



VELVET

JANE FEATHER

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

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About the Author

Also by Jane Feather

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About the Book

Clad in black velvet and posing as a widowed French comtesse, Gabrielle de Beaucaire had returned to England for one purpose only – to ruin the man responsible for her young lover's death. But convincing the forbidding Nathaniel Praed, England's greatest spy master, that she would make the perfect agent for his secret service would not be easy. And even after Gabrielle had lured the devastatingly attractive lord to her bed, she would have to contend with his distrust – and with the unexpected hunger that his merest touch aroused.

From the moment he met her, Nathaniel Praed knew that the alluring Gabrielle de Beaucaire spelled trouble. But though he fought her outrageously bold advances, he could not stem the turbulent hunger that swept through him when the tall, titian-haired vixen pressed her lips to his. Now, against his better judgement, she is in his employ. And as Europe trembles at a tyrant's war and sinister minds plot against them, Nathaniel and Gabrielle find themselves at the mercy of an exquisite passion and a love that could save – or destroy – both their lives.

JANE FEATHER

Velvet

Richard: This one's for you.

Prologue

France, June 1806

The gibbous moon hung low in the sky over the forest of St. Cloud. A fox moved sleekly through the bracken, a rabbit sat on its hind legs, eyes fixed and staring, nose twitching as it caught the scent of the predator. Then it was gone, a flash of white scut vanishing into the undergrowth. An owl's hollow hoot hung over a glade where a deer drank at a trickling stream falling over flat stones.

The rustic pavilion in the small clearing was in darkness, or so it appeared to the figure cleaving to the trunk of a copper beech at the edge of the glade. Black-clad, he merged with his surroundings, a darker shadow in the shadows of the forest. His eyes stretched into the darkness toward the single-story building humped in the center of the clearing. Long glass doors opened onto a colonnaded porch encircling the pavilion, and a wisp of white fluttered from the open door facing the watcher as the night breezes caught the muslin curtains.

He wore soft-soled leather moccasins and made no sound as he slipped from concealment and approached the portico. Black britches, black shirt, hair concealed under a black cap, pale complexion darkened with burnt cork, the only touch of color came from the gleam of the long double-

bladed knife he held at his side. He was an assassin who knew his work well.

In a book-lined room on the far side of the circular pavilion, a single candle burned low in its socket, its light so negligible as to be invisible to anyone outside.

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord dozed beside the empty hearth, a book lying open, facedown on his lap. A soft snore bubbled from the slightly open lips of a thin aristocratic mouth. His head jerked on his chest as if some sound had pierced his sleep, then the breathing deepened again.

The assassin moved on his leather soles to the open window on the other side of the pavilion. His night's work was no concern of Monsieur de Talleyrand, Minister for Foreign Affairs to the Emperor Napoleon—or so he believed.

The bed in the room was a sumptuous affair, high and hung with filmy white curtains that rose and fell in the breeze as if the bed were a ship on the high seas. Amid rumpled white silk sheets and damask coverlets, two naked figures slept entwined, their bodies heavy with the deep relaxation of fulfillment. The woman lay sprawled on her back, one arm falling loosely around the neck of her partner, whose dark head was pillowed on her breast, one leg flung over her thighs, pressing her into the deep feather mattress with his weight. His back curved toward the French window, his neck open and vulnerable, the ribs sharply delineated beneath the taut skin.

The knife slid between the third and fourth ribs. Guillaume de Granville stirred as sharp pain invaded his sleep, his dreams of love. A small sound came from him, a sound of protest, of confusion, that faded into a tiny sigh and his body lost the tautness of living flesh, sinking into his mistress's body with a flaccid heaviness that bore no relation to the relaxation of a moment before.

Gabrielle should not have woken, the killing had been so silent, but her body was still in tune with Guillaume's after long hours of love, and as life left him she woke and sat up in the same instant. Her lover's body slid sideways and her sleep-filled eyes stared disbelieving at the crimson stain on the smooth pale flesh of his back. It was a small blemish and yet not for one minute, even in the dumb trance of new awakening, did she think it was insignificant. The deadly stain began to spread in a slow, inexorable flush.

It had been a matter of seconds since the assassin had entered, and as Gabrielle's stunned gaze lifted she met the cold, blank stare of pale eyes in a blackened countenance. Eyes without life, without emotion. She opened her mouth on a scream and the man lunged, the knife aimed to puncture her throat. She flung herself sideways, heaving the dead body of Guillaume de Granville aside with the superhuman strength of terror. Her scream ripped through the chamber, shattered the silence of the elegant pavilion.

For a second of uncharacteristic hesitation the assassin stood poised on the balls of his feet, his knife hand raised. Gabrielle's scream continued as if she would never run out of breath. Suddenly her cry was met and matched by the clanging of a bell, the violent barking of hounds. The assassin spun on his toes toward the French door and leaped with the agility of a woodland creature through the opening.

Talleyrand had woken from his doze at the first skirling scream, his hand going immediately to the bellrope beside his chair. At the loud summons, men trained to respond with the speed of thought were moving at a run through the pavilion toward the source of the screaming. In the kennels outside, the keeper, following standing orders, released the hounds.

The door to the bedchamber burst open. The men barely glanced at the bed, where the woman cradled the body of her lover, her eyes wild, her mouth still open on a

continuing shriek. They ran for the open door onto the portico, pistols in their hands.

Gabrielle's scream died as her breath finally failed. She gazed down at Guillaume's body, where the blood now pumped thickly from between his ribs. Her hand stroked his hair, feeling the curious deadness of him almost as if it were a purely intellectual sensation.

Talleyrand came into the room. With his halting limp, he crossed to the bed. Taking up the coverlet, he draped it around the woman's shoulders, covering her nakedness before he examined the body of Guillaume de Granville, feeling for a pulse at the throat.

"Who?" Gabrielle spoke the one word on a whisper. The wildness had gone from her eyes and her body was taut with a fierce energy that Talleyrand, who had known her from babyhood, recognized and understood.

"Will you avenge his death, Gabrielle?" he asked quietly.

"You know I will." The response was as direct as he had expected.

He walked over to the open French door. The baying of the hounds was fainter as they pursued their quarry deeper into the forest. But they had been on his heels within minutes and would catch him in the end, unless, like some spirit, the assassin had no scent and left no footprint.

Monsieur de Talleyrand had no truck with spirits. He dealt in the corporeal world, where cunning and intrigue were the only efficient defenses and the only sure means of advancement and influence, both personal and political. And Napoleon's Minister for Foreign Affairs was undoubtedly the preeminent exponent of those arts in Europe.

He turned back to the bed, his cool gaze holding a spark of compassion as it rested on the young woman's set white face. But compassion was not a useful emotion, and Gabrielle had been in the business long enough to know that. She wanted the tool of revenge in her hands. A

revenge that would, not coincidentally, benefit both France and Monsieur de Talleyrand-Perigord.

He began to speak, his well-modulated voice quiet yet crisp in the now silent chamber of death.

1

England, January 1807

"WHO'S THE TITIAN, Miles?" Nathaniel Praed put up his eye glass for a closer scrutiny.

Miles Bennet followed his friend's gaze, although the description could apply to only one woman in Lady Georgiana Vanbrugh's drawing room.

"Comtesse de Beaucaire," he replied. "A distant cousin of Georgie's on her mother's side. They've known each other almost since the cradle."

Nathaniel let his glass fall, commenting dryly, "Presumably there's a Comte de Beaucaire."

"Not anymore," Miles said, somewhat surprised at this show of interest. In general, Nathaniel was indifferent to the charms of Society women. "He died tragically soon after their marriage, I believe. Taken off by some fever very suddenly—all over in a couple of days, as I understand it." He shrugged. "Gabrielle's officially out of mourning now, but she still wears black much of the time."

"She knows what suits her," observed Lord Praed, putting up his glass again.

Miles had no fault to find with the observation. Gabrielle stood out in a room full of women in diaphanous pastels. Her dress of severely cut black velvet accentuated her unusual height and threw into startling relief the mass of

dark red hair tumbling in an unruly cloud of ringlets around a pale face.

"Magnificent emeralds," Nathaniel now mused, assessing with a connoisseur's eye the jewels at throat, ears, wrist, and hair.

"Part of the treasure chest of the Hawksworths, I imagine," Miles said. "Her mother was Imogen Hawksworth ... married the Duc de Gervais ... they were both victims of Madame Guillotine in the Terror. Gabrielle was the only child. There wasn't much to inherit after the Revolution, but her mother's jewels were saved somehow."

He glanced curiously at his friend. "Why the interest?"

"You have to admit, she's a striking woman. She must have been a child in the Terror. How did she survive?"

Miles withdrew a Sèvres snuffbox from his pocket and took a delicate pinch. "Her parents were killed at the height of the Terror, the end of 'ninety, I believe. Family friends managed to smuggle Gabrielle out of France. She must have been about eight. That's when she and Georgie became inseparable; they're much of an age, and Gabrielle became part of the family until it was safe for her to return to France. She has powerful connections—Madame de Staël and Talleyrand, to name but two. She's been living in France for the last six or seven years, with occasional visits to Georgie and Simon."

"Mmmm. That would explain why I know nothing about her ... and why you, my friend, as always, know everything." Nathaniel laughed slightly. Miles was well known for the sharpness of the ear he kept to the ground and the reliability of his information.

"Georgie *is* my cousin by marriage," Miles said as if defending the source of his information.

"Then you are perfectly placed to effect an introduction." A silvery eyebrow quirked.

"But of course," Miles agreed promptly. "You can hardly spend the entire houseparty without meeting each other. I

own I'm interested to see what you make of each other."

"Now, just what does that mean?"

Miles chuckled. "You'll see. Come."

Nathaniel followed his friend across the drawing room to where Gabrielle de Beaucaire stood in a small group by the window.

Gabrielle watched his approach over the rim of her champagne glass. She knew perfectly well who he was. Nathaniel Praed was her reason for being there, just as she was his, although, if Simon had kept his word, he didn't know that yet. It pleased her that she should have the upper hand in this respect. It gave her the opportunity to make some assessments of the man unhindered by the role he would undoubtedly adopt once he knew exactly who and what she was.

"Gabrielle, may I introduce Lord Praed." Miles bowed, smiled, gestured to his companion.

"My lord." She gave him a silk-gloved hand as cool as her smile. "Delighted."

"Enchanté, countess." He bowed over her hand. "I understand you're recently arrived from France."

"My parentage makes me persona grata on both sides of the Channel," she said. "An enviable position, I'm sure you'll agree."

Her eyes were the color of dark charcoal, framed in thick black lashes beneath black eyebrows. It was a startling contrast to the red hair and the very white skin.

"On the contrary," Nathaniel said, nettled by an indefinable hint of mockery in her gaze. "I would consider it uncomfortable to have a foot in both camps during wartime."

"You're surely not questioning my loyalty, Lord Praed?" The black brows rose. "The only family I have are in England ... in this room, in fact. Both my parents and all my father's family perished in the Terror." A chilly smile touched the wide, generous mouth, and she put her head

on one side, waiting to see how he would respond to being put in quite such an uncomfortable spot.

Nathaniel didn't miss a beat, and not a hint of his annoyance showed on the lean, ascetic face. "I would hardly be so impertinent, madame, particularly on such a short acquaintance. May I offer my condolences on your husband's death. I'm sure he was a loyal supporter of the Bourbons even if expediency required token submission to the emperor."

Now, that had taken the wind out of her sails. Satisfied, he watched the flash of surprise at this hard-hitting return of serve.

"He was a Frenchman, sir. A man who loved his country," she replied quietly, and her eyes held his for a moment.

Nathaniel was of middle height, and the tall woman's charcoal eyes were almost on a level with his own; despite this proximity, he couldn't read the message they contained. But he had the unshakable conviction that Gabrielle de Beaucaire was toying with him in some way—that she knew something he didn't. It was an unfamiliar sensation for Lord Praed, and he didn't care for it in the least.

"Oh, I'm so glad you two have been introduced." Lady Georgiana Vanbrugh glided toward them, a beautiful woman, her daintily rounded figure delicately clad in lilac spider gauze. She slipped her arm through Gabrielle's and smiled with the genuine warmth and pleasure she always felt when she believed her friends were enjoying themselves.

"It's such a pity Simon had to go up to town so suddenly, Lord Praed. He charged me most expressly to tell you how sorry he is not to be here to greet you. But when duty calls ..." She smiled, lifted round white shoulders so that the graceful swell of her breasts rose from her décolletage. "He

assured me he'd do everything possible to be here in time for dinner tomorrow."

Two more different women would be hard to find, Nathaniel reflected, as they stood arm in arm, severe black velvet against lilac gossamer. The tall, white-skinned redhead with high cheekbones, cleft chin, and retroussé nose could only be called striking, if a man found clearly defined irregular features, a crooked smile, and a tall, willowy figure attractive. If he didn't, then one would be inclined to dismiss her as without charm. Georgiana, on the other hand, by any standards, was conventionally lovely with soft feminine curves, a peaches and cream complexion, small regular features, and gleaming golden hair.

"Members of the government are not their own masters, particularly in wartime," Nathaniel said easily.

"You speak as one who knows, Lord Praed," Gabrielle said. "Are you also involved in government work?"

Why did it sound as if she had some underlying point to make? He looked sharply at her and met a calm, cool gaze and that crooked little smile. "No," he said brusquely. "I am not."

Her smile widened as if again she was relishing some secret knowledge before she turned to Miles, a highly entertained but so far silent observer of the exchange.

"Do you hunt tomorrow, Miles?"

"If you do," he said with a gallant bow. "Although I doubt I'll keep up with you." He gestured to Nathaniel. "Gabrielle's a bruising rider to hounds, Nathaniel. You'd do well not to let her give you a lead."

"Oh, I'm sure Lord Praed will take any fence that presents itself," Gabrielle said, still smiling.

"I've never failed a fence yet, countess." He made a curt bow and walked away, annoyed that he'd allowed her to provoke him, yet intrigued despite himself ... almost like a rabbit fascinated by the cobra, he thought irritably as he

accepted a fresh glass of champagne from a hovering footman. A distinct aura of trouble clung to Gabrielle de Beaucaire.

"You don't appear to like Lord Praed, Gabby." Georgiana looked half reproachful, half anxious. "Did he upset you?"

Oh, he merely killed the man whose life was dearer to me than my own. "Of course not," Gabrielle said. "Was I rude? You know what my tongue's like when it runs away with me."

"I thought you'd find a sparring partner in Nathaniel," Miles remarked. "And I suspect you'll find him a worthy opponent." He grinned. "However, I think you won that round, so perhaps I'd better go and smooth his ruffled feathers." He went off chuckling with the slightly malicious pleasure of one who enjoys stirring up the complacent.

"Miles is wicked," Georgie declared. "Nathaniel Praed's his closest friend, I don't know why he so relishes making mischief."

"Oh, dear," Gabrielle said. "Should I beg Lord Praed's pardon?" Her expression had changed completely. There was warmth in her eyes as she smiled at her cousin and a vibrancy to the previously bland expression. "I didn't mean to disgrace you, Georgie, by offending your guest."

"Stuff!" Georgie declared. "I don't like him myself, really, but he's a most particular friend of Simon's. They seem to have a kind of partnership." She shrugged. "I expect he's something to do with the government, whatever he might say. But he's such a cold fish. He terrifies me, if you want the truth. I always feel tongue-tied around him."

"Well, he doesn't intimidate me," Gabrielle declared. "For all that his eyes are like stones at the bottom of a pond."

The butler announced dinner at this point and Gabrielle went in on the arm of Miles Bennet. Nathaniel Praed was sitting opposite her, and she was able to observe him covertly while responding to the easy social chatter of her

dinner partners on either side. His eyes were definitely stonelike, she thought. Brownish-green, hard and flat in that lean face, with its chiseled mouth and aquiline nose. He reminded her of some overbred hunter. There was the same nervous energy to the slender athletic frame, supple and wiry rather than muscular. His hair was his most startling feature: crisp and dark, except for silver-gray swatches at his temples, matching the silver eyebrows.

She became abruptly aware of his eyes on her and understood that her own observation had ceased to be covert ... in fact, not to put too fine a point on it, she'd been staring at him with unabashed interest.

Thankful, not for the first time in her life, that she rarely blushed, Gabrielle turned her attention to the man on her left with an animated inquiry as to whether he was familiar with Sir Walter Scott's poem "The Lay of the Last Minstrel."

In the absence of their host, the men didn't sit long over their port and soon joined the ladies in the drawing room. To his irritation, Nathaniel found himself looking for the titian, but the Comtesse de Beaucaire was conspicuous by her absence. He wandered with apparent casualness through the smaller salons, where various games had been set up, but there was no sign of the redhead among the exuberant players of lottery tickets or the more intense card players at the whist tables.

He examined the faces of the men at the whist tables. One of them at some point in the week would be revealed as Simon's candidate ... once Simon decided to stop playing silly undercover games. He'd dragged him down here with the promise of a perfect candidate for the service, refusing to divulge his identity, choosing instead to play a silly game with a ridiculous form of introduction.

It was typical Simon, of course. For a grown man, he took a childish delight in games and surprises. Nathaniel took his tea and sat in a corner of the drawing room,

frowning at the various musical performances succeeding each other on harp and pianoforte.

"Miss Bayberry's performance doesn't seem to find favor," Miles observed, wandering over to his friend's corner. "Her voice is a trifle thin, I grant you."

"I hadn't noticed," Nathaniel said shortly. "Besides, I'm no judge, as well you know."

"No, you never have had time for life's niceties," Miles agreed with a tranquil smile. "How's young Jake?"

At this reference to his small son, Nathaniel's frown deepened. "Well enough, according to his governess."

"And according to Jake ...?" Miles prompted.

"For heaven's sake, Miles, the lad's six years old; I'm not about to consult him. He's far too young to have an opinion on anything." Nathaniel shrugged and said dismissively, "From all reports, he appears obedient enough, so it's to be presumed he's happy enough."

"Yes, I suppose so." Miles didn't sound too convinced, but he knew which of his friend's tender spots were better left without exacerbation. If the child didn't bear such an uncanny resemblance to his mother, maybe it would be different.

He changed the subject. "So what inducements bring you to Vanbrugh Court? Country houseparties aren't your usual style of entertainment."

Nathaniel shrugged with an appearance of nonchalance. Not even Miles knew how Nathaniel Praed served his country. "Quite frankly, now that I'm here, I don't know. Simon was at his most pressing and just wore me down. Agreeing seemed the only way to achieve peace. He seemed to think it would amuse me. You know what he's like." Nathaniel shook his head in mingled exasperation and resignation. "He's never taken no for an answer, not even at Harrow." He glared around the room. "You'd think in the circumstances, he'd manage to be here himself."

"He does have a fairly lofty position in Portland's ministry," Miles pointed out mildly. "Anyway, he'll be here tomorrow."

"And in the meantime we have to endure this tedium with an appearance of good grace."

Miles chuckled. "You're an ill-tempered bastard, Nathaniel. The most thoroughgoing misanthropist." He glanced around the room. "I wonder where Gabrielle's disappeared to."

"Mmmm," responded Lord Praed, taking snuff.

Miles cast his friend a sharp look. For some reason the indifferent mumble didn't ring true. Nathaniel hadn't always been a misanthropist. It had taken Helen's death to turn him into this introspective, chilly character who seemed to delight in rebuffing all friendly overtures. Most of his friends had given up by now; only Miles and Simon persevered, partly because they'd known Nathaniel since boyhood and knew what a stout and unstinting friend he was when a man needed a friend, and partly because they both knew that despite his attitude, Nathaniel needed and relied on their loyalty and friendship, that without it he would retreat from the world completely and be utterly irreclaimable.

A man couldn't grieve forever, and the old Nathaniel would one day inhabit his skin again. Perhaps this concealed interest in Gabrielle de Beaucaire was a hopeful sign.

"I expect she decided to have an early night," he commented. "Be fresh for the hunt tomorrow."

"Somehow, I doubt that. The countess didn't strike me as a woman in need of much sleep in any circumstances." Nathaniel's tone was disapproving; but then, he made a habit of disapproval, Miles reflected.

Nathaniel went up to his own room shortly after, leaving the sounds of merriment behind. He had some work to do,

and reading reports struck him as an infinitely more rewarding way of spending the shank of the evening.

Around midnight the house fell silent. House-parties kept early hours, particularly with a hunt on the morrow. Nathaniel yawned and put aside the report from the agent at the court of Czar Alexander. The czar had appointed a new commander in chief of his army. It remained to be seen whether Bennigsen would do better than the enfeebled Kamensky when it came to engaging Napoleon's troops in Eastern Prussia. Ostensibly the czar was fulfilling his promise to support Prussia against Napoleon, but Nathaniel's agent reported the vigorous opposition of the czar's mother to a policy that could sacrifice Russia for Prussia. It remained to be seen which way the czar would jump in the end. It was hard to second-guess a man who, according to this latest report, was described by his closest associate as "a combination of weakness, uncertainty, terror, injustice, and incoherence that drives one to grief and despair."

Nathaniel swung out of bed and went to open the window. Whatever the temperature, he was unable to sleep with the window closed. Several narrow escapes had given him a constitutional dislike of enclosed spaces.

It was a bright, clear night, the air crisp, the stars sharp in the limitless black sky. He flung open the window, leaning his elbows on the sill, looking out over the expanse of smooth lawn where frost glittered under the starlight. It would be a beautiful morning for the hunt.

He climbed back into bed and blew out his candle.

He heard the rustling of the Virginia creeper almost immediately. His hand slipped beneath his pillow to his constant companion, the small silver-mounted pistol. He lay very still, every muscle held in waiting, his ears straining into the darkness. The small scratching rustling sounds continued, drawing closer to the open window. Someone

was climbing the thick ancient creeper clinging to the mellow brick walls of the Jacobean manor house.

His hand closed more firmly over the pistol and he hitched himself up on one elbow, his eyes on the square of the window, waiting.

Hands competently gripped the edge of the windowsill, followed by a dark head. The nocturnal visitor swung a leg over the sill and hitched himself upright, straddling the sill.

"Since you've only just snuffed your candle, I'm sure you're still awake," Gabrielle de Beaucaire said into the dark, still room. "And I'm sure you have a pistol, so please don't shoot, it's only me."

Nathaniel was rarely taken by surprise, and when he was, he was a master at concealing it. On this occasion, however, his training deserted him.

"*Only!*" he exclaimed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Guess," his visitor challenged cheerfully from her perch.

"You'll have to forgive me, but I don't find guessing games amusing," he declared in clipped accents. He sat up, his pistol still in his hand, and stared at the dark shape outlined against the moonlight. That aura of trouble surrounding Gabrielle de Beaucaire had not been a figment of his imagination.

"Perhaps I should be flattered," he said icily. "Am I to assume unbridled lust lies behind the honor of this visit, madame?" His eyes narrowed.

Disconcertingly, the woman appeared to be impervious to irony. She laughed. A warm, merry sound that Nathaniel found as incongruous in the circumstances as it was disturbingly attractive.

"Not at this point, Lord Praed; but there's no saying what the future might hold." It was a mischievous and outrageous statement that rendered him temporarily speechless.

She took something out of the pocket of her britches and held it on the palm of her hand. "I'm here to present my credentials."

She swung off the windowsill and approached the bed, a sinuous figure in her black britches and glimmering white shirt.

He leaned sideways, struck flint on tinder, and relit the bedside candle. The dark red hair glowed in the light as she extended her hand, palm upward, toward him, and he saw what she held.

It was a small scrap of black velvet cut with a ragged edge.

"Well, well." The evening's puzzles were finally solved. Lord Praed opened a drawer in the bedside table and took out a piece of tissue paper. Unfolding it, he revealed the twin of the scrap of material.

"I should have guessed," he said pensively. "Only a woman would have come up with such a fanciful idea." He took the velvet from her extended palm and fitted the ragged edge to the other piece, making a whole square. "So you're Simon's surprise. No wonder he was so secretive."

He sat back against the pillows, an expression of boredom now on the lean features. "This is a tedious waste of time, madame. I don't employ women in my business, and Simon knows it."

"How very definite you sound," Gabrielle said, seemingly unperturbed. "Women make good spies. They have different assets and techniques from men, I would imagine."

"Oh, they're tricky enough, I grant you," he declared as indifferently as before. "But they're more vulnerable ... they hurt more easily."

Gabrielle shrugged. "If a woman decides to take the risk and accept the consequences, it's hardly your responsibility, Lord Praed."

"On the contrary. Each agent is part of an interlocking network ... dependent upon one another. In my experience, women are not good team members. And they don't stand up well to pressure." His lips thinned. "You understand me, I'm sure."

Gabrielle nodded. "Women are more likely to talk under torture."

"Not more likely," he said with a shrug. "Just more quickly. In the end, everyone talks. But the lives of an entire cell can depend on the extra hour a man can hold out."

"I believe I have as much fortitude as most men," Gabrielle declared. *And certainly as much experience in your business, Sir Spymaster*—but that was a private reflection. "I can move freely between England and France," she continued. "I speak both languages without accent." She sat on the edge of his bed with an air of calm assurance that Nathaniel found supremely irritating. It seemed calculated to increase the disadvantages of his position, huddled in bed in his nightshirt like some invalid.

"You'll have to forgive me," he said sardonically, "but I don't trust women." He began to count off on his fingers. "As I said, they don't make good team members; they lack concentration; they can't focus on one task; and in general they fail to grasp the significance of information. I do not employ women."

Clearly a man of blind and stupid prejudice. It was amazing he was as successful and highly regarded as he was.

"I also know Talleyrand very well." She continued to enumerate her credentials as if she hadn't heard him. "He was a close friend of my father's and his house is always open to me. I move in political circles in Paris and have entrees at court. I even know Fouché quite well. I could be very useful to you, Lord Praed. I don't think a spymaster can afford to indulge his prejudices about women in

general when faced with such advantages in a potential agent."

Nathaniel hung on to his temper by a thread. "I am not prejudiced toward women in general," he said in frigid accents. "As it happens—"

"Oh, good," she interrupted cheerfully. "I'm glad we've established that. Working together could be tricky if you really dislike women. Simon seemed to think that I could be put to good use discovering the identities of the French agents in London."

"Simon is not responsible for selecting agents, madame." Why did he have this almost desperate feeling of facing an immovable object?

"No," she agreed. "You are. But I'm sure you take advice. And Simon is a very senior minister in Lord Portland's government." She examined her fingernails with an air of great interest.

Her hands were long and narrow, he noticed, the nails short, the fingers white and slender. He pulled himself up sharply. She had just made the outrageous suggestion that he was bound to submit to the instructions of Simon Vanbrugh. Only the prime minister had the power of veto over the affairs of the secret service ... and even that was open to question.

"You are greatly mistaken, madame, if you think I can be influenced against my better judgment by anyone. My word is the last one, countess, and the only one that counts. I do not employ women agents."

"There are exceptions to every rule, my lord," she pointed out with a tranquil smile. "My credentials are impressive, don't you think?"

They were, of course. Simon hadn't exaggerated when he'd described the potential usefulness of this candidate to the service. Her sex, of course, explained the elaborate setup. Simon knew that if he'd been honest, Nathaniel would have refused point blank even to see her. But

presumably Simon had tasted the mettle of Gabrielle de Beaucaire and was no more capable of convincing her to take no for an answer than he himself seemed to be.

He spoke now with calculated hostility, flavoring the words with insult. "Oh, yes, very impressive, madame. As impressive in the service of France as in the service of England. As I understand it, you've spent most of the last few years in France, and now I'm supposed to believe you're eager to betray France to her enemy? It's testing my credulity a little too far, I'm afraid."

He watched her expression, looking for the slightest telltale signs of hesitation, of shiftiness—a slide of the eye, a touch of color to the cheek, a quiver of the lips. The candid charcoal gaze didn't waver, however, and the pale skin remained translucent.

"It's not an unreasonable question," she said steadily. "Let me explain. I've always felt closer to my mother's side of the family." Her voice was no longer light but quiet and somber. "I spent most of my childhood here with Georgie's family during the Terror. My father was a supporter of reform before the Revolution, but he was always a royalist and would have supported the Bourbons if they'd survived the Terror. I can best serve my parents' memories and my own loyalties by helping to defeat Napoleon and restore the Bourbon monarchy to the throne of France."

She put her head on one side, and a smile enlivened the somber countenance. "So, Lord Praed, I am at the service of the English secret service."

"Your husband ... ?"

Shadows darkened her eyes to black. "He loved France, sir. He would agree to anything that would benefit his beloved country ... and Napoleon is not good for France."

"No." Nathaniel found himself agreeing, forgetting for a moment the reason for this discussion. "In the long run, I'm sure that's true. Although military victories seem to indicate otherwise," he added wryly.

Her explanation was convincing. His reports indicated these days that many concerned, thinking Frenchmen were beginning to understand that Napoleon's increasing megalomania was detrimental to his country. He wanted to control the whole of Europe, but the time would come when the countries he'd subjugated and humiliated would form alliances and rise up against the tyrant because they'd have nothing further to lose. And when that happened, it would be ordinary French men and women who would pay the price for one man's overweening ambition. Working to bring down Napoleon was not necessarily the act of a traitor to France.

And Gabrielle de Beaucaire was superbly placed to gather the kind of information it could take another agent months to discover.

But he didn't employ women.

He regarded her in brooding silence. She lacked something essential to femininity, he thought, some weakness or vulnerability that he associated with the female sex. She was tensile, strong, unwavering. But with a sense of humor. And something else, something he'd learned to recognize in a good spy a long time ago. He believed she had that indefinable and essential quality of bending, like the willow tree in a wind. A spy had to bend, to adapt, to switch rapidly from stance to stance.

And there were exceptions to every rule, but not this one.

"I don't deny your credentials, but I do not employ women. There is nothing more to be said. Now, perhaps you'd do me the favor of removing yourself. I don't mean to be inhospitable ..." He tried another heavily ironic smile, lifting one eyebrow. But if he'd hoped to disconcert her, he was disappointed again.

"Very well." She rose from the bed. "Then I'll bid you good night, Lord Praed." She went toward the door. "You won't mind if I go out this way?"

"No," he said, seizing on a legitimate complaint. "On the contrary. Perhaps you'd like to explain why you chose to arrive in such unorthodox fashion. What the devil was wrong with the door in the first place? The house is asleep."

"It seemed more interesting ... more amusing," she said with a shrug.

"And more dangerous." His voice was harsh. "This is not a game. We're not in this business for amusement. We don't take unnecessary risks in the service. You may have the credentials, madame, but you obviously do not have the wisdom or the intelligence."

Gabrielle stood still, her hand on the doorknob, her lower lip clipped between her teeth as she fought to conceal the violent upsurge of anger at such stinging scorn. He didn't know how far off the mark he was. She *never* took unnecessary risks, and this one had been *entirely* justified in terms of her plan. But Nathaniel Praed was not to know that, of course.

With a supreme effort she conjured up a tone of dignified defense. "I'm no fool, Lord Praed. I can tell the difference between games and reality. Nothing was at stake tonight, so I could see no reason not to indulge myself in a little unorthodox exercise."

"Apart from compromising your reputation," he remarked aridly.

At that she laughed again, and again he was attracted to the deep, warm sound. "Not so," she said. "The house is asleep, as you said. And even if anyone saw me scaling the walls, they'd hardly recognize the Comtesse de Beaucaire in this outfit." She passed a hand in a sweeping gesture down her body, delineating her frame. "Would they?"

"It would depend on how well they know you," he said, as aridly as before, reflecting that once seen like this, Gabrielle would be impossible to forget.

"Well, no harm's done," she said with a dismissive shake of her head. "And I do take your point, sir."

"I'm relieved. Not that it makes any difference to anything. Good night." He blew out his candle.

"Good night, Lord Praed." The door closed behind her.

He lay on his back, staring up into the darkness. Hopefully that was the end of any involvement with Gabrielle de Beaucaire. He'd give Simon a piece of his mind tomorrow. What the hell had he thought he was doing, encouraging that troublesome woman to see herself as an agent? She presumably had some romantic, glamorous conception of what was at best a dirty and dangerous business, and Simon was always susceptible to female persuasion.

Gabrielle stood for a second in the corridor outside, hugging the shadows while she slowly unclenched her fists and breathed deeply until her tight muscles relaxed. He hadn't guessed her tension, she was sure of it. But her entire body ached as if she'd been tied in knots. He'd accept her in the end, he had to. Simon had said it would take time and she'd have to appeal to the most unorthodox aspects of his nature if she was to overcome his resistance. She'd certainly tried that tonight, and tomorrow was another day.

But how difficult it was to conceal her rage and the longing to hurt him as he had hurt Guillaume. Oh, it hadn't been his hand that had wielded the knife, but it had been at his orders. He hadn't known Guillaume, not even known his real name, and yet he'd had him murdered.

How could she possibly seduce such a man? But she had to. She would remember Guillaume, relive his death, and then she would be able to do what had to be done.

2

THERE WERE TWO men in the comfortable study at the back of the tall house on rue d'Anjou. They were an ill-matched pair, Napoleon's Minister for Foreign Affairs and his Minister of Police. Talleyrand, the elegant aristocrat, and the brutal-featured Fouché were as unlike physically as they were in their choice of methods and techniques. But they were both experts at working in the shadows, at achieving their purposes along the tortuous winding paths of secrecy and intrigue, diplomatic in the one case, mercilessly pragmatic in the other.

After Napoleon, they were the two most influential and powerful men in France and, by extension, Napoleonic Europe. In general, they rarely collaborated, each leaving the other his sphere of operations, each courting the ear of Napoleon in his own way. But on this cold January night in Paris, with Napoleon preparing to face the Russian army in Eastern Prussia, they had come together to discuss the progress of a plan where both their interests meshed.

"She was making contact this weekend at the Vanbrugh house in Kent." Talleyrand sipped cognac, gesturing to his guest that he should refill his own glass.

Fouché's fingers around the delicate crystal decanter were thick and coarse, the nails ragged, tufts of hair sprouting on the red knuckles. Talleyrand tapped the tapering white soft-skinned fingers of a pampered aristocrat on the polished wooden arm of his chair.