

The overhead sign lit up in red letters. “No Smoking,” it warned.

A disembodied voice came over the air, interrupting the stream of music that flowed through Billie’s headphones and bringing her eyes up from the in-flight magazine in her lap.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be landing at the Nice-Cote d’Azur airport in twenty minutes. It is now two-fifteen. We ask at this time that you observe the ‘No Smoking’ sign. Kindly place your seatbacks in an upright position and fasten your seat belts. Please remain seated until the aircraft comes to a halt at the terminal. On behalf of the co-pilot and crew I want to thank you for flying Air France.”

Minutes later the huge wheels of the jetliner touched down with barely a skid. The forty-five minute ride by taxi from Nice to Monaco curved around the high rocky promontories outlining the French Riviera. Below, the Mediterranean Sea sparkled like a magnificent turquoise jewel in the sunlight.

The tiny principality was a sunlit paradise. Its shores were lapped by the Mediterranean, its back was shielded by the Alps. In the harbor a flotilla of pleasure crafts bobbed up and down, sails spanking bright in the midday sunshine. Luxury cruisers traveled great distances to lay anchor in these calm waters. Slim sailboats made the jaunt up the coast from St. Tropez, Cannes and Antibes.

Playboys and royalty, the rich and the *nouveau riche*, were drawn to the operetta-like charm of Monte Carlo. The palm-lined boulevards were cluttered with sleek sports cars. At the nearby casino grim-faced men and beautiful women watched intently as the roulette wheel turned slower and slower and finally stopped. The croupiers, poker-faced men dressed in ubiquitous black, raked in the chips like autumn leaves. This was a world of roulette and baccarat, *chemin-de-fer* and *boule*, blackjack and craps, where fortunes were lost on a roll of the dice and empires collapsed with a deal of the cards.

The halls of the world-famous casino rang with the names of the famous and infamous. But it was more than a glimpse of royalty or the autograph of a celebrity that drew the crowds this May. It was the *Cours dans la Cite*—the Grand Prix race for Formula I cars. Run through the streets of the principality, its course was lined with specially built stands from which the crowd could watch for the price of a ticket. The wealthy watched from the balconies or gardens of the hotels or from the decks of their yachts in the harbor.

In her hotel room Billie slung her leather camera bag from her shoulder and draped it over the back of a chair. From her purse she produced the appropriate tip for the bellman who had carried her luggage from the taxi. When he was gone, she removed the blue linen jacket of her two-piece suit and tossed it onto the bed.

Her suite comprised a living room with a portable bar, a dressing room with lighted vanity mirror, a full bath, and a bedroom with floral silk walls and a silk-curtained four-poster. Floor to ceiling mirrors created the illusion of immense space.

She opened the bedroom doors and stepped out onto a balcony where the air was unusually warm and languid for this time of year and a soft breeze wafted up from the shore to rustle the ends of her hair. Breathing in the sweetly scented air, she tried to put out of her mind the disconcerting fact that Christopher Hughes would be arriving on a later flight. It wasn’t enough that she’d been coerced into taking this assignment at the risk of losing her job, but he was going to be here as well, having decided to write the story himself that would accompany her photographs.

“It’s some view, isn’t it?” asked a voice from behind.

Startled, Billie whirled around to see a man coming toward her. He moved with the easy, loping gait of a wolf, and his eyes were the most brilliant shade of blue she'd ever seen. He was tall and broad-shouldered and dressed casually in tight-fitting jeans and a faded denim shirt. His tanned face, smiling pleasantly, was ruggedly handsome, with a straight nose that bore the tiniest suggestion of a bump at its bridge, full lips, and a finely chiseled chin with the hint of a cleft. Coal-black hair fell in unruly locks over his forehead.

Those cobalt eyes assessed her in the most blatant manner, traversing every curve and contour concealed beneath her blue linen skirt and white silk blouse. Extending his hand, he said in a richly resonant voice, "Hi. My name's Brice Logan."

Billie was not even aware of placing her own hand in his strong, tanned one, until she felt the pressure of his fingers closing over hers. Inwardly, she was aghast. This was Brice Logan? She'd had no idea he was so good-looking. Struck by the impact of his looks, she grinned back at him.

"Do you have a name?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, finding her voice. "It's Billie Gentry."

"Billie," he repeated thoughtfully in that mellow tone that sent an unexpected chill through her. "Is that short for Wilhemina or something?"

She slipped her hand from his. "No, it's just Billie. I guess my father was hoping for a boy to follow in his footsteps."

"And what footsteps would that be?"

"Auto-racing."

Instant recognition lit up in his blue eyes. "You're Vic Gentry's daughter?"

She nodded. "You've heard of my father?"

"Who hasn't? He was only one of the best drivers in the world. It's a shame what happened to him."

Unprepared for the sudden, unexpected reminder, she turned away quickly.

"You must be here for the race," he said.

"Me and a hundred thousand others." She wished they could talk about something else, but what else could she discuss here in Monaco during race week with the driver who was expected to take all the honors in this year's competition?

He followed her from the balcony back inside and gestured to the leather bag slung over the back of the chair. "Let me guess. Camera equipment."

"Do I detect a note of scorn in your tone?"

"It wouldn't be so bad if people would keep their cameras pointed at the scenery," he complained. "But when they point them at me, well, yeah, I guess you could call it scorn."

"I take it you don't like having you picture taken."

"That's right. I have enough to worry about with the race. And this year it's worse. *Attention!* is sending someone over to cover it. Just what I need, some leech of a photographer tagging after me."

Billie blanched at being called a leech but she managed a level tone. "Don't you like the idea of having a feature story about you in one of America's hottest publications?"

He gave an indifferent shrug. "It interferes with my work...and my play...if you know what I mean. Besides, most of the photographers those magazines send over are either snot-nosed kids who know nothing, or hotshots who think they know it all. None of them knows a damned thing about auto-racing."

Struggling to maintain her composure, Billie said tersely, "You make all photographers sound alike."

"They are. Frankly, I'm not looking forward to it. I wish I'd never consented to it."

Billie was doing her own wishing at the moment. She wished she'd had the nerve to tell Christopher Hughes just what he could do with this job. She wished, too, that she'd never set eyes on Brice Logan. How dare he presume that all photographers were alike? Surely, it was his own antagonism that made his previous photo sessions go poorly. He was certainly one of the most self-centered, arrogant men she'd ever met, even if he was the handsomest.

And that was something else she didn't like about him. His handsome face had a way of catching her reluctant stare and holding it until her cheeks blazed. There was a devilry in those glorious eyes and a mocking tone in his voice. And the ease with which his gaze lingered over her only added to her growing disdain.

She turned to face him, her eyes refusing to retreat from his. "If you will excuse me, Mr. Logan," she said tautly, "I would like to finish unpacking."

He flashed a disarming smile. "Is it something I said?"

She was tempted to answer as candidly as his question deserved. Instead, she said, "I don't recall having invited you in."

His smile turned sheepish. "I guess I did just wander in on my own. We're neighbors. My suite is next door. We have adjoining balconies. Isn't that convenient?"

"I can't imagine why it should be. And now, Mr. Logan—"

"Brice," he corrected.

"Very well, Brice," she said through clenched teeth, making her displeasure known. "Would you please leave now?"

He turned and strode to the door without another word.

Billie finished unpacking, then stripped off her clothes and stepped into a hot shower. It had been a long flight, and she was tired. With her hair still damp she slipped between the sheets of the silk-curtained bed for a much-needed nap.

She had just dozed off when the faint sounds of voices disturbed her slumber. They were coming from the next suite, carrying through the open window.

A woman's soft, breathless giggles were accompanied by a man's lust-filled laughter.

"You are so good to your little Renata," cooed the woman in French-accented English. She gave out with a little yelp. "Ooo, you are a naughty boy. You must not do that. You know it drives me wild."

"You love it Renata, and you know it."

Billie stiffened when she recognized the mellow tone of Brice Logan's voice. A flush of embarrassment stained her cheeks when she realized what was going on in the next suite. She shut her eyes and tried to force herself to sleep, but the voices would not let her. One moment they dropped to teasing whispers, and then rose to taunting laughter. Most of all she heard Brice Logan's masculine groans, and the woman named Renata's breathless words spoken in French.

It was only when the lovers had finished and most likely drifted off into the dreamy half-sleep that follows love-making that Billie was able to doze off at last. Into her dream she carried the unwanted image of two bright blue eyes sparkling out of a handsome, suntanned face. Awake, she would have rebelled at such an image, particularly after getting a taste of his unbearable arrogance, but in the privacy of her dream it was easy to imagine that it was her ear into which he whispered, and that it was her flesh his caress turned to fire.