened waters before them blended gently into the silvery shadows left behind.

"Looks a little like a Winslow Homer, doesn't it?" she sighed.

"Hmmm ... or maybe a Wyeth," Mark replied as he squeezed her close. Then he pulled her around to face him, holding the edges of her sweater like reins. Looking deep into her eyes, he asked, "How many sunsets, Maggie?"

Realizing that Mark knew the answer even before he asked the question, knew that her being here WAS the answer, that she would not have come had there been any other, she said, "Well, for starters, I can savor one Sunday then ..."

His face clouded with disappointment, and she rushed on, "... then I have some furniture to store in Dallas and a granddaughter to visit in San Antonio before I come back here looking for permanent employment...that is, if you are hiring."

He turned loose of the sweater and encircled her tight in his arms, his husky voice muffled in her hair as he spoke. "All I need, Maggie, is a full time partner to watch the sunset."

"I can handle that!" she smiled sweetly, leaning back to seal the pact with a gentle kiss. "But, I should warn you, Dr. Whitman, that I have become absolutely committed to opening my tearoom!"

As Mark continued to look at her, his eyes brightened and danced, heralding some mysterious announcement to follow. "Come with me," he said, leading her by the hand inside the glass-enclosed porch overlooking the bay.

"Now, mind you, this is just an idea..." His voice trailed off as he crossed the room to a makeshift workbench in the corner and picked up a long wooden sign suspended from two shiny brass chains. "... and it'll be okay, Maggie, if you don't like it."

He came back, holding the sign turned away so she could not read it yet.

"It's so cheerful out here with all the natural light that I was planning to turn this area into Piney Point Inn's reading room ... but one evening I got to thinking of a better use for it. It was only wishful thinking at the time, of course, but I got so excited about the idea that I called the apartment in Paris on a Sunday when I knew you were likely cooking with Kate. I wanted to run it by you."

"But you didn't. You hung up!" Margaret protested, recalling the afternoon of the phone call and her strong premonition of Mark's presence.

"Yup, got cold feet and hung up." He grinned. "But, at least, I knew you were still there. And now that you are here, you can tell me what you think about it."

He turned the sign around then for Margaret to see the words he had carved neatly on the front. Her eyes glistened as she read:

MAGGIE'S TEAROOM

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