

# Moonshine



Victoria Clayton

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**Moonshine**

«HarperCollins»

## Clayton V.

Moonshine / V. Clayton — «HarperCollins»,

A witty, charming romantic comedy from the author of *Clouds Among the Stars*. Roberta is appalled to have to abandon her perfect life in London to return to the family home and look after her mother, who has taken breaking her hip as a sign to stay in bed all day reading romance novels. Her involvement with a married politician may have been a direct consequence of this. When the inevitable scandal breaks, Roberta flees – and accepts a job as housekeeper to an eccentric family, and is summoned to their family home – an enormous castle in the Irish countryside. Arriving in Ireland, Roberta takes a hair-raising pony and trap ride in the driving rain to reach her destination: Curraghcourt. It is a grand and imposing castle, although it has fallen into a state of bad disrepair. And when she meets the family, Roberta begins to understand why. The owner's wife, Violet, is lying in her room in a coma. His charming but vague sister is addicted to poetry; and his mistress Sissy has a private line to the fairies. Completing the family unit are three dysfunctional children. The novel follows Roberta's efforts to restore Curraghcourt and reform the wayward family. She quickly finds redeeming qualities in even the most infuriating characters and falls in love with the melancholy madness of the household. The wonderful cast of characters includes eccentric friends, the fiery yet sentimental neighbours, assorted hangers-on and admirers. Victoria Clayton has written an enchanting novel, a wonderful social comedy.

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**VICTORIA CLAYTON**

***Moonshine***

**HARPER**

## **DEDICATION**

Remembering Constance Boyle, my Irish grandmother.

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## ONE

The waves scattered the lights from the Swansea to Cork ferry as though tossing silver coins to the marine life of the Bristol Channel. The wind flung the contents of my stomach after them. I bitterly regretted the Battenberg cake.

‘You don’t look well, dear,’ the motherly stewardess had said. ‘Take my advice and have a little something to settle your insides. The crossing’s going to be rough.’

Discouraging though this sounded, they were the first kind words that had been addressed to me all day. She had put down the plate before me and urged me to eat. It would have been impolite to refuse. Now my imagination was haunted by those lurid pink and yellow squares of cake, clad in wrinkled marzipan. As I pressed the cold iron of the ship’s rail against my burning face a sense of monstrous ill-usage overwhelmed me and I groaned aloud.

‘You poor thing! I’ve suffered from *mal de mer* myself and it’s no fun. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where thy victory?’

The voice was male, self-assured, amused. I suppose there is something comical about seasickness if you don’t happen to be feeling it. I wanted neither the sympathy nor the teasing but nausea and faintness made flight impossible. I would have fallen if the stranger had not taken my arm.

‘Steady! Come on, let’s sit down.’

He half carried me to a row of benches. Naturally, at this hour of howling purgatorial darkness, they were empty.

‘I feel awful!’ I moaned. I would have added, ‘The human race is despicable and life is a hideous pantomime,’ if I had not, even in this moment of crisis, a disinclination to make myself utterly ridiculous.

‘It’s bad, I know. You just want to die.’ He pushed me on to a seat and sat down beside me.

‘I do!’ I sobbed, the kindness in his voice encouraging me to give way to melodrama. ‘You’d better let me throw myself in. It’ll be the solution to every problem.’

‘Not for me, it won’t. People might think I pushed you overboard.’

‘How like a man! It’s got nothing to do with you. They’ll think, quite rightly, that I couldn’t stand another minute of this beastly boat going up and down, up and down. Oh, how I *hate* the sea!’

The man laughed. ‘We haven’t left the bay yet. Mumbles Head is over there, to the right. There’s only a slight breeze and the water’s as smooth as the proverbial mill-pond.’

I lifted my head. The lights of Swansea rose and fell most unpleasantly but the moon sent an unbroken path of beams across the water to meet them. The howling was all in my mind.

‘I hate mill-ponds.’ I continued to cry.

‘That’s right. Let it all out.’ My self-appointed nurse patted my arm from time to time. ‘Now.’ He handed me his handkerchief. ‘Have a good blow. Feeling better?’

I blew. ‘I feel worse if anything.’

‘The trick is not to register the motion of the ship. Don’t, whatever you do, look at the rail. Keep your eyes fastened on something on board. A lifebelt, a noticeboard or a ventilation funnel. Or, even better, look at me.’

The light from the saloon window fell on the right side of his face. I saw someone reassuringly ordinary, fairish, with prominent ears. I could just make out a cheek creased in a smile.

‘I suppose you’re a journalist.’ I was too tired to put as much venom into the accusation as I would have liked.

‘My goodness, you know how to hit where it hurts! Do I look like a sot and a liar? Have I the appeal of a tramp with rotting gums and a leaky urinary tract?’

‘You are, aren’t you?’ I persisted.

‘I’m a literary agent. A pretty innocent game, on the whole. Are you a film star who wants to be alone?’

‘Well ... no and yes.’

I stared at him, trying to pierce the darkness and the bone, cortex and synapses that housed the impulses operational in lying. The last ten days had destroyed my trust in anyone I had not known from the baptismal font.

‘What can I say to convince you?’ He felt inside his coat. ‘Wait a minute.’ He stood up and searched his trouser pockets. ‘Here we are. Car keys and useful torch attached. Present from a desperate godmother. At the time I thought it was a bit mean but now I’m grateful.’

He directed a pencil beam on to an open passport. I saw the photograph of a young man with a high forehead and bat-wing ears. Below this it said, *Literary Agent*.

‘See?’ He directed the light on to the white slot on the passport cover. The name was Christopher Random. ‘That’s me. I can show you my driving licence, if you’d like.’

‘I believe you. I’m sorry I doubted. You’ve been extremely kind, Mr Random.’

‘You can call me Kit.’

‘I’m sure you’ve got more interesting things to do than sitting here with me.’

‘I was about to have some supper. You ought to eat something.’

I shuddered at the idea of the cafeteria with its stuffy smell, smeary tables and bottles sticky with congealed ketchup. ‘I can’t go inside.’

‘All right.’ He stood up. ‘Promise you won’t do anything silly?’

‘Like what?’

He paused. ‘Like look at the waves.’

I closed my eyes. ‘I promise.’

The crying had made me feel better, as it always does. I felt light-headed now, and immensely weary. For the past week and a half I had slept shallowly for no more than a couple of hours at a time before a sense of something being terribly wrong had dragged me back to consciousness. Now I sat in a state of apathy feeling the vibration of the engine through the slats of the bench, the slow chilling of my feet and fingers and the tip of my nose. The realization that I need do nothing for several hours as every second the boat took me further from home seemed like an extraordinary kindness for which I was inexpressibly grateful.

My thoughts wandered and revised my impressions of the day. There had been a long train journey. I had been gripped by an obsessive fear that I was being followed. The man sitting opposite me seemed to be watching me covertly from behind the open pages of his *Gardener’s Weekly*. I became convinced that he was a newspaper reporter. After we passed Cheltenham he struck up a conversation with the woman next to him. He was a retired miner with silicosis. I saw again his eyes, mild, uncomplaining, his long upper lip and his patchily shaven chin as he talked about his passion for gladioli. And then, as I dozed, it grew redder and more angular, with fierce eyes and bared teeth. It became my father’s face.

I roused myself and pulled my jacket closer round me, for though it was July the breeze from the sea was freezing. A young couple sauntered past, arm-in-arm, gave me a curious glance and walked on. I fell again into a waking dream in which my father’s face was constantly before me. His expression of ferocity as he threw down the newspaper at breakfast ten days before had lodged itself so securely in my memory that whenever I ceased to think actively it floated up from my subconscious to fill the vacuum.

We had been sitting in the dining room, a shrine to Victorian mahogany, brown leather and second-rate watercolours. There were always twelve chairs round the table and we had occupied the same places from the time my brother and I had left the nursery. As in a dentist’s waiting room, we sat as far apart from one another as the arrangement allowed.

My father was a small man and, with characteristic perversity, had chosen to marry my mother, who at five feet eleven was seven inches taller than he. This had embarrassed me horribly as a child. It seemed to detract from the dignity of each and I was afraid that people might laugh at them. If my father was in a good humour with my mother, he called her 'Lanky'. Her name was actually Laetitia.

When I examined the photograph on my mother's dressing-table of my father in uniform as a young subaltern I could see he might once have been attractive. His hair had been thick and sandy, his brows well marked, his expression keen and pugnacious. Now he was largely bald so that clumps of hair sprouted above his ears in speckled tufts and his eyebrows were unruly. He bore a striking resemblance to a wire-haired fox terrier. He spoke in an aggressive, impatient manner and when he was angry the spaces between the thousands of freckles on his face became tomato red and the bridge of his short, hooked nose grew purple.

Of course he was going to find out.

When I had seen the newspaper neatly folded by his plate, placed there by our daily, Mrs Treadgold, I knew the moment of revelation had come. The story had been the third item on the television news the night before. I had switched it off with a fluttering heart and a sick feeling in my stomach as soon as I saw Burgo's face appear on the screen. Luckily my father considered television plebeian, so he never watched it. For the remainder of the evening I had sat in painful suspense by the telephone in the hall in case one of my father's cronies at the Army and Navy Club should have seen the news and be stirred by curiosity to ring him up on the pretext of condoling with him. No one had. Perhaps they too were a little frightened of him.

I cannot explain why I was afraid of my father. I could not remember a time when I had not heard his approach with apprehension. Even when he was in a jovial mood, there was something combative in his voice and manner. And I knew how rapidly the joviality could turn to rage. I could be coldly analytical behind his back and sarcastic, even defiant, to his face, but none the less I dreaded his anger.

The moment had come. I had braced myself inwardly and pretended to be busy with the marmalade while he cut the rind from his bacon, buttered toast and poured himself a second cup of tea before picking up the newspaper. I heard the abrupt cessation of crunching as his eyes fell on the offending photograph. He had let out a sudden roar of fury that made me drop my knife.

'What! ... No! ... I don't believe it!' My father's voice, usually distressingly loud, had an ominous strangled sound. He clutched the edge of the table as though unseen hands were attempting to drag him away.

My heart, which had been pounding more or less continuously for the last few days, skipped a couple of beats. But I forced myself to look indifferently, even coldly, at him. We were alone in the dining room – my mother being an invalid now and Oliver unable to get up before noon. My father's small brown eyes were watering with shock and he was making a gobbling sound in his throat. I watched him, wondering with a frightening detachment if he were about to have a stroke. He threw his napkin to the floor, clapped his hands on to the arms of his chair, stood up, strode round the table to where I sat and prodded energetically at the front page of the *Daily Chronicle*:

'Well? Is there a *word* of truth in this?'

I stared up at him dumbly. He seemed to interpret my silence as denial.

'I want you' – my father was breathing heavily and his eyes were bulging and crazed with red lines – 'to tell me why anyone should ... want to make up this *disgusting* farrago of lies.' I noticed with a detached part of my mind that a blob of spit had landed on the butter. I made a mental note of exactly where so I could scrape it off afterwards.

'Well? *Well?*' He tried to shout but violent emotion had divested him of strength. 'Are you going to give me some sort of ... hah! ... explanation?'

I stood up, perhaps subconsciously to give myself the advantage of height. I was three inches taller than he. I wiped my fingers slowly with my napkin while schooling my face into an expression of challenge and defiance. 'If you mean, have I been having an affair with Burgo Latimer, yes, I have.'

He landed a smack on my jaw that knocked me sideways and made my teeth rattle. 'Whore! Bitch! Shameless whore!'

I shut my eyes to prevent tears falling and though my cheek immediately began to throb I remained outwardly calm. I braced myself for a second blow but it did not come. Probably it was the undeniably proletarian flavour of domestic violence that saved me.

'By *Christ*!' he said at last. 'That ever a child of mine ... behaving like a bitch on heat ... common little *tart* ... the disgrace ... never live it down ... sacrifices for my country ... my own *daughter* ... how am I going to hold up my head in the club?'

I knew it would be pointless to attempt an explanation. I let him rave uninterrupted to get it over with as soon as possible.

'I blame your mother,' he concluded, in a tone into which some of the bittersweetness of having been deceived and betrayed was beginning to trickle. 'She's filled your head with sentimental claptrap. I suppose you fancied Latimer was in *love* with you. I hope he was good enough in bed to justify compromising the first decent government we've had for years. Don't imagine you were the only one! He'll have had his leg over every party worker under forty. What *fools* women are!'

'You kept your word, I see.' Kit evolved from the darkness and stood before me, laden with bulky objects. 'Feeling better?' He dropped a pile of blankets on the bench beside me and proceeded to wrap me in them. A man in uniform approached with a tray.

'Just put it there. We'll help ourselves, thanks.' Kit put something into his hand and he slid away with a respectful murmur. 'Now.' Kit began to unwrap packages. 'Never let it be said that we English can't enjoy a picnic whatever the weather, even in the middle of the night on a ship trying to stand on its head. Cheese sandwich, madam? Or would you prefer cheese and pickle? Or there's cheese and egg, and, for the connoisseur, cheese and sausage.'

'I thought you said something about a mill-pond.' Suddenly I found I was even a little hungry.

'So I did when it was. As smooth as. But we've got out beyond the point now and it's blowing up. No' – as I turned my head to look – 'just take my word for it. Now have some hot coffee and if you eat up your sandwiches you can have a treat afterwards. I managed to commandeer the last two jam doughnuts. When in my extreme youth we had them for tea, Nanny used to wash them under the bathroom tap to get rid of the sugar because she feared for our tooth enamel. Ever since then, when things have looked on the bleak side, I've found there are few things more comforting than a dry, plump, sugary doughnut. Other men may hanker for *foie gras* but I thank God my tastes are more easily satisfied.'

Warm within my nest of blankets, with a strong breeze in my face, looking up at the stars while I ate the sandwiches and sipped the cooling coffee, I began to feel the truth of the saying that stuffing holds out a storm. It would be too much to say that I felt cheerful but while Kit was talking nonsense and when I was not thinking about Burgo I began to feel a little less miserable.

Ironically, it was entirely due to my father's passion for interfering with other people's lives that I had met Burgo.

By my own reckoning I had removed myself from my father's sphere of influence years before. As soon as I was capable of living independently (that is, the summer after I left school), I had spent three months living in a bed-sitter in Earls Court and working in an antique shop. That autumn I had enrolled at London University to read History of Art and after graduating I took a poorly paid but interesting job at Boswell's, one of the smaller auction houses. I shared a tiny house with two friends, Sarah and Jasmine, in an enchanting cul-de-sac near the river in Chelsea. To help pay the rent I spent some of my spare time writing articles for periodicals about things like embroidered textiles, fans, silhouettes and custard pots. For relaxation I was entertained by my share of the large, fluctuating

collection of men friends about whom Sarah, Jasmine and I speculated endlessly over bottles of cheap wine in the intimacy of the shabby but pretty sitting room of 22 Paradise Row.

Jasmine was in love with a married man called Teddy Bayliss. Though Sarah and I had told her (until we were in danger of sounding like evangelists for the Divine Light through Abstinence and Purity) that this was asking for trouble and bound to make her miserable, it was impossible to be anything other than sympathetic when one saw her lovely face ravaged by grief. Naturally, after the first wild rapture of romance with Teddy had passed, all our predictions came true. There were long lonely evenings in thrall to the telephone, broken dates because of wifely comings and goings or the demands of his children, the misery of imagining him sitting by a Christmas tree unwrapping presents with his family while Jasmine sat in a suite at the Savoy, watching her mother drift into a gin haze. Though the trials of her situation were commonplace, even hackneyed, this did nothing to alleviate the unhappiness they created.

I could not understand the attraction. Jasmine was sweet-natured, gentle, generous and half-Chinese. Her waist-length hair was black and lustrous, her skin golden, her features childlike and enchanting. Teddy was middle-aged, had mean little eyes, scant hair, an undersized chin, an oversized stomach and a self-conceit that seemed entirely unfounded. To see him treating Jasmine with a careless assurance that seemed to take her devotion for granted made us furious. We did everything we could think of to release her from the spell that made her blind to his ass's head – lecturing her as mentioned above, telling her that Teddy was a boring and pompous bastard, introducing her to nicer, more attractive men – but she remained enamoured.

Sarah, who owned the house in Paradise Row, and to whom Jasmine and I paid rent, had her own theory about this.

'Jazzy sees her father twice a year. He kisses her politely, gives her an inscrutable smile and a cheque and asks her to call him a cab. Ergo, she's looking for a father substitute.'

On the sole occasion Jasmine's father and I had met, he had shaken my hand and told me that Communism had been the end of civilization as far as China was concerned. Then he had whipped a book from his pocket and removed himself to the far end of the room to read. He held some diplomatic post at the embassy in Paris. It did not seem to me a position for which he was particularly well suited.

'But would you say that Teddy was exactly an ideal father figure? Having an affair with a girl half his age would seem to me to disqualify him from the start.'

'Don't be so literal, you fathead!' Sarah was a forthright girl, a barrister-in-training. She enjoyed polemic. 'Jazzy doesn't want a bloke smelling of pipe tobacco with slippers and a woolly waistcoat. She's looking for an authority figure to lead her through the maze of life and instruct her in every instance, including sex. Surely you know that all little girls have powerful sexual feelings about their fathers?'

I looked at Sarah's round brown eyes in her round face, framed by straight brown hair.

'I can say with absolute certainty that I never did.'

'You're afraid to admit it to yourself, that's all.'

'Afraid would be the word, all right.'

'Anyway,' Sarah continued with energy, 'Jazzy's still in many ways a child. She doesn't understand cause and effect. She refuses to take responsibility for her actions. Like a baby, she simply responds to the most pressing physical need.'

'I still don't see why that makes the repulsive, chinless, paunchy Teddy—'

'What a dunce you are! There's nothing special about Teddy except his age and his unavailability. She has to struggle to engage his attention. That feels familiar, therefore comforting. Those of us who've had reasonable relationships with our fathers can move on from there to seek men who satisfy our grown-up emotional and intellectual needs as equals.'

'So far we don't seem to have had much success.'

It was true that there were men of all kinds turning up on the front doorstep of Number 22 to take us severally out to lunch, dinner, the theatre, the cinema, exhibitions, home to meet their mothers, and sometimes to bed. But neither of us had so far met anyone who met all our requirements for more than a few months. Sarah had had a string of lawyer boyfriends who were unsatisfactory because they much preferred sex to arguing. My boyfriends tended to be artistic and unsatisfactory because they were self-absorbed, neurotic, unreliable, and always borrowing money. Once I had got as far as announcing an engagement in *The Times* before I came to my senses and called it off. The unpleasantness this engendered and my own deep regret for causing pain had put me off such conventional behaviour for good. After the tremors had ebbed I decided that if I met someone I wanted to marry I would do it at once and without more ceremony than the register office provided. No one had so far tempted me to put this plan into action.

None the less, it would be true to say that my life was continuing satisfactorily until one morning not long after the above conversation – 22 April 1978, to be precise – a telephone call from my father had come as a rude blast shattering the idyll.

## TWO

'It's your mother. Broken her hip. You'd better come at once.'

'Poor thing! Is she in pain? How did it happen?'

'Fell down the library steps. Her own fault for frittering her life away with those damned stupid fairy tales.'

There was triumph in my father's voice. His reading matter was confined to the *Trout and Salmon Monthly* and the *Shooting Times*. He considered a taste for fiction evidence of bohemian depravity.

'I suppose it could have happened anywhere.'

'Stop arguing, Roberta! Your mother needs you. I'll tell Brough to meet the twelve-fifteen.'

Brough was valet, butler, gardener, handyman and driver. Due to a childhood illness that had resulted in a humped back, he was a tiny man, much shorter even than my father. Though he sat on several cushions, his view from behind the wheel of our Austin Princess was largely sky. My father regularly deducted the repair of wings, bumpers and headlamps from his wages, then lent him a subsistence to prevent him from starving. After twenty years of service, Brough was several thousand pounds in debt to my father. Because of this he seemed to feel he had no choice but to do my father's bidding, however unreasonable the task and the hour, and to put up with any amount of calumny in the process. Understandably Brough was a morose man, given to violent outbursts of temper when out of earshot of my father.

'I'll get a taxi from the station.'

'This is not the time to start throwing money about when I've the fruits of your mother's confounded carelessness to pay for. That damned clinic charges the earth.' Nor were reports of the general standards of hygiene of the Cutham Down Nursing Home encouraging. But my father presumably thought it was worth paying for a superior sort of dirt.

'I'll come tomorrow on the ten-fifteen.'

'You'll come today, my girl, or I'll know the reason why!'

There followed an unpleasant exchange which bordered on a row. A compromise was reached and I went down to Sussex late that afternoon.

'How are you, Mummy?'

A temporary bedroom had been made of the morning room, ill chosen as such for it faced due north and was perpetually in shade.

My mother opened her eyes and sighed. 'Terrible. Can't sleep.'

'Were they kind to you in the nursing home?'

'They were *harridans*.' Her voice was alarmingly weak but she managed to get a little emphasis on the last word. 'Ill mannered. Coarse and stupid. Like being nursed by a gang of Irish road-menders.'

'What a good thing you were able to come home early.'

'They said I ought to stay in at least until the stitches were taken out. But your father insisted on my being discharged. It's ninety pounds a day.'

Her skin was lined and greyish. Her gooseberry-green eyes were reproachful and her mouth quivered with resentment.

'Poor Mummy.' I bent to kiss her and stroke her once pretty, fair hair from her forehead. 'Does it hurt very much?'

'Don't pull me about.' She jerked her head away. 'You know how I hate it. It's perfect agony, if you want to know.'

I looked around the sickroom, noticing that the grey and white-striped paper was beginning to peel at the cornice, that the Turkey carpet had a hole in it and the bed on which my mother lay was propped up at one corner by a stack of books.

‘This is such a dismal room.’ I put an extra brightness into my voice to compensate. ‘We must see what we can do to cheer it up. I’ve brought you some flowers.’

She looked at the bunch of exquisite pink and green-striped parrot tulips I held out, then turned her eyes away. ‘I prefer to see flowers growing out of doors where Nature intended them.’

My eye travelled through the window to where Brough was hacking with uncontrolled fury at some spotted laurels, growing in a landscape of dank shrubbery and sour grass.

‘I’ve brought you some chocolate. Walnut whips. Your favourite.’

My mother closed her eyes and screwed up her face. ‘It’s easy to see you’ve never been ill. In the state I’m in, rich food is simply poison.’

‘I’ve also brought the latest Jeanette Dickinson-Scott.’

‘I expect I’ve already read it.’ Her eyes opened. ‘What’s it called?’

I looked at the cover on which was a painting of a Regency belle in a low-cut purple dress, with powdered hair and a loo mask. ‘*Amazon in Lace*.’

‘Who’s in it?’

I flicked through the pages. ‘Someone called Lady Araminta. And her guardian Lord Willoughby Savage. He’s got sardonic eyebrows, long sensitive fingers and a jagged cicatrice from cheekbone to—’

‘You may as well give it to me.’ My mother’s hand appeared from beneath the bed cover. When I looked in, half an hour later, she was reading hard and sucking the top of a walnut whip.

After that the days had crawled by at an invalid pace. There was plenty to do but only things of a most unrewarding kind. Cutham Down, once a village, now a small town, was in a part of Sussex that had a micro-climate of bitter east winds and exceptionally high rainfall. After my maternal great-grandfather had amassed a fortune bottling things in vinegar – ‘Pickford’s Pickles Perfectly Preserved’ was the slogan – he had sold the factory and applied himself to the serious business of becoming a country squire. In the 1880s Cutham Hall had been a pleasing two-storey Georgian house with a separate stable block set in the middle of forty acres. This had not been grand enough to suit my great-grandfather’s newly acquired notions of self-consequence so he had added a top storey and thrown out two wings, at once destroying the elegant façade and making the house unmanageably large.

Cutham Hall had ten bedrooms, most of which had not been slept in for decades, and a number of badly furnished rooms downstairs in which no one ever sat. My father lived in what he called his ‘library’, a room of mean proportions which housed the remains of the various hobbies that he had run through. There were drawers of butterflies and beetles pinned on to boards. There was a sad red squirrel with a crooked tail, his first and only attempt at taxidermy. In a cupboard were his guns and fishing rods. On the walls were photographs of meets at Cutham Hall from the period when he had been enthusiastic about hunting. No books, of course. He was really only interested in amusements that involved killing things.

Oliver and I spent most of our time in the kitchen where there was an ancient lumpy sofa by the Aga and a television, ostensibly ‘for the servants’. We had no indoor servants unless Mrs Treadgold, our daily, counted as one. She had a twenty-eight-inch colour television in her tidy, warm, watertight bungalow and would have scorned to watch anything on our tiny flickering black-and-white set with its bent coat-hanger aerial.

For about three days after my return home, Mrs Treadgold and I diligently dusted and vacuumed the ancestral acres of mahogany and carpet. I could tell by the quantities of cobwebs and dead flies that they were unaccustomed to so much attention. Then, by tacit agreement, exhausted by labour that was as dreary as it was pointless, we closed the doors on the unused rooms and allowed them to sleep peacefully on beneath a fresh film of dust. I took over the cooking and shopping while Mrs Treadgold cleaned the few rooms we lived in. Between us we looked after my mother.

My chief duty was to keep her supplied with books and, as she read all day and half the night, I was constantly on the road between our house and the four libraries in the county to which she was

a subscriber. Her taste was for romantic fiction. I had my name down for every novel that had the words 'love', 'heart', 'kiss', 'bride', 'sweet' or 'surrender' in the title.

'I've read this,' my mother said during the second week of my servitude, casting my latest offering aside. 'Don't you remember? You got it out last week.'

'Can't you read it again?'

'I know what happens in the end.'

'Of course you do. The handsome titled hero subdues the heroine's pride and spirit until she loves him so much she's prepared to let him do unutterably filthy things to her despite her natural disinclination. That's always going to be the ending. She's never going to go off with the good-natured wall-eyed coachman or decide she'd rather run a dress shop.'

But my mother affected not to be listening. 'You can ask Treadgold to bring my tea now. And tell her not to slop it in the saucer. That woman's so clumsy, she could get a job at the nursing home easily. You'd better go and see what Brough is doing. Now I'm lying here helpless I suppose the place is falling to rack and ruin.'

'It looks fine,' I lied. 'You mustn't worry about it. Just concentrate on getting better.'

My mother threw me a sidelong glance of annoyance. It occurred to me then that she much preferred lying in bed and being waited on to the unremitting slog of trying to run a large decaying house with severely limited funds. I could sympathize with this. I went to see Brough as instructed.

The forty acres my great-grandfather had begun with had shrunk to four as parcels of land had been sold piecemeal during the last hundred years to prop up a pretentious style lived on an insufficient income. Most of the remaining acreage had been given over to shrubbery which required little attention. Brough had a comfortable arrangement in the greenhouse with a chair, a radio and a kettle by the stove where he sat for hours on end, no doubt brooding over his thralldom. On this occasion I found him actually out of doors, spraying something evil-smelling over hybrid tea roses of a hideous flaunting red.

'Wouldn't they look rather better if they had something growing between them?' I suggested, hoping to strike a note of fellowship with this remote, furious being. 'Perhaps some hardy geraniums or violas—'

'This is a rose-bed.' Brough's angry little eyes were contemptuous.

'Yes, but it needn't be *just* roses ...'

'The Major wouldn't like it.'

The Major was my father.

'How do you know he wouldn't?'

'Because he told me. He said, "Brough, whatever you do, don't go planting anything between them roses. Over my dead body."'

One cannot call someone a liar without disagreeable consequences. I walked angrily away and set myself the task of weeding the stone urns on the terrace. A harvest of bittercress shot seeds into the cracks between the stones as I worked, there to take ineradicable root and, just as I finished, the handle of one of the urns dropped off and smashed, leaving two large holes through which the sandy earth trickled on to my shoes in a steady stream. I went indoors.

My brother Oliver, the fourth inmate of this unhappy house, threatened daily to shake the plentiful dust of home from his feet. He was twenty, nearly six years younger than me, and could certainly have done so without anyone objecting. I think my father might even have been willing to drive him to the station himself, had he been convinced that Oliver would board the train. Oliver was currently an aspiring novelist. He was working on something satirical about a Swiftian character who, like the fortunate Dean, was adored by two equally desirable women. Despite having completed a mere ten pages Oliver was convinced that this was to be his passport to success and a new life. I loved my brother dearly and to see him struggling to maintain a fragile self-confidence was painful. I already knew the plot of *Sunbeams from Cucumbers* backwards and it seemed promising.

‘It’s all in the writing, you see,’ he explained, lying full-length on the sofa after a lonely afternoon of creation, while I peeled potatoes for supper.

It was three weeks after my return and my mother had not yet managed to totter further than to the commode set up for her in the corner of the morning room. I was sinking into a lethargic despondency at the prospective length of my term of servitude.

‘You know the saying “kill your darlings”?’ Oliver went on. ‘I think it was Hemingway who said it. Well, as soon as I write anything that seems any good, I have to destroy it immediately. So, naturally, it takes a while to get a page done.’

‘You’re sure you aren’t taking it too literally?’ I put the saucepan on to boil. ‘I mean, if you only keep the bits that aren’t any good, isn’t that defeating the object?’

‘It means you must cut out the showy, self-conscious passages.’ Oliver licked out the bowl in which I had made a batter for apple fritters. School and the army had bred in my father a taste for nursery food which meant that solid English puddings, of the kind that require custard, were obligatory at lunch and supper. ‘My problem is that to lose self-consciousness I have to be drunk. But not so drunk that I can’t hold the pen. It’s a delicate balance. You’ve no idea what a serious writer has to suffer.’ As he said this at least twice a day I felt I was beginning to get a pretty good idea.

It was unfortunate that alcohol did not agree with Oliver. He had tried beer, whisky, wine, sherry, even crème de menthe, but they all made him wretchedly ill. He was a handsome boy with dark, almost black hair, a large, slightly bulging forehead, which gave him the appearance of a solemn child, a sensitive, girlish mouth and my mother’s green eyes which, because of the drinking, were matched by his complexion. On bad days his skin was the colour of a leaf.

‘I think this place is part of the trouble,’ he went on to say as I cut corned beef into cubes for a hash. ‘How can one be inspired when living in an atmosphere of intellectual aridity and Pecksniffian hypocrisy? That tosh Mother reads is atrophying her brain. She’s so miserable with Father that she can’t bear to live in the real world. I sometimes wonder where Father’s getting his spiritual nourishment. I can’t believe being beastly to his children and kicking Brough around is quite enough even for a man with the mental acuity of a wood louse.’

‘I can answer that as it happens. I drove into Worping this morning to see if Bowser’s had any new romances and afterwards I stopped at the Kardomah for a cup of coffee. While I was there Father came in. That was strange enough but what made it even odder was that he was with a woman.’

‘No!’ Oliver swung his legs round to sit up, his green face lit by excitement. ‘What was she like? And what did he say when he saw you?’

‘I was sitting in the corner behind a sort of trellis screen covered with plastic ivy. I could see them quite clearly by peering between the leaves but he never knew I was there. I heard every word they said.’

‘Go on!’

‘She was asking him about Mother. Father said she’d do a lot better if she put some damned effort into it, instead of lolling about, filling her head with rubbish. He never let illness get him down, he said. If he had anything wrong with him he always went out for a brisk walk over the Downs and blew it away. I don’t suppose a brisk walk would do Mother’s broken hip any good at all.’ I paused in the act of chopping onions to wipe my stinging eyes.

‘Don’t stop now!’

‘She said something about being sure he was a brave man. He couldn’t have done what he did in the war unless he’d been really courageous.’

‘So he didn’t tell her about being sent home with a bad case of Tobruk tummy to a desk job in Devizes. What was the woman like?’

‘In her fifties, plump, hennaed hair, a lot of make-up and jewellery. Her name’s Ruby. Not his usual type. Apparently they’re having dinner on Friday at the Majestic in Brighton. She was quite excited and giggly about it. She must have had a sad life if dinner with our father is her idea of fun.’

Oliver gave a bitter laugh. 'So he's got a bit of rough on the side. How dreadfully unoriginal. I wonder if he pays her?'

'Actually I thought she was rather too good for him. She spoke kindly about Mother. She seemed concerned. And when Dad ticked her off for saying "serviette" – he's such a hideous snob – she looked crushed. I felt sorry for her.'

'The old bastard! And when I think what a fuss he made about Gaylene!' Gaylene was a girl who had worked the petrol pumps at a garage in a neighbouring village of whom Oliver had been much enamoured. 'He had the nerve to call her a draggle-tailed slut. I've a good mind to leave tomorrow!'

I seized the moment. 'I think you should, darling, though you know I'll miss you like anything. I'll ring David this minute and ask him if you can come and stay.' David was an ex-boyfriend of mine, with a flat in Pimlico, who had offered this boon when last I had discussed the problem of Oliver with him.

We sat up until one in the morning detailing plans for Oliver's escape. David professed himself willing to harbour the son of Hemingway, provided I would have dinner with him the following week. This was no hardship as I was still fond of David, though only in a sisterly way. I went to bed feeling glad that this depressing episode of my life would not be entirely unproductive of good after all.

When I knocked on Oliver's door the next morning, having got up at the ghastly hour of six to drive him to the station, there was no answer. I went in. The alarm clock was on its back in the farthest corner of the room and Oliver had both pillows over his head. He became almost violent when I tried to drag him out of bed. He came down to lunch in his dressing-gown and was bathed and dressed by four. By this time he had decided that as he'd had a brilliant idea for the novel he had better spend the rest of the day working and go up to London the following morning. This became the pattern for the next three days.

After that I cancelled the arrangement with David, except for the dinner as this would have seemed unattractively opportunistic. I tried to resign myself to the fact that I was powerless to help Oliver. The only good I could do him was to encourage him to go on writing. I made myself available for any amount of pep-talking and amateur psychotherapy. I bought him vitamin pills and sent him out for walks to catch whatever daylight was left. But all my efforts amounted to little. The novel proceeded at a rate of a couple of sentences a day. The truth was that Oliver was afraid to go. Some part of him clung desperately to home, hoping that even now he might be blessed by some vivifying drops from the fount of parental love.

'Mm ... Kit?' I muttered thickly, my mouth crammed with doughnut. 'If you're a literary agent, I suppose you help novelists get published, do you? I mean, I happen to know someone who's written this absolutely brilliant book. It's practically finished, and I can assure you it's quite exceptionally good, only he needs some professional help. You know, whom to send it to, what to say in the letter, perhaps even a friendly eye cast over the text and a few constructive hints?'

Kit was silent for a moment or two and something like a sigh escaped him. It occurred to me that probably a great many people had approached him with just such a request.

'It's a cheek to ask, I know,' I said humbly, 'and of course I'll pay you, but ... Well, it's my brother, actually, and of course you'll think I'm prejudiced—'

'Your brother? In that case, the services of Roderick, Random and Co. are yours, willing and gratis.'

'Oh, how kind!' I felt a gush of enthusiasm for this stranger who had not only plucked me from the verge of shipwreck, warmed me and fed me but now offered to help rescue my darling brother with at least an appearance of eagerness. 'I don't know how to thank you. He'll be so grateful.'

'You can start by telling me your name.'

'Certainly. It's Bobbie.'

'Bobbie? Don't tell me, your parents wanted a boy.'

'It's a nickname. Not elegant, I know, but it's what everyone calls me.'

Except for Burgo. He disliked abbreviations. I had, he said, a perfectly good name that suited me perfectly.

‘So what’s the other bit?’

‘Oh, let’s not bother with formalities, as you said.’

‘What a mistrustful girl you are. Who would have thought that beneath that angelically fair exterior there ticks such a suspicious mind?’

I stiffened and drew away from him. ‘How do you know what colour my hair is? It was already dark when we left Swansea.’

‘I was speaking poetically. Fair meaning pretty, you know. I hope you’re pretty. I’m prepared to bet that you are. But I’ve no idea whether you’re as blonde as a Viking or as dark as an Ethiopian.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I relaxed. ‘Things have been ... Lack of sleep is making me neurotic.’

‘Actually the name Bobbie makes me think of someone with a pudding-basin haircut, red cheeks and a punishing serve. A sister to all men, always willing to make the cocoa, a jolly good sport.’ I felt a tug on one side of my head. ‘But your hair’s long and you say it’s fair. I’m awfully glad. I’ll be happy to make the cocoa every time.’

‘We’ll have to do without it tonight. It must be at least ten o’clock.’

Kit shone the meagre beam of his torch on to the dial of his watch. ‘Half past. Are you ready for your berth, Bobbie? Shall I escort you to the door or will that give rise to impertinent gossip, do you think?’

‘I don’t think I can face it. I went to look at my cabin when I came aboard. It’s several floors down. Horribly claustrophobic. I booked too late to get a single berth. My bunkmate was jolly and friendly but smelt penetratingly of the stables. Apparently she’s going to Ireland to buy horses. I’m not sure my stomach can stand being tossed about all night in a miasma of manure. Anyway, it’s rather lovely up here and I’m not cold now.’ And it was, in truth, lovely – if rough. The wind seemed to be blowing hard, or perhaps that was the motion of the ship, but the moon, three-quarters full, suffused the drifting clouds with silver. ‘But you must go to bed. You’ve looked after me beautifully and I’m grateful. I shall be perfectly all right.’

‘I’m not at all sleepy. Why don’t you put your feet up and I’ll tuck you in. Here, rest your head on my coat. Don’t worry,’ he said as I made noises of protest, ‘the steward’s keeping us under observation from the saloon window. He’ll be the perfect chaperon. And as soon as I’m the least bit weary I shall leave you to it. Will it bother you if I smoke?’

‘Not at all.’

The delicious smell of a Gauloise mingled with the tang of salt. The stars rolled languorously to and fro above my upturned face as the giant cradle rocked beneath me. It was strange to be lying with my head almost in the lap of a man I had known for two hours but at the same time it felt companionable. I began to relax. For ten days now I had slept patchily, always with a sense of foreboding. My rib cage stopped aching; my eyelids ceased to twitch.

‘Marvellous, aren’t they?’ Kit blew out smoke. ‘Impossible to believe they’re indifferent to our joys and sorrows, isn’t it?’ I realized he was talking about the stars. ‘There’s one that’s definitely winking at us. No wonder people make wishes by them.’

‘If wishes were butter-cakes, beggars might bite,’ I said drowsily. At least I thought I had said it, but it may just have been part of my dream.

### THREE

Something brushed against my cheek.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.’

I opened my eyes. The sky had paled mysteriously. It took me a second or two to realize that this must be the dawn. I twisted my head and saw someone – Kit – looking down at me, smiling. Something hard pressed against my ear. I put up my hand. It was a coat button. I struggled to sit up, encumbered by blankets, my muscles unresponsive with cold. ‘How long have I been asleep? What time is it?’

Kit looked at his watch, squinting in the grey light. ‘Ten to five.’

‘It can’t be!’

‘You were terribly tired.’

‘I hope I didn’t snore.’

‘You were as quiet as a little cat. From time to time you purred and once you shouted “No!” quite fiercely. That woke me up.’

‘Have you been here all night?’

He nodded.

‘You must have been so uncomfortable. Really, you *should* have gone to bed.’

‘I’m as stiff as an ironing board,’ he admitted, ‘but I managed to doze. I’m one of those lucky people who can get by on not much sleep. I’ll just walk about a bit and I’ll be fine. We’ll be in Cork in less than an hour.’

‘Cork!’ I felt a rush of emotions, predominantly apprehension.

‘Where did you think we were going?’

‘Well, there of course. It’s just that I’ve never been to Ireland before. And everything was arranged at the last minute. Oh, Lord, I can’t move my fingers! And my neck’s broken, I think.’

‘Come on.’ Kit pulled me up from the bench. ‘We’ll get our circulations going.’

We strolled about together until the blood had returned to our hands and feet. There were no other passengers on deck, only members of the crew who gave us particular looks and pointed smiles. Probably they assumed we were lovers who had preferred a romantic consummation beneath the stars to a struggle within the confines of a narrow bunk in a prosaic cabin. We stood at the stern rail, drank brown tea and ate tasteless white rolls filled with hard-boiled eggs and mayonnaise. We watched the sky blush with gleams of coral, salmon and rose. Slowly it flooded with gold.

‘Lovely, isn’t it?’ said Kit. ‘Doesn’t it make you glad to be alive?’

‘Mm ... yes,’ I said, more decidedly than I felt. Foam streamed in the wake of the ship. Gulls slid up and down the grey-green waves and quarrelled over the last crumbs of my breakfast. I wished the ship would sail on and never come to land.

‘Now I can see for myself that you *are* fair,’ Kit said. ‘In at least two of the ... let’s see’ – he counted on his fingers – ‘six meanings of the word that I can think of immediately. Neither a market-place nor good weather. Beautiful and with light-coloured hair, yes. And I’m willing to bet that you’re just and impartial. But never mediocre.’

‘Oh, don’t! It was so lovely to forget about me. I must look a wreck. And of course I’m not impartial. No one is, however hard they may try to be.’ I attempted to run my fingers through my hair but it was tangled by the wind.

‘I’ll comb it for you,’ suggested Kit. The brightening rays of the sun shone through his ears, turning them crimson. His hair was curly and brown. His eyes were blue and intelligent. It was an appealing face, with its high forehead and good-humoured mouth. Not handsome but attractive.

‘Certainly not. People will think I’m an escaped lunatic and you’re my keeper.’

'I shan't mind if you don't. That steward hasn't taken his eyes off you since you woke up. You're putting colour into his drab existence. Can't you gibber a little and play with your lips? Where's your sense of civic duty?'

'I probably *am* a lunatic. Only a madwoman ...'

I paused. Kit had been so sympathetic that I had been tempted to tell him something of my circumstances but then I thought better of it.

'Oh dear. That suspicious look again. You're as wary as a bird of paradise who's just spotted a woman in a rather dull hat.'

I laughed but said nothing.

Kit turned to lean his back against the rail so that he could look directly into my face. 'Forgive me if this is an impertinent question, but when we get into Cork will there be a husband or a boyfriend standing on the quay, counting the seconds?'

I thought of Burgo, imagined him with the collar of his coat turned up against the importunate July breezes, hands in pockets, frowning, impatient of delay, already running ahead in his mind, planning what we were going to do, where we were going to eat, make love. I felt a pang of desolation.

'No.'

'I see. Would it be presuming to ask where you're going to in such solitary splendour? I promise not to divulge the information to MI5.'

'I'm going to Galway. To Connemara.'

Kit whistled. 'Among the mountainy men? It's a wild sort of place and they're a strange, interesting breed. "To Hell or to Connaught", as they used to say. Meaning, of course, that there was little to choose between them.'

'Where's Connaught?'

'Where you're going. The ancient kingdom of the West. Where Cromwell sent the indigenous Irish after dispossessing them of their nice, fertile, well-drained lands in the east. Are you an accomplished Gaelic speaker?'

'Not a word. Will it matter?' I had a vision of myself shut away in some mountain fastness, in a household of eccentrics of whose culture and language I was entirely ignorant. Anthropologists would no doubt have delighted in the prospect. I found it alarming.

'Not at all. Despite the efforts of the Gaelic League and Sinn Féin to establish it as the first language, it's fiendishly difficult and the majority of Irish speak English. I just wondered if you were writing a book about the Gaeltacht or researching the dress code of the high kings or something like that.'

'I'm going to be housekeeper to a family named Macchuin.'

Kit whistled again. 'That's the last thing I'd have guessed. What do you know about them?'

'Almost nothing. I answered an advertisement in a newspaper. When I telephoned, the woman I spoke to said she was desperate for help. She engaged me on the spot.'

'And you accepted, just as impulsively?'

'All relevant questions, apart from how to get there, went out of my head. I needed to get away.'

'I hope you won't feel as urgent a need to get back. They might be dipsomaniacs, drug-smugglers, sexual psychopaths or an IRA stronghold, for all you know.'

'Perhaps all those things at once. Though we only talked for five minutes at the most I liked the impression I had of Mrs Macchuin. And I was flattered that she seemed so thrilled when I agreed to come.'

'Only someone absolutely hell-bent, neck-or-nothing, on escape would be encouraged by such enthusiasm. Are you impetuous, rash, devil-may-care by nature or are the bailiffs after you?' When I smiled but didn't say anything he went on, 'So what did this excitable woman say? Any kind of job description?'

‘All I know is that there are three children between the ages of eight and sixteen, and six adults, one of whom is generally away. Mrs Macchuin sounded exhausted rather than excitable.’

‘Worse and worse. Why is she exhausted, I wonder? Badly behaved children? Too little money? Or too much Mr Macchuin, perhaps.’

‘I didn’t ask. I was trying to think myself into a new role. The sort of person who does as she’s told and doesn’t ask questions. An efficient, invisible menial.’

‘You’ll never be that. Invisible, I mean. You don’t look terribly efficient but here appearances may be deceptive.’

‘I must admit my life so far hasn’t really demanded efficiency. But it can only be a question of application.’

Kit sighed and shook his head. ‘I see problems ahead.’

‘It’ll only be for six months or so. Then I’ll go back to London, probably.’

‘I wish you’d trust me.’ He looked at me gravely. When I did not reply he pointed behind me and said quietly, ‘Land ahoy.’

While we had been talking the ferry, unobserved by me, had been turning slowly. We were about to enter a wide channel bounded by distant promontories, perhaps a mile apart. I felt excited as I examined the low cliffs, half hidden in mist, trying to imagine my immediate future.

‘Your first view of Ireland,’ said Kit. ‘It’s such a beautiful country with the best people in the world, yet the most terrible things have happened here. Do you know anything of Irish history?’

‘Not much.’ I dredged my mind for facts. ‘Um ... Cromwell and the Siege of Drogheda. And there was the Battle of the Boyne. James the Second. I think he lost. That’s about all I can remember. Oh, and of course the IRA. I don’t understand any of that. Why did they assassinate Airey Neave? Wasn’t he trying to help the Irish?’

‘Ah, that’s a complicated one. You may as well forget your history lessons. Seen through Irish eyes, Ireland has suffered eight hundred years of merciless exploitation beneath the yoke of English imperialism. Make no mistake. We English are still the “Old Enemy”.’ I must have looked alarmed for he added, ‘Don’t worry. You won’t be held accountable. They’ll be charming to you. It’s the British government and the army they hate. But you’d better acquaint yourself with some proper Irish history if you’re going to make sense of the place. The Irish take enormous pride in their long struggle for national identity. Now they’ve joined the EEC things are looking up economically and a cultural change radiating from Dublin is gradually persuading the country people to abandon their inwardlooking, backward-looking colonial complex, but essentially you’ve still got a population that is rural, conservative and poor.’

‘I thought it was such a fertile country. Why is it poor?’

While Kit was talking, one part of my mind absorbed first impressions of my new country of residence, which I hoped would be something of an asylum. As we steamed into the mouth of the River Lee towards Cork Harbour I saw gentle hills, fields and farmsteads lit by a rosy light. Then the channel broadened and they receded into haze.

‘Again that’s not easy to say in a few words. During the second quarter of the nineteenth century conditions for the peasantry were tough but they were healthy and happy enough if one can believe the historians. Thackeray, in his *Irish Sketch Book* of 1842 described the Irish as being like the landscapes: “ragged, ruined and cheerful”. But then they were struck by the worst disaster in Irish history: the Great Famine, when the potato crop failed four years in succession. Out of a population of eight million people one million died of starvation or disease. Two million, probably the brightest, most energetic ones, emigrated, mostly to England and North America. So much misery and loss is bound to have an effect on a nation’s psychology. A sort of fatalism, a melancholy, that leads to inertia.’

‘Oh yes, I see. But did we – the English I mean – do nothing to help?’

‘Not enough, in my opinion. Certainly not enough in the opinion of the Irish. But there isn’t enough time to explain exactly what happened. We’re coming into Ringaskiddy. That’s the ferry terminal. It’s another two or three miles to Cork itself.’

The ship was turning as sharply as a large ferry can, which is not very, and we were moving at a sluggish pace towards land. The terminal was the usual noisy, busy, ugly conglomeration of warehouses, cranes, lorries and moored craft. Much too quickly it increased in size. The propellers reversed to reduce our speed to dead slow and we drifted towards the quay. Until this moment I had been lulled into a state of passivity by the knowledge that there was no alternative to idleness while the ship was in motion. Now anxiety returned with full force.

‘I’d better go and get my things.’

‘No hurry,’ said Kit. ‘Most of the passengers are still asleep. They’ll take the cars off first.’

‘All the better. I’ll go before there’s a crowd.’

‘What’s your cabin number? I’ll fetch your cases for you.’

‘No, really. You’ve already been kind beyond the call of duty. And I ought to wash my face and brush my teeth.’

‘How are you getting to Connemara?’

‘Train. Apparently it takes all day to go a hundred and fifty miles. I have to change twice. Then a bus from Galway to Kilmuree. But I shall have scenery to look at.’ I tried to sound enthusiastic.

‘I’ve a better idea. For the next few weeks I’m travelling round the country spreading light and hope among my lonely authors. Part business, part holiday. There’s a delightful old boy on my list who lives near Westport. Writes books about geology. Sells about four a year but we like to diversify. He’ll be thrilled to see me a few days early and I can drop you off at your destination.’

‘You’ve got a car?’

‘Picturesque though a high-perch phaeton is, I find it inconvenient. And too exposed to the elements.’

‘I couldn’t possibly ask you to change your arrangements.’

‘But I can insist, truthfully, that I’m happy to do so.’

‘I’m being met at the bus station.’

‘All right. I’ll drop you there.’

‘But not until seven o’clock. In the evening, I mean.’

‘We’ll have a leisurely lunch on the way.’

It was too good an offer to refuse. I descended to collect my things. My cabin-mate was still asleep, lying on her back with her mouth open, snoring like a nest of wasps. The smell of horses had intensified. A wild creature with matted clown triangles of hair and smudged saucer eyes stared at me from the mirror.

‘My word!’ said Kit as I rejoined him on deck half an hour later. ‘I was beginning to worry that you’d jumped ship. But it was worth the wait. You look glorious. That colour is marvellous with your skin and hair.’

I felt a stab of pain then, remembering Burgo saying the same thing, almost word for word, about the pale yellow linen dress I had put on.

‘I don’t want to give the Macchuins the impression that the steamiron and I are unacquainted. My skirt not only bears all the signs of having been slept in but looks as though it might have been used as a picnic tablecloth as well.’

‘I’m not so conceited as to suppose that you put it on for me.’

Kit’s expression was non-committal but there was a slight sharpness in his tone. Had I sounded ungracious, I wondered?

‘There’s the old bus now.’ He leaned over the rail and pointed to a red sports car being driven off the ramp and along the quay. The hood was down so we could see quite clearly a man in overalls

behind the wheel, playing with the dashboard and flashing the headlamps. Kit watched with the sort of glazed impassioned look that mothers get when people bend to coo admiringly into the pram.

We were the first passengers to present ourselves at customs and were through it in no time. Kit's car gave a throaty roar at the first turn of the ignition key. My experience of cars was limited. In London I used buses and the underground. My father's ancient Austin Princess and my mother's battered Wolseley were my transport in the country. They rounded bends under protest and were rebellious when it came to starting. Kit's car seemed barely able to contain itself as we trundled through the streets of Ringaskiddy. It had a gravelly growl and made little menacing rushes at obstacles, like a lion on a leash.

'All the men are giving you envious looks,' I said. 'I don't know anything about cars. Is it something terrifically glamorous?'

'It's an Alfa Spider. But it isn't the car they're jealous of.'

Some men consider it only polite to keep up a steady trickle of compliments.' I liked Kit and I was grateful to him, but I had no heart for the game. To flirt successfully you must believe yourself to be desirable. I was near to hating myself. Depression threatened. I pushed it away. I owed it to Kit to be a cheerful passenger.

The urban sprawl at the outskirts of Cork offered nothing particular to admire but the surrounding countryside made up for that. It was at once apparent why Ireland was called the Emerald Isle. It was not just emerald, though. Different tones of green – olive, apple, lime, grass, sage and chartreuse – reflected the sun with a glossy luxuriance. Even the light was green.

'That's Blarney,' said Kit, waving vaguely towards the west. I looked but saw only a church spire. He began to recite:

'There is a stone there that whoever kisses,

Oh, he never misses to grow eloquent.

'Tis he may clamber to a lady's chamber

Or become a member of Parliament.

'I know which I'd rather,' Kit went on. 'As Topsy said, I'm mighty wicked and I can't help it, but I lack the cold-blooded cynicism necessary to be a good politician.'

I glanced quickly at Kit's profile but it was a picture of perfect innocence.

'Look over there, to the north-west. The Boggeragh Mountains.'

I saw a series of massive heather-coloured triangles. We purred between stone walls that divided the land into tiny boulder-strewn fields while the trees laid blue and purple bars across the road, empty but for a few wandering sheep. Beside the road ran a sweetly purling river and seconds later we crossed it by means of a small hump-backed bridge.

'What wonderful names. This really is fairy-land.'

'Certainly it is. And you must be careful to keep on the right side of the good folk. They can be spiteful if crossed and they never forgive an injury.'

I examined Kit's face carefully for signs that he was teasing me. He must have felt my eyes upon him for he turned his head briefly and smiled. As we drove north through the small town of Mallow and on towards the Ballyhoura Hills, I watched the landscape unfolding into higher and ever more beautiful curves and angles, marvelling that I had been ignorant all my life of so much beauty lying in wait across a small sea.

I found myself wondering what Burgo would have thought of it. It occurred to me that in the twelve months that I had known him I had not once heard him comment, favourably or adversely, on the works of Nature. Had this been because our meetings had so often been snatched from commitments elsewhere, appointments with other people, and there had not been time to think about our surroundings? No, that wasn't it. Burgo had often been irritated by the shortcomings of the places we had been obliged to make use of. In fact he was highly conscious of his environment and of the

way his presence changed things. Does that make him sound egotistic? Well, he was. Surprisingly, this had not stopped me loving him.

He was not, on the face of it, a vain man. I suppose his clothes must have been made for him because despite his height – he was six feet four inches – they fitted him perfectly. But I never heard him mention his tailor. His hair was straight, silvery fair, untidy. Probably he knew he was attractive to women so he never fussed about what he looked like, never looked in mirrors, was careless about mud and creases, did not seem to possess a comb. It was this confidence which had drawn me to him, which had been the fatal lure, I decided as I slid down in the car seat to escape the wind that whipped my hair into my eyes. Burgo's attitude was neither aggressive nor defensive. This must have been because his ego was never in danger. Other people's insecurity amused him. Possibly mine was what first attracted him. Certainly the occasion of our meeting had been unpropitious.

Dangerous though I knew it to be, a sense of ease and restfulness I had not felt for days tempted me to let my mind wander back to those first weeks of knowing him, when I had managed for the most part to live only for the moment; when only to think of him had lifted my despondent mood and made my heart race.

## FOUR

Burgo and I had met five weeks after my return to Sussex to look after my mother. The encounter was preceded by a period of almost unrelieved dreariness. Despite visits from a physiotherapist, my mother had made no discernible progress. I had sub-let my room in Paradise Row so that Sarah could continue to pay the mortgage. I became supersensitive to the awfulness of Cutham Hall. When I walked into the house the smell of my father's cigar-smoke mixed with the rubbery smell from carpet underlay that was beginning to perish made me feel sick.

'It's the Conservative lunch on Wednesday,' my father had said at breakfast towards the end of the fifth week. 'As your mother refuses even to look at the wheelchair provided for her at enormous trouble and expense, you'll have to stand in.'

We were alone as usual so I knew he meant me, though he did not look up from his boiled egg. I cannot think quickly first thing in the morning. Irrelevant thoughts went through my mind. The wheelchair was on loan, gratis, from the Red Cross and had cost him only the telephone call I had made to order it and the cupful of petrol I had used when driving to pick it up.

'You don't mean you want me to go with you?'

'There isn't anyone else.'

'Well, thank you for such a flattering invitation but on Wednesday I'm taking the kitchen sofa covers into Worpington for dry-cleaning, then I'm dropping the Wolseley at the garage to be serviced and while that's being done Oliver and I are going to the cinema. Mrs Treadgold's agreed to stay later to look after Mother.'

'You can do all that any day of the week. Your mother was tremendously relieved when I said I'd take you. You don't want to set her back, do you?'

'Please!' said my mother later as I poured her a cup of tea the colour of white wine and buttered wafer-thin slices of toast. She had protested she was too weak to do her own buttering. 'Please, for my sake, go to that ghastly Conservative lunch with him. He has to have a woman on his arm. If he's on his own he feels as naked as going without trousers. He's threatening to make me go in the wheelchair. As if I could! If you knew the pain I'm in. All the time. It's relentless.'

'Honey or marmalade?'

'Marmalade. Sometimes I think I'm going to take all my painkillers at once and finish it for good. When your father starts hectoring me I absolutely make up my mind to do it. If he mentions this beastly lunch one more time, I shall.'

Brough, wearing his peaked cap and a cheap grey suit from the Co-op which was his chauffeur's uniform, drove us to the Carlton House Hotel in Worpington where the lunch was to be held. I had offered to drive so that Brough would not have to kick his heels, throwing stones at seagulls, for two hours but my father was adamant that we should travel like important dignitaries in the back of the Austin Princess, hoping perhaps to excite envy and admiration in the breasts of his political brothers.

Attempting to reverse into a space before the hotel's porte cochère Brough crushed a plastic 'No Parking' sign and from the accompanying crunch of metal I guessed something had happened to the rear wing.

A man in a tail coat and striped trousers came running down the hotel steps. 'You can't park here. Didn't you see the sign? This space is reserved for the mayor and the brass hats.'

'*I am* a brass hat, as you put it,' said my father, getting out of the car.

At that moment the mayor's car drew alongside. It was of a size and magnificence to empty the rate-payers' pockets before anyone had even considered street lamps or drains, and all traffic came to a standstill.

'There *was* a time when the damned peasants knew their places,' said my father with feeling. 'I blame the Welfare State.' He strolled up the steps and disappeared into the hotel.

I saw that we had already drawn a crowd who were watching Brough's attempts to disengage the rear wheel (which had become wedged against the kerb) with unconcealed amusement. 'I'd better go in,' I said. 'See if you can find a space in the car-park.'

I opened the car door in time to hear one of the witnesses to our humiliation say, 'Who *was* that pompous idiot?'

'That's Major Pickford-Norton,' said his companion. 'The sort of man the Conservative Party needs like a hole in the head. Blimpish, bloated with self-consequence—'

'Oh-ah-ha-a!' said another, whom I vaguely recognized. I think he had once been to our house for a shooting lunch. He threw me an embarrassed glance. 'Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you. This is Miss Roberta Pickford-Norton.'

There was an uncomfortable silence. None of this was my fault yet I felt myself blush with mortification.

'Miss Pickford-Norton,' said the one who had called my father a pompous idiot. 'I apologize for my unparliamentary language. Will you let me try to make amends by buying you a drink?'

He put his hand under my elbow and I found myself being borne upwards into the hotel foyer. He ushered me into the dining room, which was already nearly full. Several men and women surged towards him and began conversations, while others waved and tried to catch his eye.

'Hello, Lottie, how are you? Yes, I know, but you must excuse me for a moment. Good to see you, Herbert, talk later? Hello, Mrs Cholmondeley. No, I hadn't heard. Really? Let's talk about it after lunch.'

He tightened his grip on my elbow and steered me into a side room, which was comparatively empty.

'Just a minute.' He went away and reappeared almost immediately with two glasses of white wine. 'Now,' he said. 'I hope you like speeches and being bored to hell and drinking' – he sipped his wine and shuddered – 'something you could clean paintbrushes with because you're in for it now and no mistake. And in addition you've had to put up with my unforgivable rudeness. I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to stamp off in a rage. In fact' – wheeling round to look about him – 'if I weren't the most selfish of men that's exactly what I'd advise you to do. It's going to be unmitigated hell. But I hope you won't. If you can find it in your heart to forgive a blundering idiot – I mean me – I'd be grateful because I can see at a glance you're the only person here I want to talk to.' He grabbed a bowl of peanuts from a nearby table. 'You look hungry. Won't you celebrate a truce with a friendly nut?'

He had dark eyes that slanted upwards at the outer corners. Despite his repentant tone and the solemnity of his expression I could see he thought it was funny. My parents never found anything amusing and Oliver was usually in the toils of creative agony. My own sense of humour, having fallen into desuetude, revived. I took a few nuts to show there were no hard feelings.

'I forgive you,' I said. 'I'm not tactful myself. But you've confirmed my worst fears. I didn't want to come. I hate politics and I loathe politicians. Particularly Conservative ones.'

'I quite agree with you. About politicians, anyway. A worse lot of crooks, egomaniacs and shysters you'll never meet. Though I think the Labour Party's just as bad. Superficially they appear more altruistic but mostly it's cant. Individually they're just as greedy and dishonest. All politicians have had to cheat and connive and flatter to get their seats. Another nut?' I shook my head. 'However,' he went on, 'I like politics. I think it's exciting to feel you can change things for the better.'

'That would be satisfying, if you really thought you had. Improved things, I mean. But so often what politicians do seems to result in nothing more than manipulating statistics.' I looked at my watch. 'I only came to please my father. Perhaps he won't notice if I go away for an hour. I could creep back at the end when the worst is over.'

'That would be the wisest course.' He lifted his eyebrows. They were dark, in striking contrast to his white-blond hair. I thought of the hero of *Amazon in Lace*, s, whose sardonic eyebrows worked overtime. The absurdity of this thought made me smile. 'That's better,' he said. 'Clearly you have a

forgiving nature. I wish I could come with you. It's years since I saw anything of the English seaside. We could have walked along the promenade and looked for shrimps and anemones in rock pools and I could have tried to impress you by skimming stones on the waves. Why don't we have tea—'

'Latimer! Dear chap!' A man with a large curved nose like a puffin's beak placed an arresting hand on my companion's shoulder. 'Well, well, well! This *is* a pleasure! Haven't seen you for, let me see, is it two years? Not since that polo match at Windsor. D'you still play?'

'No. I bust my arm and I've been too frightened to get on a horse since. Miss Pickford-Norton, meet Reginald Pratt.'

I held out my hand.

'How d'ye do?' Mr Pratt squeezed it briefly while giving me a quick measuring glance before dismissing me as someone of no importance. 'You know, Latimer, you shouldn't let a little thing like a broken arm put you off. Why don't you come down next weekend and join us for a bit of practice? You'd soon get your eye in again.'

'No, thanks. I never enjoyed it above half anyway. I only played to please my father-in-law. Do you like the game, Roberta?'

'I don't like team—' I began.

'How's the lovely Lady Anna?' Reginald Pratt interrupted. 'Why don't you bring her along to some of our constituency dos? Shame for her to be sitting at home on her own while you have all the fun.'

'She's in France. And she hates this kind of thing.'

'Oh. Pity. Still, no false modesty, Latimer!' Mr Pratt had edged round so that his back was turned towards me. 'You were a damned good player! Now, Leslie falls off every chukka, don't you, old boy?' He poked a finger into the ribs of the man who had come up to join us.

'I like that!' Leslie laughed until his face was pink. 'Who was it fell off last week and smashed his own bloody stick to matchwood, eh?'

I put down my glass and walked into the dining room.

'Roberta!' shouted my father as soon as he saw me. 'Come and meet Mrs Chandler-Harries.'

A middle-aged woman in a scarlet wool suit standing next to him was beckoning from across the room. I moved slowly between long tables decorated with arrangements of yellow spider chrysanthemums and blue napkins folded into mitres. Mrs Chandler-Harries seemed to have Reginald Pratt's share of chin. It swelled in rolls above her pearls and quivered as she talked. My father (the rat) cleared off at once.

'So *this* is Roberta.' Flecks of red lipstick had transferred themselves to her front teeth. 'Of course you won't remember an old woman like me.' She was right. She had hard, inquisitive eyes which travelled from the collar of my shirt to the toe of my shoe, pricing as they went. During the remainder of our conversation they trawled the crowd over my shoulder hoping to net bigger fish, returning only occasionally to my face. 'You went to dancing classes with my little Nancy.'

I remembered Nancy Chandler-Harries. A poisonous child with a squint, which she could not help, and a boastful manner, which she could.

'Nancy *will* laugh when I tell her I've run into you and where. She said wild horses wouldn't drag her along to a lunch at the Carlton House with a lot of old fuddy-duddies. But then Nancy is *so* popular and has so many demands on her time.'

I kept my face expressionless with some effort. 'How is Nancy?'

'She's engaged to be married to the most *charming* boy. His family have the most *marvellous* place in Hampshire. He'll inherit the title, of course. His family *adore* her. Of course, though naturally I'm prejudiced' – she gave a deprecating laugh which did not convince – 'I must say I think they're lucky to have her ... winning ways ... instinctive good taste ... firm hand ... poise ... charm ...' I stopped listening. I disapprove of violence under any circumstances but after this I could cheerfully have taken little Nancy outside and put out her lights for good.

There are moments when one becomes aware that one is alone in an unsympathetic world. I felt depressed to the depths of my being. I acknowledged that it must be my fault. It could hardly be the rest of the world's. Yet who could deny that Mrs Chandler-Harries was a complacent, insensitive ... I realized she was looking at me expectantly.

'Sorry. What did you say?'

'Are you married or engaged?'

'Excuse me, I really must ... before the speeches begin ...'

I turned away and began to move towards the door. Someone clapped their hands for silence.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Reginald Pratt was fiddling with a microphone. 'Before we partake of this veritable feast' – he waved a hand at the buffet table on which were stainless steel dishes of something sweltering beneath an apricot-coloured sauce: probably coronation chicken – 'first I must say a few words about our late lamented Member, Sir Vyvyan Pennell. We extend our sympathies to dear Lady Pennell.'

The applause that followed was lukewarm.

'Ghastly woman,' murmured the man standing next to me, to no one in particular.

'Sir Vyvyan did sterling work on our behalf and we shall all be the poorer for his sudden demise. That is to say ...' Reginald Pratt made a snorting noise, unpleasantly amplified. '... we *would* be the poorer were it not for the fact that we're privileged to have in our new Member one who has done such ... um ... sterling work in the constituency of Hamforth East and comes to us as a new broom ... blah ... blah ... blah.'

'Hear, hear!' came heartily from the audience.

Reginald continued to fumble through an obstacle course of clichés. I tried to get through the door but a large woman in a quilted waistcoat was leaning against it.

'We are fortunate,' Reginald Pratt continued, 'to have as our representative in Parliament a man who combines the gift of the gab with an ability to get to grips with any number of subjects, ranging from ...' He consulted his notes. '... the need for more university places for the underprivileged to home ownership for council house tenants and—'

'What about inheritance tax!' someone called out.

'That is to say, taxation, of course and ... and artesian wells for the Sudan—'

'Bugger the Sudan,' muttered a man in green tweeds to the woman in the quilted waistcoat. 'If you ask me this fellow's a damned Socialist.'

Mr Pratt realized that his audience was becoming restless. 'Well, you don't want a long speech from me—'

'Hear, hear!' cried the wits.

'Suffice it to say, I've known him a good while and there's no doubt he's an excellent chap and quite terrifyingly clever into the bargain. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Burgo Latimer.'

The man who had fed me peanuts took Reginald's place at the microphone. He acknowledged the applause with a raised hand.

'Thank you, Reggie. I must begin by paying my own tribute to Sir Vyvyan, who, unlike most Members of Parliament, was not in love with the sound of his own voice ...'

Roars of laughter greeted this.

'Too drunk to stand up,' muttered my neighbour.

'The man was an alcoholic,' said the woman in the quilted waistcoat. 'It said in his obituary he made his last speech in nineteen sixty-nine. God knows why he was paid a salary.'

'I can't claim such modest reserve,' continued the new MP for Worpington. 'I intend to speak in the House on Friday on the subject of terrorism in Europe. The recent murder by the Red Brigades of the unfortunate Mr Aldo Moro, a crime as pointless as it was inhuman ...'

Mr Burgo Latimer had his audience's attention immediately. Everyone there was concerned about threats to civic order. He made a short, eloquent speech and looked thoroughly at home in his

surroundings. He radiated confidence. The chest of every man listening seemed to swell with the certainty that they had their finger on life's pulse. Despite the stuffiness of the room every woman looked rejuvenated.

The applause afterwards was enthusiastic. The woman in the quilted waistcoat darted forward to secure her seat. I was through the door in a moment and breathing the salty air of freedom. I spent an enjoyable three-quarters of an hour in Worping's two antique shops, bought a cream jug which I could ill afford but which I was almost certain was Worcester, and ate a tomato and cheese roll, watching the breakers pounce like cats on to the shingle and attempt to claw the pebbles back into the sea.

I merged with the crowd as the lunch ended. My father was flushed with wine, coronation chicken and the sort of self-congratulatory, status-confirming conversation he enjoyed. He had not noticed my absence.

'Not a bad do, on the whole,' he said as we sped home. 'Though I'm not sure about the new chap. I don't like a politician to make jokes. Running the country's a serious business. You can be *too* clever.'

'Surely cleverness is always a good thing.'

'Not when it means you can't see the wood for the trees. Latimer's the kind of Conservative who wants to appeal to the lower orders with a lot of socialist-type reforms. Putting more money into state education. It won't wash. People don't want their taxes spent on reforms they're not going to benefit from.'

'If what you say is true, he obviously isn't that clever.'

'Well, he *thinks* he's clever. That's what I mean. It's the same thing.'

'Not at all. Everyone secretly thinks they're clever. But a few people really are.'

'I wish you wouldn't chop logic with me, Roberta. It's a damned unattractive trait in a woman.'

We travelled the rest of the way in silence. The telephone was ringing as I walked into the hall. I picked up the receiver. I was still angry but I attempted to sound even-tempered.

'Hello?'

'Roberta? This is Burgo Latimer. Will you have dinner with me tonight?'

'Dinner? I couldn't possibly—'

'Please don't say no. If I don't have a decent conversation with somebody human I may go mad. I've had all I can take of the burghers of Sussex. I'm beginning to wonder if there's anyone on this earth who feels remotely as I do about anything. It's a lonely feeling. Surely you know what I mean?'

I remembered liking his voice before, that hurried way of speaking, as though his mind was working furiously.

'Should you be a Conservative MP if you feel like that?'

'Can you think of a single job in which you don't have to put up with people whose company you don't enjoy?'

I thought of my own job. Of my boss, who was known to everyone as Dirty Dick because he was ineptly lecherous; of Marion in the antiquarian books department who was a poisonous gossip; of Sebastian in Musical Instruments who was morbidly touchy and difficult.

'How do you know we have anything in common? I don't suppose I said more than twenty words.'

'That's because I did all the talking. I want a chance to repair that. Besides, I knew *before* the twenty words. One does know these things.'

Was he right? It was true that I had felt disappointed to discover that he was, of all breeds of men, a 'scurvy politician', historically despised, universally mistrusted. I remembered that he also had a wife.

'I'm afraid I'd rather starve to death than set foot in the Carlton House Hotel again.'

'There you are! We *do* feel the same. I think you'll find where we're going the food will at least be all right.'

‘You seem to presume your invitation’s irresistible.’

‘I’m hoping against hope.’

The truth was, I was not only lonely myself but also horribly bored. Oliver was dear to me but not much of a companion as he was asleep most of the time I was awake. My parents limited their communication to exchanges of practical information and complaints. Mrs Treadgold and I had a handful of conversational topics – my mother’s progress or the lack of it; Mrs Treadgold’s own health which was undermined by every germ, allergy and chronic disability to be found in her medical dictionary; and the previous night’s television programmes – which we ran through dutifully each day. The friends of my childhood had left Sussex years ago and fled to London or abroad.

‘Well ... I don’t know. It seems rather odd. We hardly know each other ...’

‘I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty.’

## FIVE

‘You’ve missed some wonderful scenery,’ said Kit.

I opened my eyes. I had been asleep.

‘Where are we?’

‘In the car-park of the pub where we’re stopping for lunch. I’d better put the hood up. You never know in Ireland when it’s going to rain.’

‘But it’s gloriously sunny.’

‘That doesn’t mean a thing. You’ll see.’

While Kit fastened the canvas roof I took stock of our surroundings, yawning. The inn, which stood on the main street of a small village, was low, white-washed and charming. Behind it rose dark trees and, behind them, more mountains.

‘Look at those mountains. That pair like raised eyebrows.’

‘Rather as you might expect, they’re called the Paps of Anu. She was a goddess of fertility.’

‘Of course. I should have known. But, being a woman, it never occurred to me that they bore the remotest resemblance to breasts.’

‘Can we men help behaving like children in a sweet shop when you women are so delicious and desirable?’

I examined myself in the rear-view mirror. Neither epithet could with truth have been applied to me. ‘I’ll need a little while in the Ladies’ with soap and a comb to get the smuts off my face and my hair to lie down.’

‘You go ahead. I’m going to nip across to that telephone kiosk to let my host know I’m about to descend on him.’

‘Supposing he’s away? Or he already has guests?’ I still felt guilty about having disrupted Kit’s plans.

‘He never goes away. And the house is large and infinitely accommodating. Don’t worry. The Irish are tremendously relaxed about these things. Dean Swift once travelled into the country to have dinner with some friends at the house of a stranger. Swift was a difficult, acerbic sort of fellow, as I’m sure you know, and he grumbled all the way there, but he was so delighted with the welcome he received, the standard of cooking, the excellence of the cellar, the elegance of the house and the arrangements made for his comfort, that he stayed for six months. Ireland’s changed since those days but the Irish themselves are as gregarious as ever.’

‘I can’t imagine many people I’d want to have to stay for six months. Certainly not someone as exacting and irritable as Swift.’

‘I shall do my best to be neither of those things.’

Ten minutes later I emerged, much tidier, from the cloakroom to find Kit sitting at a table in the bar, smoking a Gauloise, a bottle of wine in a plastic paint bucket full of ice at his elbow. I sat beside him and took a sip of wine, which was not good but not bad either. The bar was fairly dark and despite the warmth outside a fire burned in the hearth. We were the only people there.

‘This is lovely.’ I meant not just the wine but the liberating feeling of being a stranger in an unknown land.

‘I hope it’s cold enough. The Irish mostly drink beer and whiskey. An ice bucket is an unknown quantity outside the big towns.’

‘It doesn’t matter. I think it’s all charming.’ I admired the artwork, several religious pictures in primary colours, a photograph of the Pope in a cardboard frame decorated with tinsel and a reproduction of Holman Hunt’s *Light of the World*.

‘T’ere ye are at last, madam.’ A waiter came over to our table and winked at Kit. ‘Worth waiting for, wasn’t it? Madam’s as lovely as a rose. And what’ll you both be eating now? We’ve chicken or

fish. But I'm t'inking the fish is a little past its best. I don't say it's off exactly but it's got a smell on it I shouldn't care to bring t'rough the house.'

It was the first time I had heard the famous brogue in its native setting: *th* pronounced as *t* and *s* preceding a consonant softened as in 'pasht its besht'. It was beguiling.

We decided on the chicken and I asked for a glass of water.

'I suspect the fish doesn't exist,' said Kit when he had gone. 'Only he wanted, in a true Irish spirit of hospitality, to have an alternative to offer us.'

'Really? How friendly and kind. Rather different from the English attitude, isn't it?'

'The Irish and the English have little in common. Except that neither nation is celebrated for its food. If I were you I'd have cheese instead of pudding. There isn't much you can do to ruin a piece of good Irish cheddar. The last time I ordered apple pie in a country pub it was brought to my table in its cardboard box to reassure me it wasn't a cheap homemade effort. The waitress kindly squirted the blob of cream from the aerosol can in front of me. You can understand it, really. When the majority of the population once lived on potatoes and buttermilk anything from a shop seems like luxury. The white tags on tea-bag strings are known as "wee glamours".'

'Not really?' I laughed. 'I think that's delightful.'

Kit smiled at me. 'I must say it's cheering to be with someone who's so ready to be pleased.'

'I expect I sound idiotic. It's just that recently things have been rather ... difficult. This seems so different. It's a relief to have left it all behind.'

'You've had a bad time?'

'It was my own fault. One must expect to take the consequences if one behaves stupidly. But that's all in the past. Don't let's even think about it.'

'I wish you'd trust me.'

'It isn't that.' I stared hard at a picture of Christ standing on a hectic, crimson cloud. 'I don't want to tell you because ...' I paused. 'The truth is I'm ashamed.'

'That sounds intriguing.' When I did not say anything he added, 'But I'm not to know why?'

I shook my head.

The waiter brought us a plate of sliced bread, already buttered, and my glass of water. Despite the glass being chipped and smeary I smiled and thanked him. He clapped his hand to his waistcoat pocket, roughly where his heart was. 'O-ho! She's a dazzler!' He gave Kit another wink. 'Yer t'e lucky man now,' he whispered mockconspiratorially. 'They're saying in t'e kitchen t'e two of ye must be on yer honeymoon.'

'I wish we were,' said Kit.

'Arrah!' The waiter's voice was warmly sympathetic as he rested his hand on Kit's shoulder. 'She's keeping ye waiting, toying with ye like a cat wit' a mouse, but ye'll appreciate it all the more when she gives t'e green light. Bless ye both.' He hurried away.

I drank some of the water which was warm and swimming with specks of rust. I hoped it was rust. 'I've heard of Irish charm but I didn't expect to be flattered into a state of mild hysteria.'

'He's laying it on a bit thick.' Kit laughed. 'It's a national game, playing the stage Irishman to tourists: the rollicking, red-nosed loveable rogue; the lazy, boozy, belligerent, professional Celt. And there's something true in it as well. As a race the Irish are friendly, hospitable, good crack – that means company – and on the whole they do like to talk and get drunk. They prefer to say what they think will please, which I rather like. But there's often a degree of self-parody beneath all that passion and melancholy that can catch you unawares.'

'So I'm to disbelieve the flannel but take it as a gesture of goodwill?'

'It's a game but it's quite good fun to play it.' Kit's eyes held mine expectantly. 'Though nothing's much fun for you at the moment, is it? I know I'm in danger of seeming offensively inquisitive but I wish you'd tell me what the problem is.'

‘Oh, please, let’s not talk about me. I’m heartily sick of the subject. And you’d be horribly bored, I promise you.’

Kit’s expression became regretful. ‘I’ve a confession to make,’ he said. ‘I hoped you’d trust me so I wouldn’t have to. But I hate the feeling that I’m deceiving you. After I’d telephoned Phelim O’Rahilly – who, by the way, is raring to see me so you needn’t feel guilty about my change of plan – I went into the village shop to buy a bar of chocolate to sustain us during this afternoon’s drive. The English papers had just arrived. Even upside down I could see it was a good likeness.’

I suppose I must have developed something of a phobia about newspapers because I felt the blood drain from my face at the mere mention of the horrible things. My fragile pretence of lightheartedness crumbled. ‘Oh,’ I said, pressing my lips together to prevent them trembling.

‘So, Miss Roberta Pickford-Norton, all hope of concealment is at an end. However, you are under no obligation to say anything.’

‘But anything I do say may be used in evidence against me?’

Kit shook his head. ‘Despite the inflammatory nature of the reporting, it hasn’t changed my view of you by one tittle or jot. I know what journalists are. And politicians.’

‘Is it bad?’

Kit raised his eyebrows and widened his eyes.

Some instinct made me say, ‘You bought it, didn’t you? Let me see it.’

‘You won’t like it.’

‘Hand it over.’

Kit drew the paper from under a cushion. It was one of the less reputable newspapers, though the distinction is fine.

The headline was: *Labour Backbenchers Demand Resignation of New Minister for Culture*. In smaller print was the caption: *War hero’s daughter in love scandal*. The photograph beneath was of me driving out of the front gates of Cutham. I was looking straight at the camera, my eyes staring and my lips drawn back in a snarl. There was a caption beneath the photograph. *Roberta Pickford-Norton, 26, leaves ancestral home for Belgravia party*. Next to it was a studio photograph of a woman in a striped shirt and pearls, who leaned her chin on her hand and smiled into the lens. Beneath it, it said *Lady Anna Latimer, 35, daughter of the Earl of Bellinter*. I read the article.

Lady Anna, the minister’s wife, has assured friends she will stand by her husband despite being devastated to discover he has been engaged in a year-long relationship with blonde bombshell, Pickford-Norton, whose father was decorated for bravery for his part in the battle for Tobruk in 1942. Slim, green-eyed, convent-educated siren, Pickford-Norton, is well-known in aristocratic circles for her wild behaviour and outspoken views. She told reporters, ‘Who gives a \*\*\*\* about his wife? She’s middle-aged and past it and anyway fidelity is a naff, middle-class thing.’ The Labour Party is united in calling for Latimer’s resignation but the Prime Minister, Margot Holland, who was clearly angry to find herself embroiled in scandal barely seven weeks after taking office, said in her statement yesterday, ‘Burgo Latimer is a gifted, hard-working and conscientious member of the team, who has a great deal to contribute to the future of both the party and the country. This is muck-raking by the Opposition of the most discreditable kind.’ Sources close to Pickford-Norton have denied she is pregnant by Latimer. Lady Anna, who is childless, is believed to have recently undergone the latest treatment for infertility: in-vitro fertilization. Continued Page Two.

I opened the paper to see a photograph of Burgo, striding along the pavement towards 10 Downing Street, looking preoccupied. I felt such a sense of loss, such a longing for him that I almost burst into tears.

‘I don’t want to read any more.’

I stood up and thrust the paper on to the fire. It burned brightly, then fell into the grate. Kit went to work with the poker to avert the burning down of the inn.

‘Sorry,’ I said dully. ‘It was your paper. I ought to have asked.’

‘You did the right thing. That’s all it was fit for.’

‘Most of it isn’t true. I’ve never in my life said anything about Burgo’s wife, even to him. What could I possibly say? I’ve never met Anna and Burgo hardly ever talked about her. I’m not remotely aristocratic. My father comes from a long line of undistinguished army officers and clergymen. Nor was I going to a party in Belgravia. I was going to the surgery to get some Valium. Not at all glamorous.’ I tried, unsuccessfully, to laugh. ‘My father wasn’t decorated, nor was he a hero. I went to a Church of England school. Nothing’s true. Except – except that I did have a love affair with Burgo. And I suppose that’s all that matters.’

‘Millions of people have affairs. Why should you be ashamed? My mother’s had more lovers than birthdays and I don’t believe my father minds a bit as long as nothing gets in the way of his own philandering.’

‘Yes. Well, as you say, adultery is commonplace. But when you see your name in every newspaper, from broadsheet to gutter press, and you know that people the length and breadth of Britain are calling you a heartless, scheming whore, you feel profoundly hurt. It seems I’ve done something so terrible that anyone feels justified in saying the vilest things about me. Yesterday a well-known female columnist wrote an article deploring women who let down the sisterhood. She mentioned me by name, saying that in a few years my lifestyle would show on my face. Lying and cheating and fornicating would plough deep fissures from brow to chin, my body would become diseased from sexual excess and my hair would fall out from over-bleaching. While Lady Anna would deepen in beauty like a fading rose ... It was rubbish from beginning to end but I can remember it almost word for word. Hatred was in every line. I’m frightened by so much hostility. I couldn’t recognize myself in the woman she condemned. I feel I don’t know who I am any more.’

To my dismay, my eyes filled with tears. Kit took my hand. It is wise to be wary when men offer brotherly comfort. It is generally a prelude to something far from brotherly. But Kit’s grasp was warm and consoling. He neither squeezed nor stroked, he simply held my hand in his while I worked hard at being sensible, grown-up and self-controlled.

‘Surely you don’t plough fissures,’ said Kit, after a while. ‘You plough furrows, or lines perhaps, but fissures occur from hard surfaces splitting from weakness in their composition—’ I may have looked reproachful for he interrupted himself to say, ‘Sorry. It’s the job, you see. You have to weigh every semicolon for sense and fitness. Something those journalists couldn’t begin to do, even if they wanted to.’

‘Probably it’s just my pride that’s been wounded.’ I slid my hand away and tried to speak lightly. ‘As a child I desperately wanted to be good, above all things. I spent hours on my knees begging God to make me heroic and saintly: a cross between Gladys Aylward and Thérèse de Lisieux. I longed to radiate seraphic purity.’

‘I must say you don’t strike me as being especially prim and proper. There’s a light in your eye that I’d say was a warning to the faint-hearted.’

‘Wholly misleading, in that case. I like to be in control of things, not luxuriating in sensuality.’

‘Hm. Pity. Are you sure? When I look at this slender hand’ – he picked up mine again and turned it over – ‘I see the nails painted dark red, the skin smooth and white.’ He tapped my ring. ‘Emerald and diamonds, aren’t they? Now my aunts – my father’s sisters – whom I always think of as the embodiment of virtuous women, corseted by self-discipline, have strong square callused hands with nails cut savagely short, a little dirty from washing the dogs and digging up the herbaceous borders. They are strangers to hand cream. Ditto rings. Your hands are much more like my mother’s, of whom, naturally, they strongly disapprove.’

I retrieved my hand. ‘The ring belonged to my grandmother. I like beautiful things, perhaps more than I ought, but I’m not a hedonist. I don’t believe that the pursuit of pleasure is the highest good.’

‘What is, then?’

'I don't know. I suppose ... behaving in a way which causes the least harm. One shouldn't be indifferent to the effect one's behaviour has on other people. It's impossible to talk of these things without sounding like a prig. What do you think?'

'I'm not so high-minded as you. I think if you enjoy yourself then you're less likely to be a burden and a nuisance and more likely to be amusing. If that's hedonism, then I approve of it.'

'I'm not high-minded at all. As I've demonstrated rather publicly.'

'So now you feel you're forever disqualified from sainthood?'

'It seems so.'

'So what's the real story? I don't believe you dragged a protesting, happily married man from the arms of his miserable, barren wife.'

'Apparently she's determined not to have children. One of the few things Burgo told me about her was that she dislikes them and is afraid of getting fat.'

'And do you think that's true?'

'Why shouldn't it be? It's not a particularly attractive attitude but it's perfectly rational.'

'Are men generally truthful when discussing their wives with their mistresses, do you think?'

'I suppose not. But Burgo's not quite like other men. Oh, I know people always say that when they think they're in love,' I added when I saw scepticism in Kit's blue eyes.

'Are you in love with him?'

'Who knows what love is? Mutual need? Desire? Vanity? Illusion? I wish I knew.'

'What's he like, then?'

What was Burgo really like? I wondered.

The landlord appeared at that moment with our food. The chicken had been boiled to an unappetizing grey, a match for the overcooked cabbage. I knew if I did not eat I would get a headache and feel faint by the evening but the newspaper article had killed my appetite.

'It's bad, but not that bad,' Kit said when I put my knife and fork together, having managed less than a quarter of what was on my plate. 'Surely you can get those potatoes down? Come along, I'll butter them for you and they'll taste better.' He unwrapped a square of butter, which had come in a foil packet with the rolls, and spread it over the vegetables as though I were a child. To please him I forced down a few more forkfuls. 'That's a good girl. Now eat that bit of chicken breast just to show you forgive me for upsetting you. I'm an ass and I'm really sorry.'

'You've been my absolute salvation.' I ate the chicken. 'I'm sorry to be so pathetic.'

'All right, so we're both thoroughly remorseful. Now, Scheherazade. If you wish to avoid strangulation, carry on with your tale.'

I began to tell Kit about Burgo.

## SIX

‘Why are you dressed like that?’ Oliver had asked on the evening of the Conservative lunch at the Carlton House Hotel.

We were in the kitchen. I was wearing my mac buttoned to the neck while I washed up my mother’s supper tray.

‘I’m going out to dinner and I don’t want to splash my dress. It’s silk and even water marks it like crazy.’

‘What’s for supper?’

‘It’s called a navarin, but you’d better tell Father it’s lamb stew or he won’t eat it. It’s a classic French dish. It’s got peas and beans and turnips in it. It’s delicious, honestly.’

‘It doesn’t sound it.’

‘There’s Brown Betty with gooseberries for pudding.’

‘Oh, good. Custard or cream?’

‘Cream.’

‘Where’re you going?’

I took off the mac and examined my reflection in the mirror by the back door. My hair is naturally wavy and resists all attempts to tame it. I had fastened it back from my face with two combs. My eyelashes are dark, luckily, but I had thickened them with mascara. I had painted my lips with a colour called Black Pansy which I had found in the village shop. The deep red made my mouth look sulky but was effective, I thought, with my skin, which is pale. I fished the pink plastic case from my bag and applied a little more for good measure.

All the time I had been washing my hair and putting varnish on my nails I had been conscious that my blood was circulating a little faster. It was a measure of how miserable being at home was making me, I told myself, if going out to dinner with a man I knew nothing about, except that he had a job I rather despised and was married, could lift my spirits so dramatically. Not that the last was relevant. A Member of Parliament taking a single woman out to dinner in his own constituency could not afford the least breath of scandal. He would not dare to flirt with me. And even if he did, I was immune to his charms. Sarah and I had so often listed the reasons why it was certifiable madness to have anything to do with married men that we could have given public lectures on the subject.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who’s taking you?’

‘A man called Burgo Latimer. Our new MP.’

‘Really? That sounds grim. What’s he like?’

‘He’s a Conservative but he’s not what you’d expect.’

‘What’s different about him?’

‘I don’t know, really. He isn’t dull, anyway. There’s the doorbell. Don’t tell Father anything about it. He won’t approve.’

‘What shall I say? He’s bound to give me the third degree if he thinks there’s a mystery.’

‘You’re the novelist. Make it up.’

Burgo was standing with his back to me when I opened the door. I had forgotten how tall he was.

‘Some good trees,’ he said, turning, ‘but if there’s one plant I can’t stand it’s the spotted laurel. It makes me think of a dread contagion. And you’ve got so much of it.’

After his telephone call I had tried to remember his face but could only be sure about his eyes which I knew were dark brown and his hair which was straight and of that extreme fairness – a sort of white-blond – that generally one sees on small children. It had the same juvenile texture, soft and untidy, and was, I guessed, worn a fraction too long for the conventional tastes of his female acolytes.

His nose was finely shaped with arched nostrils, his mouth full. It might have been considered a slightly effeminate face but for the eyes. They were sharp, amused, combative.

‘We’ve practically got the National Collection of dingy shrubbery,’ I said.

I followed him down the steps to where an enormous black car stood on the gravel.

I was relieved he hadn’t expected to be invited in for drinks with my family. It seemed this was an opportunity to soft-soap the voters that he was willing to write off. Or perhaps he knew that even if he had snubbed my father, made a pass at my mother and taken an axe to the furniture, Cutham Hall would always be a staunchly Conservative household.

‘You can starve a laurel,’ I continued, ‘leave it unpruned for years then hack it to the ground, but it’s almost impossible to kill it. It’s difficult to love something that can be thoroughly abused and taken for granted. You need a little uncertainty. The feeling that you have to nurse the guttering flame.’

‘And this is so true of love between humans.’

A man in a real chauffeur’s uniform, grey piped with blue, which would have made Brough horribly jealous, had rushed round the car to hold open the rear door nearest the steps. Burgo went round to the other side and slid in beside me.

‘This is Simon,’ said Burgo, when the driver returned to his seat. ‘He drives me when I’m in Sussex. Miss Pickford-Norton.’

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘I don’t use the hyphen. I call myself Roberta Norton. Or, more often, Bobbie.’

‘How democratic,’ said Burgo.

‘Pickford is my mother’s maiden name. My father added it on when they married. It’s a bit of a tongue-twister.’

Also I thought, but did not say, that it was an embarrassing piece of social climbing on my father’s part. He liked to talk of the Pickfords of Cutham Hall as though they had lived there for centuries instead of barely a hundred years. And he kept quiet about the pickling.

‘I like Roberta, though. Pretty and old-fashioned. Bobbie doesn’t suit you at all. Step on it, Simon. We don’t want to be late.’

Simon spun the wheels on the gravel and we shot away. The suspension was so good that one hardly noticed the potholes.

‘Where are we going?’

‘A place called Ladyfield. You won’t have heard of it. It’s about fifteen miles from here.’

Burgo leaned forward and closed the glass partition that separated the front from the back.

‘Obviously you don’t worry about appearing democratic.’ I admired the acres of polished walnut and quilted leather. The back seat was the size of a generous sofa and you could have fitted a dining table and chairs into the space for our legs.

‘Simon won’t mind being excluded. He’s thrilled to be asked to drive fast. He doesn’t often get the chance.’

‘I really meant, this is an opulent car.’

‘It isn’t mine. It belongs to Simon. He’s a dedicated Conservative so he lets me have the use of it at a reasonable rate. It doesn’t do me any harm to be conspicuous but the real reason I like it is because I can stretch my legs and sleep off the coronation chicken on my way back to London.’ He extended them as he spoke and they were, indeed, unusually long. ‘When Simon’s not driving me about he makes a living ferrying brides to and from church at a stately crawl.’

This explained the powerfully sweet aroma of scent and hairspray that clung to the upholstery. I opened the window a fraction.

Burgo leaned forward and picked something from the floor. ‘There you are. Confetti.’ He handed me some scraps of silver paper, then swayed towards me as Simon took a tight bend at speed. The draught from the open window blew the tiny bell and the horseshoe from my hand. ‘I find all sorts of things in here.’ He looked in the ashtray and then felt along the edge of the seat. ‘There you are.’ He showed me a lace handkerchief, crumpled into a ball. ‘It’s still damp with tears. At least I

hope it's tears. Once I found a garter. Another time a copy of *Tropic of Capricorn* with the spicier sections marked. Last week I found a photograph of a young man torn in two. Themes for a whole book of short stories.'

'Don't you ever drive yourself?'

'I don't have a licence. I gave up after the fifth attempt to pass my test. I offered the last man a bribe but he still refused to pass me. I found it reassuring, in a way, that he was incorruptible. My temperament isn't suited to driving. I get bored and my mind wanders. In London I take taxis. It's an opportunity to hear what people really think, talking to people who don't know I'm an MP. Naturally the cabbies all have strong views on politics and are usually much further to the right than I am.'

'My father seems to think you're practically a Marxist.'

'In theory I approve of some elements of Marxism but I disapprove of despotism, which is the only way you can implement it, humans being so unequal. History's shown us that Marxism and Fascism have a lot in common. Both systems rely on collective brainwashing to educate the populace and extreme brutality to crush rebellion. And that's positively my last word this evening about politics. You've told me unequivocally that you hate them and I've had enough of them today to satisfy the most ardent politicophile.'

'I like political history, though. Distance lends enchantment.'

'What do you really like?' He slid lower in his seat, folded his arms and turned his head to rest his chin on his left shoulder to look at me. 'What makes *you* want to get up in the morning?'

Meeting his eyes, observant, curious, humorous, I felt a moment of disquiet, almost alarm. What was I doing speeding through the countryside to an unknown destination with this man who was a stranger? Reality is so different from one's imagining. Getting dressed alone in my bedroom, I had felt excited and confident. Now Burgo was beside me, I felt oddly uncertain of myself and almost wished myself safely back in the gloomy dining room at Cutham.

'Well.' I looked down at the little heap of multicoloured confetti near his shoe and attempted to restore my composure by giving my attention fully to the question. 'Breakfast, for one thing. I usually wake up hungry. And extremes of weather. Not only sun but snow and wind, too. I even like wet days if it's a proper deluge. That's the only thing I don't like about living in London: you hardly notice the seasons, except as an inconvenience. Nature's confined to a few dusty plane trees growing out of holes in the pavement. I really love flowers and gardens. But London parks are too tidy. And I hate African marigolds.' Careful, I thought, you're starting to gabble. Don't let him see you're nervous. If only he'd stop looking at me. I put up my hand to check the combs in my hair, then was annoyed with myself for fidgeting. 'I'd always be willing to get up to see the first bud open of an oriental poppy called Cedric Morris. It's the most subtle shade of greyish pink.' Now you're sounding like a plant dictionary. Stupid, stupid. 'And I nearly always want to get up for work. I work for an auction house. I used to be in the antique textile department but last year I moved to porcelain. There's always the chance that something good's going to be brought in for valuation or to be sold. I can't often afford to bid for anything myself but just to see something beautiful – to touch it – gives me pleasure.'

'What do you call beautiful?'

'Practically anything that's eighteenth century. Ignoring the smells and the lack of antibiotics and dentistry, Angelica Kauffmann seems to me to have led the most enviable life. She was prodigiously talented and got to see most of the wonderful houses and gardens and exquisite furniture of the age.'

'Ah yes, she was a painter.'

'And absolutely on a par with the men. Sir Joshua Reynolds was a great admirer. Have you seen her work at Frogmore?'

'No. But I shall, now you've put me on to it. Do you paint?'

'In an amateur way. The need to earn a living is my excuse for not being better at it. But the truth is that I can't make up my mind what I like best. Textiles, fans and *objets de vertu* are passions but

I'm equally besotted by porcelain, especially Chelsea and Longton Hall. As for early English walnut furniture ...' I made a sound expressive of longing.

'Describe an average day.'

I told him about my job. Now I was on familiar territory I grew calmer. I felt a brief return of my London self. I was used to working with male colleagues, to being as much at ease with men as with women and confident that I knew what I was talking about most of the time. Burgo was a good listener. He gave me his whole attention and asked the right questions. I relaxed and wondered what had made me lose my nerve in that absurd way. It must be Cutham that disagreed with me.

'I like the idea of a life spent in pursuit of beauty,' Burgo said.

'Is that the impression I've given? Well, perhaps. Some people would think that superficial. Cold and selfish. And subjective, of course.'

'Only if they were thinking of beauty in its narrowest sense: the acquisition of fine objects. And even with material beauty, things must be honest, well conceived and well made to be beautiful. Keats said it succinctly enough in that wonderful sonnet. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Or was it the other way round? When we come to abstractions – goodness, truth, unselfishness, charity, justice, fortitude – in practice they're indivisible from one another and from beauty. I knew I'd like talking to you. You're an enthusiast and so am I. About different things but that doesn't matter. I like that dress. That *is* a subjective judgement. What do you call that colour?'

'I don't know. Pistachio, perhaps.'

'Your eyes are almost the same colour, a mixture of green and grey with that ring of gold round the iris. I've never seen anything like them.'

'I think you said your wife was in France? Is she on holiday?'

'She spends a lot of time in Provence. She has a *mas* there with a few acres of vines. She likes heat.'

'Does she make the wine herself?'

'No. She has someone to do it for her. She prefers to read and sunbathe and sleep. Sometimes she goes for walks or entertains. Anna is not an enthusiast.'

'It sounds a charmed life.' I wanted to ask more about her but was afraid of sounding inquisitive.

He turned his head away to examine a handsome old house as we flew past. 'I suppose it is. Are you married?'

'Not even engaged. I once was for a week, then thought better of it. The awfulness of breaking it off and hurting someone I was fond of taught me a lesson: not to go into these things without being one hundred per cent certain. But as one can't ever be that I may never get married. It seems such a terrible risk.'

'That's not the enthusiast talking. What about your parents?'

'What about them?'

'Happy marriage?'

'No.'

Burgo refrained from drawing the obvious conclusion, for which I was grateful. He continued to look out of the window. Trees overhung the road. Occasionally a flash of fire from the setting sun shot between the leaves and stung my eyes. I closed them to prevent them watering. A minute went by without either of us saying anything. The silence felt comfortable now, as though we had reached some sort of understanding. Perversely, this feeling of intimacy, as though the usual social rules need not apply, made me determined to break it.

'It's so kind of you to take me out and give me this treat. But you must let me pay my share.'

He continued to look out of the window. 'Are you afraid I shall call in the debt by demanding sexual favours?'

I kept my voice detached, though I was disconcerted. 'Not in the least. A man intent on paying for such things with dinner doesn't talk about his wife, unless of her imperfections.'

‘So you’re quite confident that what I want is your companionship for what would otherwise have been a lonely evening?’

‘Perfectly confident. Isn’t it possible for men and women to enjoy friendship with nothing else involved?’

Burgo did not reply but turned his head to look at me. It was not a flirtatious look. He did not smile or smoulder. There was no tenderness, no particular friendliness even. It was a look of simple interrogation, as though he wondered whether I meant him to give me a serious answer. I felt compelled to drop my eyes, conscious of a sudden acceleration of the heart.

‘Here we are,’ he said as Simon braked sharply and swung the car between a pair of iron gates.

‘Where?’

‘Ladyfield.’

An immaculately maintained drive was bordered on each side by a double row of limes. Beyond were park-like grounds dotted with stately trees.

‘Is it a private house?’

‘Yes.’

‘Will there be other guests?’

‘Eight more, I believe.’

I was almost annoyed to discover that we would be so well chaperoned. I had come near to making a fool of myself, thinking, as he had perhaps intended me to think because it amused him, that we would be having a cosy dinner *à deux* with the potential for advance and retreat that this implied. I caught his eye. He was smiling.

‘Won’t the people there think it odd? Thrusting a perfectly strange woman on them at the last minute, I mean?’

‘You don’t seem particularly strange to me.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Fleur won’t mind at all. I ought to say she’ll be delighted but that would be stretching it. I don’t know that she’s ever really delighted by people. She much prefers animals. This is where I stay when I’m in Sussex. When one of her guests rang to say she was ill, I told Fleur I’d invite you.’

‘Is it her house?’

‘Strictly speaking it’s Dickie’s. He’s her husband. It’s been in his family for a couple of generations.’

‘They seem to have prospered.’ I could not help comparing the grounds of Ladyfield with Cutham Hall, to the latter’s disadvantage.

The lights of the house appeared through the trees. The drive curved round in a circle to end before an early Georgian house of soft red brick. Ladyfield must have been built at roughly the same time as Cutham Hall but had escaped Victorian revision. The light was fading but I could see a well-proportioned façade with a pedimented portico, pilasters and a balustrade at roof level ornamented with urns. The half-glazed front door stood open.

‘Well?’ Burgo asked as we stood on the drive after Simon had driven the car away. ‘Like it?’

‘It’s enchanting!’

‘Let’s go in.’

The hall was painted a marvellous rich red, the perfect background for what seemed at a cursory glance to be good paintings. A cantilevered staircase curled round at the far end beneath a Venetian window. It was all quite grand but untidy. On the lovely, worn limestone floor a pair of gumboots stood beside a bowl containing pieces of meat. Beneath a side table was a dog basket from which trailed a filthy old blanket. A halter and a Newmarket rug were thrown over a chair. Burgo examined a pile of letters on the table. He picked up one and read it quickly, then threw it aside.

‘Nothing that can’t wait. Let’s get a drink. Then I’ll run up and change.’

We went into the drawing room. The walls were buff coloured and looked superb with the plasterwork, which was of a high quality and painted, in the correct manner, several shades of greyish-white. Burgo appeared at my side with a glass of something that fizzed.

‘What are you looking at so intently?’

‘Plasterwork’s a particular weakness of mine.’

‘Perhaps, after all, you are a strange woman.’

I stared at the painting above the fireplace. ‘Isn’t that a Turner?’

‘Is it?’

‘It’s an early one. Before he was bitten by cosmic mysticism. But you can see the hand of the master.’

‘You may be able to. I don’t know enough about it.’

‘Oh, I’m a novice myself when it comes to painting. That takes years and years of just looking.’

‘You beast!’ said a voice behind us. ‘I’ve been waiting and waiting for you. And then you choose just the moment I dash out to the stable to arrive.’

A girl, younger than me, I guessed, had come into the drawing room. She walked up to Burgo, threw her arms round his neck and pulled down his head so she could kiss him on the mouth. Burgo disengaged himself from her embrace and held her wrist in one hand while he pulled her ear with the other.

‘Roberta, this is Fleur,’ said Burgo. ‘My sister.’

‘Hello.’ Fleur gave me her hand. It was slightly sticky. ‘Sorry I wasn’t here to greet you. I’ve been drenching a colt. He’s got worms.’

Fleur was small and slender. Her hair was brown, her face soft and round like a child’s. Her eyes slanted up at the outer corners, like his, and had the same dark brilliance, but hers were vague and dreamy.

‘Where is everybody? I thought we’d be the last to arrive.’ Burgo poured a glass of champagne for his sister. She held the stem of the glass in a childish fist.

‘They’ve all come. Dickie took them out to see the Temple to Hygeia.’

‘Dickie’s in the process of repairing an old folly,’ Burgo said to me. ‘Dedicated to the goddess of health and cleanliness. I’m going to change.’

Before I could ask: Why cleanliness? he had gone. There were noises in the hall and then people in evening dress came into the drawing room. I felt a little shy, not only because they were all unknown to me but also because I was certain they must wonder what I was doing there. But my diffidence was as nothing to my hostess’s. She frowned, licked a finger and began to scrub at a mark on the skirt of her beaded dress.

‘You must be Roberta.’ A man with grizzled, receding hair shook my hand. He leaned upon a stick. ‘I’m Dickie. Charmed to see you. Any friend of Burgo’s ... Can I give you a top-up?’ I accepted his offer of more champagne. ‘So nice of you to make up the numbers at the last minute,’ he continued. ‘It isn’t everyone one can ask; *Homo sapiens* is a sensitive, thin-skinned creature.’

‘Yes,’ I said. Then, feeling my reply to be inadequate, I added, ‘It certainly is!’

‘Glad you agree with me!’ The expression in his eyes above his half-moon spectacles was cordial. ‘I must quickly do the rounds with the booze. Fleur darling, look after Roberta. Catch up with you later.’

He limped away. I watched him talking to his friends. He was affable, gave a pat on the arm here, a peck on the cheek there, his pinkish face suffused with pleasure. Fleur abandoned the scrubbing of her dress but kept her eyes on the carpet, her mouth unsmiling.

‘Do tell me about your colt.’ I had once been the proud possessor of a piebald with a large head and short legs and had been to enough gymkhanas and pony-club dances to be able to maintain a horsey conversation without making an idiot of myself.

Fleur's beautiful eyes met mine with sudden enthusiasm. 'He's nearly three and absolute heaven. Bright chestnut with white socks and a blaze. I've called him Kumara. It's the name of a Hindu god. He's got the most perfect action ...'

While Fleur talked, the words coming quickly in a way that was already familiar to me, I speculated about what seemed a striking mismatch. What attractions, apart from a genial manner, had a man like Dickie for a lovely girl at least twenty years younger? He had a wonderful house and appeared to be well heeled, but Fleur did not seem the mercenary type.

'And I've already lunged him twice ...'

There was something endearing about the grubby fingernails and a definite tidemark round the neck, half-hidden by the expensive dress.

'I've had a good offer for Kumara but nothing would persuade me to part with him. I love him best in all the world – after Burgo, naturally. But you can't equate people and animals, can you? I mean, Kumara looks to me for everything. I know that sounds rather sad and selfish, having to be important to something. But Burgo doesn't *need* me. He doesn't need anyone. That doesn't stop me loving him but it makes it rather one-sided.'

I looked across the room at Dickie, who was roaring with laughter at something he had just been told. He threw back his head and leaned more heavily on his stick to balance himself.

'Children need you, I suppose for the first few years, anyway,' I said.

Fleur's expression changed. Her fine brows drew together and she flushed. 'Probably they do.' She grew silent.

Obviously I had put my foot in it. I wondered what the trouble was? Perhaps Dickie was too much of an invalid to ... I cast about for a change of subject. 'What sort of dogs do you have?'

'I've got three. Looby, a black Labrador, Lancelot who's a red setter and King Henry. He's a stray, a mixture of Alsatian and poodle, I think.'

Fleur told me the provenance of each dog, their likes and dislikes and particular charms. It ought to have been excruciatingly dull but actually I enjoyed Fleur's artless confiding style. It was like being with an old friend with whom no pretence is necessary.

'Darling, you haven't said a word to Benedict and you know how hurt he gets if you neglect him.' Dickie had his free hand on his wife's bare arm, caressing it discreetly with his thumb. 'Besides, I'm looking forward to talking to Roberta.'

'I don't think Benedict likes me at all. And I certainly don't like him.'

'Sweetie, he's crazy about you. Do your duty, there's a good girl.'

As she slouched off like a rebellious teenager Dickie gazed after her, love transforming his plain features into something pleasant to see. Then he turned back to me, smiling. 'I was watching you two. Fleur really likes you. She's no good at hiding her feelings, you know.'

'She's charming,' I said, meaning to please but meaning it, too.

Dickie lifted his upper lip and grinned like a dog. 'Isn't she wonderful? The first time I set eyes on her was at a garden party. Burgo was the guest of honour. It was in aid of somebody starving somewhere. It was hot and stuffy and the people were awfully stuffy too. Fleur was standing alone in the shade of a weeping willow. She took off her hat and shook out her hair. There was a band playing. One of those musicals. Te-tum, te-tum, te-tum.' Dickie hummed something unrecognizable. 'She started to dance, with her eyes closed, as though she was imagining herself far away. I said to myself, that's the girl I'm going to marry.' Dickie's face as he told me this story had become patchy with emotion. 'But I had to wait four years before she'd have me. She was only eighteen then and naturally she had other things on her mind besides marriage. And I was already a silly old buffer. I'm fifty this year – nearly thirty years older.'

I tried to look surprised.

'Yes, it's not so much May and September, more like February and November.'

I put a note of polite contradiction into my laugh.

‘Actually ...’ He pulled a face. ‘I bribed her into marrying me. I said she could have Stargazer as a wedding present. A horse, you know.’ Dickie smiled, then looked solemn. ‘People might think that was an ignoble thing to do: an older man taking advantage of youth and all that; but I knew I could look after her, d’you see? Her parents were dead and she only had Burgo to take care of her. He did his best – there’s no better fellow – but he’s a busy chap. I was in the fortunate position of inheriting money. My family were in soap. “You’ll always love bath-night when you use Dreamlite,”’ he sang, revealing a glimpse of pink plastic dental plate.

I remembered the commercial, one of the first television advertisement campaigns, featuring a girl wearing a tiara, false eyelashes and a pout, sitting in a bath and patting blobs of foam on to her carefully made-up face while a footman in livery, wearing a blindfold, held her bathrobe. Dreamlite, packaged in crested glossy gold paper but extremely cheap, had convinced the nation that there was pleasure and status to be had from an affordable soap. Now I understood why the Temple was dedicated to Hygeia.

‘It was a clever piece of marketing.’

‘Wasn’t it! A simple message, easily understood. That was my father. He was a born businessman. He could have made a fortune selling dust for dining-room tables. It was the sorrow of his life that none of his children took after him. We’re all as thick as fog. Ah, there’s Mrs Harris to say that dinner’s ready.’

A middle-aged woman dressed in black, presumably his housekeeper, had opened the double doors that led into the hall and was standing to the side of them, unsmiling, her eyes fixed on nothing.

‘Come along, everyone,’ called Dickie. ‘Grub’s up.’

I was, on the whole, pleased to find that I had not been placed next to Burgo. It seemed to confirm that I had been asked only to make up the numbers. If I was at all disappointed it was because he would have been more interesting to talk to than the orthopaedic surgeon on my right, who was accustomed to cut ice in his professional life and who shamelessly monopolized every subject we discussed. But the delight of finding myself in a beautiful room filled with wonderful furniture and scented with roses and lilies more than made up for my neighbour’s shortcomings. On my left was a publisher. He dealt only with academic books so he was no use as far as Oliver was concerned. But he was intelligent and agreeable and we had fun talking to each other during our allotted courses. In fact we carried on talking to each other through the pudding and the cheese, though I was guiltily aware that the surgeon was waiting for me to turn back to him.

After that Fleur stood up and muttered something in an offhand way about coffee, which was the signal for the women to depart.

‘Come on!’ She grabbed my arm as soon as we were in the hall. ‘I’ve got something to show you.’ She led me to the kitchen quarters and opened the door of what appeared to be the boiler room. ‘Look!’ she said in a tone of deep feeling. ‘Did you ever see anything more glorious?’

A large black dog – I ought to have said bitch – lay almost hidden beneath a heap of squeaking, squirming puppies. I bent to put my hand among the wriggling bodies. The puppies nibbled my fingers with velvet mouths. I stroked their backs and tickled their fat little paws. I picked one up. ‘This is the first time I’ve held a puppy,’ I confessed, kissing its wrinkled brow.

‘You don’t mean that!’ Fleur’s eyes were full of sympathy. ‘You *poor* thing!’

‘My father was bitten by one as a child. He’s always hated all dogs since so we never had one.’

‘How dreadful for you! I’m not going to let Looby have another litter. It’s too difficult to find good homes.’ She gave a gasp of excitement. ‘Would you like a puppy?’

‘I’d adore it but I’m living with my parents at the moment so it’s quite impossible. But I’m flattered you think I could be trusted to look after it.’

‘I can tell that sort of thing straight away. I’m hopeless socially – well, I don’t need to tell you that. It’s only too obvious. I hate pretending I like people when I don’t. It seems to add insult to injury.’

To them, I mean. Often I don't like people who are perfectly worthy and decent and all that but they make me feel uncomfortable when they pretend things.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, that they aren't bored, that they're enjoying themselves, that they care about things just because they're supposed to. You know. Like this evening. All those women with fluty voices, praising each other, praising me, laughing at things that aren't amusing, making the effort to talk. Would it be *so* dreadful if we sat at the table in silence and thought our own thoughts?'

'I think it would quickly become embarrassing. And sometimes my thoughts aren't that interesting. Often I'd rather listen to someone else's. But I agree it can be an appalling grind if you find someone unsympathetic.'

'You had that foul surgeon, Bernard Matthias. He calls me "young lady" and I know he disapproves of me. He thinks I'm gauche and rude and he's quite right. Burgo says I ought to grow up and play the game. He says it's self-indulgent to insist on being strictly truthful all the time. But when I try to put on an act, I start to feel peculiar. I can feel my face twitching and I get panicky and hot.'

'You're not the only one.' I put the puppy back into the basket. Its mother began to lick it painstakingly from nose to tail, removing my scent. 'Sometimes I can't play the game either. At the Conservative lunch today I hated absolutely everyone in the room. Apart from your brother, of course. They seemed to me quite unreasonably pleased with themselves. But I expect I was in the mood to find fault.'

Fleur looked at me thoughtfully. Then she said, solemnly, 'Burgo was right. He said I'd like you. I was afraid you'd be grand and smart, but you aren't. At least, you look wonderful but you aren't at all *grande dame*.'

'Why don't you call me Bobbie?' I suggested. 'Nearly everyone does.'

Fleur considered. 'I like that. I once had a monkey called Bobbie.'

'Shouldn't we go back to the drawing room? Won't the other women be expecting you to give them coffee?'

'Mrs Harris always does that. Once I spilled it on the carpet and she had to spend ages getting it out. I think she's hoping I'll break my neck riding Stargazer and then she'll be able to console Dickie. She's crazy about him and thinks he's utterly wasted on me. She's quite right.'

'I've never seen a man so obviously in love with his wife.' I was being truthful. I would not have dared to equivocate with someone so passionately sincere as Fleur.

'Oh yes, he's in love with me but that doesn't mean to say I'm any good for him.' Fleur began to fiddle with the loop of a doglead that was hanging nearby. 'Often I think if I weren't quite, quite heartless I'd run away. After a while he'd get over it and he'd meet someone else – not Mrs Harris, she's much too boring – who'd be able to give him what he wanted.'

'What does he want?'

'What *do* men want?' She shrugged. 'A wife to run their house brilliantly, dazzle their friends, be nice to their mother? Luckily Dickie's mother died ages ago. And laugh at their jokes. I do when I remember but Dickie's jokes aren't very funny. Someone to be around when they're wanted and to disappear into the kitchen when not, although Mrs Harris would be furious if I ever tried to cook anything. And children, of course. Dickie would like children more than anything. Isn't it odd?'

'I can think of quite a few men who like children.'

'But they don't *yearn* for them as Dickie does. He adores looking after things. Sometimes I find him in here playing with the puppies and giving Looby extra biscuits though it isn't good for her to get fat. He goes round the estate feeding everything: birds, squirrels, foxes, badgers. It nearly kills me because I know what it means. He wants a baby to kiss and buy pretty things for and teach how to ride a bicycle and all that.' Fleur abandoned the lead and began to nibble a fingernail, a bar of pink across her pale cheeks. 'Poor Dickie, I suppose I'm just the meanest, most selfish person alive but' – she grimaced and shuddered – 'I just can't *bear* the idea—'

‘I knew I’d find you here.’ Dickie stood in the doorway. ‘Come along, you bad girls. All the men are panting for the sight of the pair of you. You’ve made a hit with Matthias, Roberta. He asked me all about you.’ Dickie winked at me. ‘I thought I’d better warn you. Sound as a bell of course, no better fellow, but he does lack a sense of humour.’

‘He’s a horrible man,’ said Fleur. ‘He keeps his dogs outside in kennels all winter and he hunts.’ It was clear there was no greater crime in Fleur’s eyes.

Dickie laughed indulgently as he shepherded us back to the drawing room. ‘He thinks of foxes as vermin, darling. It doesn’t occur to him that it might be cruel. People’s attitudes are mostly formed by their upbringing, you know.’

‘Only stupid people’s,’ hissed Fleur.

As we entered the room several people turned smiling faces towards us. Fleur put her arm through mine and led me to stand with our backs to the room before a large landscape.

‘Don’t let’s talk to them a second more than we can help. They’re only being polite for Dickie’s sake.’

‘What a wonderful painting!’ I was genuinely moved. ‘It’s a Claude, isn’t it?’

‘School of,’ said a voice in my ear. It was the surgeon. ‘Claude never painted pure landscape. He always put in figures from classical mythology. When we consider the different ways Claude and Poussin use reflected light ...’

Fleur gave him a look of loathing and edged away but I was trapped for a quarter of an hour while he lectured me on Roman Renaissance art.

‘Don’t you think Elsheimer an important influence ...’ I attempted to turn the monologue to dialogue but the surgeon brushed aside my contribution by speaking louder and more emphatically.

I found myself swallowing yawns, my throat aching with the effort. It was now half past ten. I had spent an arduous day washing and ironing eight sheets, the same number of pillowcases and forty-two napkins. My father insisted on clean, starched napkins at breakfast, lunch and dinner. I had introduced paper ones one lunchtime during my first week at home and he had become plethoric with rage. I had persuaded Oliver to do without but, for once, my mother had sided with my father.

I turned my head discreetly as the surgeon gave me the benefit of his accumulated wisdom and stole a glance at the other guests. Burgo and I had not exchanged a word all evening. Whenever I had happened to glance in his direction he had been surrounded by women. Now he stood near the drawing-room door, holding a coffee cup, staring into its depths. A woman talked energetically to him, having seen off the competition. She was wearing an expensive-looking dress of bold magenta Fortuny-pleated silk, which looked good with her short black hair. She flashed her eyes and laughed frequently and, as far as I could tell, maintained a constant, faceaching expression of spirited gaiety. Watching her covertly over the surgeon’s shoulder I saw Burgo strike a match to light her cigarette. She tossed him a look as smouldering as her cigarette end.

‘When you take into account the importance of the inspiration of ancient Attica ...’ droned the surgeon.

I must have dropped into a waking doze for the next thing I heard was Burgo’s voice.

‘Sorry to deprive you of your audience, Matthias, but I promised Dickie I’d show Roberta the Temple of Hygeia,’ said Burgo.

‘Can’t it wait, Latimer?’ The surgeon looked huffy. ‘You’re interrupting a fascinating discussion. It isn’t often I find a young lady so well informed.’

Burgo looked at me. I put as much entreaty into my eyes as good manners permitted.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘Dickie was insistent.’

Fleur would have been disgusted, had she seen the departing smile I bestowed on Mr Matthias. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, stroking the stomach of a small grey dog, ignoring a man who was squatting in front of her, trying to engage her attention. On our way out I glanced at the woman who had been talking so animatedly to Burgo. Her face was gloomy, her gaiety extinguished.

She looked up and met my eye. There was something savage about the way she flung her cigarette into the fire.

## SEVEN

‘Poor woman!’ Kit poured me another glass of wine as we waited for two cups of coffee at the inn near the border between Limerick and Clare. ‘After applying herself sedulously all evening to the work she must have been annoyed to see you pocket the sweepstake. So you fell in love with him because he neglected you. Or was it because you saw him as a man of power surrounded by adoring women?’

‘I wasn’t in love with him then. We were still strangers, virtually.’

‘But you were piqued by his indifference. You were in that state of pre-infatuation when the chosen one is supremely fascinating in all his, or her, words and deeds.’

‘Perhaps. It had nothing to do with the old saw that power is an aphrodisiac. If he’d been a Labour politician it might have been slightly better. But until I got to know Burgo I was convinced that all politicians’ souls had been traded in at an early age. And there isn’t a species of male I dislike more than the Conservative toff. As it turned out, perhaps unfortunately for me, Burgo wasn’t one of them. He loathes their craving for caste conformity. He’s a Conservative because he thinks Socialism’s hidebound by political theory and because he wants independence from the trade unions. The Labour Party has to wear its heart on its sleeve, however economically undesirable it might be to cripple industry in favour of handouts to the improvident. Burgo doesn’t care about image. He thinks there are good men and monsters on both sides and all that matters is being effective.’

‘In the light of what you say I’m glad I’ve never voted Tory. I shouldn’t like to be so comprehensively despised by my elected representative. But no doubt the Labour and Liberal MPs are equally contemptuous of the great unnumbered. But to hell with politics. What I want to know is what happened when you went into the garden alone on a beautiful summer’s night to view the Temple of Hygeia?’

‘You can’t really be interested. This is just therapy, isn’t it?’

Kit laughed. ‘Of course it’s good for you to talk. But I’m honestly intrigued. Though you’re trying to make it matter-of-fact your face and voice betray you.’

I smiled calmly but made a mental resolve that they should do so no longer. It was true that I was giving Kit an edited account of the beginning of my affair with Burgo but while I was talking I found I was reliving some of the sensations of a year ago, when all my ideas about myself, of the sort of person I was and what I was capable of doing and feeling, had been knocked for six.

‘Now don’t get cagey,’ Kit continued. ‘As I said, it’s good for you to get things off that delightful chest. And I’m your ideal audience. A stranger you need never see again if you don’t want to. I promise I’m not being polite. I make my living assessing the outpourings of professional pen-drivers. I do it because I dearly love a yarn. And my first requirement is total involvement in the tale. As soon as I’m aware that my mind has wandered to when I’m supposed to be picking up my shirts from the laundry or whether the dog’s toenails need clipping, then the manuscript goes straight into the out tray. I’ll let you know if you’re boring me.’

‘What sort of dog is it?’

‘I haven’t actually got one. It was merely an illustration.’

‘Oh.’ I was disappointed. ‘I’ve always wanted a border collie. Or anything, really, that needs a home. But it wouldn’t be fair to keep one in London, when I’m working all day.’

‘You’re temporizing. I want to hear about Mr Latimer, the answer to a suffragette’s prayer. OK, you needn’t shatter my nerves with explicit descriptions of a sexual kind if you don’t want to – leave me leaning against the bedroom door – but get on with it, Bobbie. Your audience is agog.’

I got on.

‘Should we ask her to come with us, do you think?’ I asked Burgo as soon as we were in the hall.

‘Who?’

‘The woman in the magenta dress.’

‘Is that what you call it? I thought it was purple.’

‘She looked a little sorry to see you go.’

‘We ran out of things to say to each other halfway through dinner. She’s thankful to be rid of me.’

‘You’re not a very good liar, are you?’ By this time we had walked the length of a passage and reached a door that led into the garden.

Burgo laughed. ‘We had quite an interesting chat about the iniquitous doings of King Leopold in the Belgian Congo earlier on. But most of the conversation was about her. Her husband is a brute and a philanderer. And he drinks. Much as other husbands, in fact.’

‘Are you those things?’

‘I expect I would be if I spent much time being a husband. Anna is spared my uxorial shortcomings at least six months of the year. Look at that!’

The lawn shimmered with raindrops but the sky had cleared. The moon lay like a silver dish at the bottom of a large pond, quivering faintly as the wind breathed over the surface of the water. The shadows of the trees and hedges were knife-sharp.

‘It’s beautiful!’ I said. ‘And the scent!’

I could smell honeysuckle and roses and something else overwhelmingly sweet, perhaps jasmine. We strolled side by side, brushing against wet bushes that overhung the gravel path. The first lungfuls of fresh air banished any desire to yawn. The trunks of a stilt hedge laid shadow bars across our path. We entered a parterre of box, the squares filled with flowers, grey and lavender by moonlight. I ran my hand along the top of a hedge of rosemary, releasing a pungent scent which made me think of heat and Italy. And food.

‘How can you be hungry?’ asked Burgo when I confessed this. ‘You’ve just eaten five courses.’

‘That has nothing to do with it. With me hunger is connected with mood. I can’t eat properly when I’m not enjoying myself. I barely tasted the soup or the beef Wellington when I was being harangued by the beastly surgeon about Stalinist purges. At home when things are miserable I go for days eating practically nothing.’

‘I’ve got a bag of caramels. Will that do?’

‘It would be heaven.’ I took one from the packet he gave me. ‘What a strange thing to have in one’s dinner-jacket pocket.’

‘I always carry sweets. For any children I may come across. I’m supposed to kiss them but I’d rather not. Their runny noses put me off. So I give them a sweet and they like it much better than being mauled by a strange man.’

‘Are you being serious?’

‘You’re shocked by the cynical contrivances of a politician’s everyday life?’

‘I suppose I am.’

‘Well, don’t let that interfere with your enjoyment of the caramels.’

‘I’m ashamed to say it isn’t in the least. I haven’t had a toffee for years. It may well be the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten.’

‘Does that mean you’re particularly enjoying yourself?’

‘Wouldn’t you like to know?’

‘So you *can* flirt.’

‘Of course I can. But not with married men. It’s a strict rule of mine.’

‘And you’ve kept to it admirably. How wise you are, Roberta Pickford-Norton.’

‘Perhaps that’s going *too* far, but I’m not an absolute fool.’

He bowed gravely. ‘I’m sure of that.’

We walked slowly. I ate another toffee. Epicurus was right to insist that man’s principal duty was the pursuit of pleasure. We followed the path until it came to a narrow gap in a dense high hedge. He stood aside to let me go through. A square about half the size of the drawing room was filled with

beds of roses. Behind them, forming one side of the square, was a small building with a pointed roof, upflung eaves and fretted windows in the oriental fashion.

‘A China House!’ I was thrilled. ‘What a marvellous thing to find! I had no idea there was one in this part of the world. A wonderful example of *sharawadgi*!’

‘What’s that?’

‘*Sharawadgi* is an eighteenth-century word. It means the first impression, the impact on the eye of something surprising and delightful. A shock of pleasure. In this century it’s been revived with particular application to landscape gardening and garden architecture. It’s a quasi-Chinese word made up by a European, no one quite knows who.’

‘*Sharawadgi*,’ Burgo repeated solemnly. ‘I like that.’

‘I don’t know if I’m telling you something you already know, but England was tremendously influenced by the Chinese taste in gardening in the eighteenth century. It became known as the *anglais-chinois* style when it filtered through to the rest of Europe, finally ousting the Italian and Dutch fashions. But because the buildings were made of wood, most of them have decayed. This must be one of just a handful. Forgive the lecturing tone.’

‘I like being told things. And I didn’t know.’

‘But how marvellous that Dickie has restored it. What a nice man he is. Can we go in?’

The door was stiff and Burgo had to be firm with it. The faint smell of new paint was quickly absorbed by the rose-scented air that accompanied us inside. Though the moonlight streamed in, the room was filled with gloomy shadows. As my eyes adjusted I made out a predictable set of garden furniture, a wicker sofa and two chairs grouped round a coffee table.

‘This should be decorated with Chinese scenes of dragons and tigers, water lilies and fans, that sort of thing.’ I walked about examining the room. ‘And there should be scarlet screens and lacquered furniture. And really the garden ought to be Chinese as well, with a pond and a bridge.’

‘You must tell Dickie. He’ll be overjoyed to find that someone shares his enthusiasm. Fleur cares for nothing but her beloved animals. I’m sure he’d appreciate some help with the project.’

‘Well, if you really think ... I *could* make a few suggestions.’

‘I realize I’ve no right to treat you like a social worker but I’d be grateful if that meant you’d see something of Fleur,’ Burgo said. ‘She has no women friends. She doesn’t work so she has no colleagues either. Her shyness prevents her from taking part in charitable exercises like the Red Cross and so on. And the fact that she has no children separates her even more. I’ve seen how women support one another, and enjoy being with each other, despite the usual platitudes about women being catty, which of course are also true.’

So that was why he had invited me. For Fleur’s sake. I ran my fingers over a section of white-washed tracery that I was almost certain was a stylized pagoda.

‘She’ll have children later on, won’t she?’

‘She and Dickie sleep in separate rooms. It was a condition she made when she married him.’

I was touched by this evidence of Dickie’s devotion to Fleur. How many other men would have agreed to such a stipulation? I couldn’t think of one.

‘I’d be delighted to see Fleur again if she’d like it. What a good brother you are.’

‘No, I’m extremely selfish. I found looking after Fleur a worry and a responsibility. So when Dickie wanted to marry her I encouraged her to accept him. Despite the horse I don’t think she would have, if she hadn’t wanted to please me. She’s always valued my opinion more than it’s worth. Now I can see they’re neither of them particularly happy. But if you think that’s why I asked you to come here tonight: to befriend Fleur, you’re wrong.’

I turned from the window to which I had gravitated. I could see his face quite clearly now as he came to stand beside me. Until that moment he had not said a word to which the most captious guardian of morals could have taken exception. Neither overtly nor covertly had he sought to fascinate me. He had been as a brother. Now he looked at me calmly, with a suggestion of polite interrogation

as though about to ask me whether I cared for touring abroad. He did not sigh sentimentally or attempt to take my hand.

Yet something threatened, like the shivering of a snowcap in response to an echo from the valley below, which sent me swiftly to the door.

‘I must go home. I’m so glad ... It’s lovely. I’ll talk to Dickie about it if I get the chance.’

I turned the handle but the door held fast. I pulled hard, struggling, almost panting with the effort to escape.

‘Let me.’ Burgo engaged energetically with the handle and the door gave way with a shudder. ‘There you are. Deliverance.’

I thought I detected something like laughter or even derision in his eyes as he stood back to let me go through it before him. We walked back to the house. Burgo strolled beside me, his hands in his pockets, looking thoroughly relaxed.

Had he an ulterior purpose in taking me to see the China House? The situation had an air of contrivance about it. A cushioned sofa in a remote and romantic arbour, practically a love-nest ... I accused myself of a chronic, spinsterish tendency to doubt men’s motives. I had jumped at Burgo’s invitation to go to see it and it had been my idea to look inside. Was I so cynical that I suspected that every man who found himself alone in the moonlight with a woman not actually hideous would try his luck with her? Well, yes. But after all, what had Burgo done? Precisely nothing. He might have been about to ask my opinion of his lunchtime speech. Or to confess to a troubled childhood. Damn the man! He could at least have made his intentions clear so that I could have apprised him swiftly and unequivocally of his mistake.

‘So,’ said Kit, finishing a cup of terrible coffee. ‘He was damned if he did and damned if he didn’t. You women don’t know how lucky you are. Pity us poor blokes trying to interpret the signals from a girl who thinks she *might* fancy you if you make a sufficiently manly lunge, yet who might on the other hand want to scream the house down. I bet you’ve never been in the position of having to make the running. If you met a man you wouldn’t mind a game of Irish whist with and he seemed a bit slow off the mark in taking you up, what would you do?’

‘I’d assume he didn’t like card games.’

‘When a phrase has Irish in it, it usually means something not to be taken literally. Often it means the opposite, or it’s describing something inferior as exaggeratedly superior. To have an Irish dinner means to have nothing to eat. An Irish nightingale is a frog. An Irish hurricane is what the navy call a flat calm. Irish curtains are cobwebs. Do you see? To throw Irish confetti is to chuck bricks at something.’

‘Rather insulting to the Irish, isn’t it?’

‘For some reason it’s been the common sport of nations to make a laughing stock of Paddy and Mick. But now the Irish are so powerful in the States, they can afford to ignore the banter.’

‘So Irish whist means ... oh, I see, sex. What you men can’t seem to grasp is that a woman rarely thinks like that. Naturally, if she really liked a man she’d be prepared to scheme. She might try to run into him unexpectedly, or take up parachuting if that was his hobby. But she wouldn’t be plotting to get his clothes off in record time. She’d be thinking about a love affair.’

‘Men can be romantic, too,’ Kit protested. ‘But these days they’re unlikely to wax warm about a woman who won’t nail his hat to the ceiling pretty soon after meeting him.’

‘You’re ignoring the fact that plenty of men would be put off by a woman who made a blatant advance.’

‘We’ll conduct an experiment.’ Kit summoned the landlord and took out his wallet. ‘Make a blatant advance and let’s see how I react.’

I prepared myself for argument. ‘I really must insist on paying my share.’ I put a five-pound note on the table.

‘How kind.’ Kit picked up the note and gave it to the landlord. ‘That’ll pay for my lunch too. But you needn’t think you’ve bought me,’ he added as we left the pub.

The landlord’s wife, overhearing this, fixed her eyes on us with keen interest. As we drove away I looked back and saw her standing at the open door, staring after us.

‘All right.’ Kit accelerated with a growl from the engine as we came to a straight bit of road. ‘Back to the story. You were stalking back to the house in high dudgeon because Burgo had – or possibly hadn’t – tried to seduce you.’

‘I’m sure you don’t want to hear—’

‘Will you get on with it!’

The moonlight must have been partly to blame for my confusion. It poured down upon the garden, washing the grass with silver. It was an enchanted place. A fountain splashed beside a statue of a naked woman with a pig at her feet. Or more likely a dog. A faint breeze swept over the lawns. Ghostly foxgloves waved their wands of ashen flowers, binding one with spells. As I passed beneath an arch I ducked to avoid the branch of a rose and a shower of scented petals dripped over me. It was impossible to be rational and wise on such a night as this.

‘You remember that description of moonshine?’ Burgo had stopped and was gazing upwards. ‘Shakespeare, I think. Perhaps *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. You’re supposed to be able to see a man with a lantern, a dog and a thorn-bush in the pattern made by the craters.’

The sky was spangled with stars. The melancholy face of the moon stared down open-mouthed, contemplating human folly. A shiver ran down my back. It may have been a petal.

I had to make an effort to speak. ‘I think I just can.’

He was looking down at me, his pale hair gleaming, his face hidden by shadows. I felt again a sense of appalling danger but I almost didn’t care.

‘You’re very quiet,’ he said. ‘What are you thinking about?’

The flowers – the garden – the intoxicating scent – the bliss of being alive on such a night as this, I wanted to cry. I longed to run and dance and lift my arms to Ch’ang-o, the Chinese goddess who stole her husband’s drug of immortality and went to live in the moon to escape his wrath. But by a supreme effort at self-control I managed to keep my arms by my sides and walk on, a little faster.

‘I was wondering how many hours it would take to mow so much grass.’

‘No! Were you? What a practical girl you are, after all.’

I heard disbelief in his voice.

‘Yes. I am.’

‘I’ll find Simon and we’ll take you home. It must be nearly twelve. As a prudent, sensible woman I expect you subscribe to the view that an hour before midnight is worth two after?’

‘I most certainly do.’

‘Nothing happened in the garden,’ I informed Kit.

## EIGHT

‘So you managed to resist him,’ said Kit. ‘What’s much more remarkable, almost incredible, in fact, is that he managed to resist *you*.’

We had left the town of Ennis behind us and were heading northeast. The wind had risen and snatched impatiently at the ends of the scarf I had resorted to winding round my head like a turban. I had no wish to arrive in Connemara looking like the thorn-bush on the moon. Ahead of us a lavender-grey cloud marred the exquisite blue of the sky.

I was used to Kit’s flattery by now and continued to ignore it. ‘I suppose even politicians, sex-crazed psychopaths though they are by reputation, draw the line at raping fellow guests at respectable dinner parties in the Home Counties.’

‘Not often, I should say. Anyway, is Sussex a Home County?’

‘Not quite. But you know what I mean. Is there any chance of a cup of tea, do you think? So much talking’s made me thirsty.’

‘We’ll stop at the next town. On condition you go on with the story the moment your thirst is slaked. I absolutely must know what happened next. I identify closely with those Victorians who used to stop complete strangers in the street to ask if Little Nell was dead. It’s quite as gripping as an episode of *The Old Curiosity Shop*.’

‘You exaggerate my powers of narration. It’s a trite tale that’s often been told.’

‘Now don’t be bitter, Bobbie. It doesn’t suit you.’

‘I apologize for sounding stupidly melodramatic. I’m suffering badly from hurt pride, that’s all. I mean, really, what an absolute idiot I’ve been! One small comfort is that by telling you – I haven’t confided in a soul ... well, only one other person apart from Oliver – it’s like reliving those days when Burgo and I were so entranced by each other. Now I remember why I was ready to risk my peace of mind, my self-respect, even my sanity for something that could never have a happy ending.’

‘Is there a man or woman alive who hasn’t taken a gamble and lost? Just because your unlucky speculation has been emblazoned in headlines the length and breadth of the country doesn’t make it specially heinous. I gather his wife is not the vulnerable ingénue portrayed by the press. Nor, perhaps, a chaste Penelope working her fingers into calluses at her loom, until such time as her lord and master cared to drop in?’

‘Burgo hardly ever talked about his marriage. I don’t know if it was satisfactory or not. I assumed that it wasn’t because he wanted *me* but I see now that was laughably naïve. I believed the truism that it’s impossible for an outsider to break up a good marriage. I wonder what persuaded me to place reliance on that piece of sententious, simple-minded claptrap? Marriages are mutable, anarchic, boundless things and no two are alike.’

‘What you seem to be forgetting is that things aren’t quite over yet.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Your running away is not necessarily an end. Perhaps it’s just another part of it. Love affairs don’t usually end with a neat severance. They gasp out their life in a slow, merciless suffocation of hopes and dreams.’

I felt a resurgence of optimism that a second later was dashed. ‘Whatever our desires may be, it *is* over.’

Kit’s silence told me that he was sceptical.

‘What’s that marvellous old building?’ I pointed to a tall cylinder of stone with tiny windows and a pointed door standing in a field. I wanted to change my mood from high-flown pathos to something resembling cheerfulness.

‘It’s a tower house, like a small castle, you know, belonging to one of the lesser chieftains. Probably fifteenth or sixteenth century. The fortified enclosure running round it is called the bawn. There are lots of them all over Ireland.’

‘What a lot you know.’

‘Extensive reading is a requirement of the job. I’m no scholar, just a store of scraps of information. I never do anything with it. Too lazy. I’m a dreamer.’

How different from Burgo, I thought but did not say. As the car swooped over miles of more or less empty road the sky changed from blue to dove grey to pewter and the green of the Irish landscape became livid, the colour of brass. We drove through a succession of hamlets, which were usually single streets of small, dilapidated dwellings. There were broken windows patched with cardboard, and sections of roof covered with tarpaulins. The southwest seemed prosperous by comparison.

‘What do people do here?’ I asked. ‘I mean, to earn a living.’

‘Oh, they farm mostly: smallholdings not quite big enough to sustain the inevitably large families. Galway’s coming up fast and there are good jobs there but the country people are reluctant to leave a way of life they’ve always known. You can understand it.’

‘Oh yes. But the fields look so stony. There are great lumps of rock sticking out of them. Surely it must be difficult to plough?’

‘Impossible in some places. The limestone pavements are famous for rare wild flowers – gentians, orchids, ferns – but of course you can’t eat those. People used to grow potatoes by making what are called “lazy beds”: scraping the earth into little heaps of a few square yards to get the required depth. In the good years when there was no frost or famine, the average Irish peasant ate fourteen pounds of potatoes a day.’

‘You’re making it up! No one could eat that many.’

‘Truthfully. Many families existed on an exclusive diet of potatoes and buttermilk. And poteen, of course. That’s home-brewed whiskey.’

‘But surely on such an unvaried diet they’d be ill?’

‘On the contrary, they were the healthiest people in Europe. Boiled potatoes and buttermilk provide all the nutritional needs of a full-grown labouring man. There were herrings and seaweed for those who lived near the coast.’

‘But think of the terrible boredom of eating the same thing day in and day out!’

‘Ah, but boredom is the luxury of affluence. You must remember that some of the country people were so poor their clothes were hardly more than rags. It’s all about expectations, isn’t it? They considered themselves as rich as kings if they could afford a pig or two, a cow and a few hens. All around them were living examples of what happened if you couldn’t pay your rent. You were evicted and the roof was pulled off your houses. So you were forced to live in what were called scalpeens: hovels pieced together from a bit of corrugated iron here, an old door there, without windows, without chimneys even. Then you were too hungry, too cold, too miserable to be bored. When the potato blight destroyed your crops you and your children lay down in your hovels and died of starvation or typhus and your bodies were picked clean by foxes and crows.’

‘And the landlords did nothing to help them?’

‘What you must understand is that the vast majority of landowners were of English or Scots origin. They’d got their Irish estates through the land confiscations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ireland was – still is, to some extent – two nations, divided not only by poverty and riches but also by religion, politics, language and culture. The bosses, the Protestant Anglo-Irish, saw the Catholic peasants as feckless, idle and dishonest. The old Irish naturally hated the usurpers, their masters.’

‘Were they all – the bosses, I mean – callous and greedy?’

‘There were some conscientious landlords. They waived rents and set up soup kitchens. But a lot of landowners had larger, more important estates in England. Some never set foot in Ireland.’

They didn't give a damn about the peasants who worked and starved to provide the rent money on which the landowners – in the old days anyway, before the eighteen eighties – grew fat. After the Great Famine years of eighteen forty-seven to eighteen forty-nine some landlords chartered ships to take their tenants to America to start a new life.'

'I suppose that was better than nothing?'

'It was cheaper to send them abroad than to pay for their keep in the workhouse. But the conditions on the boats were so bad that they were called coffin ships. At least half of them died on the journey.'

I tried to imagine what it must have been like: the ravaging of the flesh by hunger and cold and disease. Watching one's children suffer and being powerless to help them. Being uprooted from home and family, enduring appalling hardships to land in an alien place among alien people. Knowing that the prosperous world was indifferent to one's pain and grief. It made my own unhappiness seem contemptible. I resolved to say not another word of complaint about my own misfortunes.

'And now? What about British presence in Northern Ireland? Should we stay or go?'

'Ah! That's a hard one. And I've lectured you long enough.' Despite my assurance that I wanted to hear more, he changed the subject. 'See that ruin on the hill-top?' I looked obediently to my left. A row of Gothic arches stood proud against a Constable sky, smudged with shades of grey and indigo as clouds gathered. 'That's all that remains of a once magnificent Palladian mansion and a substantial demesne. That's just the folly, the eye-catcher, which no one could be bothered to blow up or burn down.'

'Where's the house?'

'Among those trees. I went to look at it last time I drove up here. It's nothing but walls and glassless windows now, and chimneys colonized by crows.'

'Oh, what a pity! There's a foul little bungalow slap-bang next to that exquisite stone gateway. And an electricity pylon on the other side. It should never have been allowed!'

'You can't expect the Irish to be exactly fond of the glory of the Ascendancy.'

'No. But beauty, no matter how degenerate its creator, is still precious, isn't it?'

'If it's a reminder of injustice and misery, it may no longer be beautiful.'

'Surely the making and preservation of fine buildings is one of the great consolations for man's sorrows?'

I must have allowed more indignation to appear in my tone than I had intended for Kit laughed and said, 'You're absolutely right. Don't be cross. I'm only trying to see the other point of view. Playing devil's advocate.'

'I'm not at all cross with *you*. How could I be when you've been so kind? What happened to the house and the family?'

'It was burned during the Troubles.' Kit paused to negotiate with an oncoming lorry for the left-hand side of the road. 'The family went to live in England. The people who live in that bungalow you so despise are the descendants of a long line of stewards who looked after them. They were very friendly and keen to show me round. Ironically, they were proud of the majestic ruins which they seemed to feel gave them a reflected status.'

'What was the point of it then? What good did it do to burn the house and presumably destroy the livelihoods of all the people connected with a working estate?'

'Good? No good at all, I should say. If you're going to get on in Ireland you must be prepared to abandon notions of cause and effect. Other things are more important, like love and generosity and good fellowship. And drink, of course.'

'It doesn't seem to me particularly loving or generous to burn someone's house down.'

'Ah, you'll understand in time. Logic's of no possible use to you here. Forget all about it and you'll be much happier.'

I wished I could be happy. I wished I could rid myself of a sense of loss that weighted my limbs with despair. But I reminded myself that my problems were trivial.

‘What’s up, Bobbie? Suddenly you look as though you’ve swallowed a bitter pill.’

I had taken it for granted that Kit’s eyes would be on the road ahead. He might claim to be an idle dreamer, but in fact he was sharply observant.

‘Oh, nothing.’ I smiled. ‘Just ... I was wondering if my new employers have been reading the newspapers. They may well recognize me as a woman steeped in sin and hurl me out on my ear.’

‘In that case you’ll ring me from the nearest telephone box and I’ll come and rescue you.’

This was reassuring. But I was conscious of getting deeper in Kit’s debt. We stopped at a hotel in the town of Williamsbridge for tea. It was called, inaccurately, the Bellavista. The sitting-room windows looked across the car-park to the public lavatories. They had run out of sandwiches but there was cake, a sort of spiced bread called barmbrack. It was stodgy but I did my best to get some down, knowing that a few calories can do a lot for one’s mood.

‘I like to see you eat,’ said Kit. ‘It’s depressing to see a girl squeeze the oil out of an olive before she downs it. My last girlfriend ate nothing but lettuce, poached fish and sorbet when I took her out to dinner but I’d find her standing by the open fridge at two o’clock in the morning guzzling a tub of chocolate ice cream. I fail to understand the rationale behind this peculiar eating pattern.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Fenella.’

‘How old-fashioned and pretty. Were you very much in love with her?’

‘I thought so at first. Then I discovered it was her face I was in love with, not her.’

‘What did she look like?’

‘She had marble-white skin, a hooked nose and bulging eyes. I know that doesn’t sound alluring but there was a symmetry about her face and a kind of sculpted quality that I found fascinating. Her eyes were pale green, like the inside of a cucumber. She was cold, too, like a cucumber, and almost as immobile. At first I yearned to lie in her arms, like reclining on the bed of a fast-flowing stream. But after a while, I got chilly. That was when I fell out of love with her.’

‘Was she dreadfully hurt?’

‘Annoyed more than anything. Her mother gave her a lot of stick for parting company with me.’

‘Her mother? How did she come into it?’

‘She was a mink-wrapped, ruby-hung adding machine, totting up my credits, setting them against my debits.’

‘The credits being? If that isn’t an impossibly rude question?’

‘An inheritance. A nice old house in Norfolk. An entrée into other nice old houses belonging to people she approved of.’

‘I had no idea you were such an eligible *parti*.’

‘I conceal it brilliantly, don’t I?’

‘Now don’t fish. And the debits? Those *are* well hidden.’

‘It’s a little late to truckle, Miss Bobbie. Debits minimal, from Fenella’s mother’s point of view. An inability to take life seriously, a shocking inconstancy in matters of love, a face like an amiable schoolboy’s and a strong dislike of scheming, snobbish mammas.’

‘You said Fenella was your last girlfriend. Describe your present girlfriend, if you’d be so kind.’

‘Situation vacant.’

‘So you’re looking for someone with a face like an El Greco saint, whose embrace is as cosy as thermal underwear and who loves fiercely but briefly. Preferably an orphan.’

‘Oh no. I said I was inconstant in love. Now I want a woman about five feet six or seven, slender but not bony, whose hair is the colour of unsalted butter, with large, glowing eyes that vary in hue between neat scotch and seawater, who has a tendency to weep when she thinks no one’s looking. She

has a fascinating way of raising one eyebrow seductively and looking at you with a positively wicked gleam, while smiling as demurely as a postulant nun.'

'I think she sounds extremely irritating. I'd have nothing to do with her if I were you.'

'You aren't me. I shall have as much to do with her as I can possibly arrange.'

'But we know the fascination won't last long.'

'I have a feeling she's the exception that proves the rule.'

'You're obviously a case-hardened flirt.' I bit into the last piece of cake and smiled as I chewed to show I did not take him seriously.

'You're the girl of my dreams,' replied Kit, not smiling back.

'Oh, look! Rain!' I directed his attention to the window where plummeting water formed a curtain, obliterating the view of the public lavatories. 'What a mercy! Every single man who's been in there has waited until emerging into full view of the hotel to tuck in his shirt and zip up his trousers. Is there a law in this country against doing oneself up privately indoors?'

'But it's provided you with a conversational diversion. You needn't be afraid that I'm going to pounce, you know. I'm well aware you're still besotted with Mr Latimer. But, unlike you, I don't believe that you'll never get over it. I bet you think that from now on your life will be a sad round of charitable works and knitting hideous cardigans for your nephews and nieces.'

'I hope not. I hate it when the stitches get so tight you have to practically crowbar them off the needle.'

'Don't worry. Psychic wounds always heal eventually, even if there is some scar tissue left. People who pretend their hearts are broken really want an excuse not to have to risk themselves again on the merry-go-round of human relationships. Uncle Kit knows these things.'

He looked up as the waitress brought us the bill.

'I insist.' I snatched it up from the table.

'You see,' Kit explained to the waitress, 'I'm a kept man. My companion is fabulously rich and she takes me everywhere with her like a sort of pug-dog.'

The girl, who must have been about seventeen but was made up to look forty-five, was at first nonplussed. Then she melted under his friendly gaze and giggled.

'Is t'at *her* car t'en?' she asked, pointing through the window at the little red Alfa. 'I'd give anyt'ing to go for a drive in somet'ing like t'at. My boyfriend's a fishmonger and when we go out in his van I stink of fish for days after.'

'Like a mermaid,' said Kit. 'Your boyfriend's a lucky man.' His blue eyes seemed to dazzle as a ray of sunlight shot through the rain-glazed window.

She giggled again as she counted the money I had given her. 'I wouldn't go out wit' him but the other boys here only have bikes and I hate riding on crossbars. Your clothes get all anyhow. I want to go and work in Dublin but me mum won't let me.'

'You'd be a smash hit there.'

She looked at Kit doubtfully. 'Do ye t'ink so?'

'One glimpse of those eyes and they'd be hiring limousines to take you out.'

'Arrah, go on wit' you!' She twitched her shoulders and threw up her chin to show she could not be so easily taken in but her small, painted face was beaming. 'T'ank you, miss,' she added when I gave her a tip of fifty pence. 'T'at's very kind of ye. Enjoy yer ride now.' She gave Kit a last slaying glance over her shoulder as she went away.

'You're pretty much a smash hit yourself,' I said, getting up and putting on my mac.

'The Irish expect a little badinage. Talking's a national pastime. It's only good manners.'

As I checked my reflection for crumbs in the mirror over the fireplace I saw Kit whisper something to the waitress which made her blush with pleasure. She almost curtsied when he gave her what looked like a five-pound note.

'Throat oiled and spirit soothed?' he asked as we got into the car.

‘Thank you, yes. What a good Samaritan you are.’

‘Could we have less of the distance-making gratitude? I *could* swamp you with thanks for lunch and tea, but I know how to accept gracefully.’

Opposite the entrance of the car-park was a shop that sold television sets. A small crowd had gathered on the pavement to stare at the rows of flickering screens, a bright point of interest in the dull, rain-soaked street. As we swept by I saw a man’s face, striking in black and white, and was almost certain that it was Burgo’s. I closed my eyes and swallowed down the sour taste that rose into my mouth, a combination of barmbrack and grief. For once Kit, who had been concentrating on the traffic, had noticed nothing.

‘Now, my fair friend and fellow voyager,’ he continued, ‘as we embark on the last part of our journey, I want you to tell me what happened after the dinner party. You needn’t look blank. You know perfectly well which dinner party I mean. The dinner party that ended in the China House with a general stand-off. I must find out what happened next.’

‘I can’t think why you’re so keen to hear about it.’

‘I told you. I’ve a passion for stories of any kind. And love stories are always the most enjoyable. Also I’m deeply interested in anything to do with you. Does that answer your question?’

I supposed it did. So, as we drove on through rain that fell in bathtubs rather than buckets and the road became narrow and winding and the land either side of it began to rear up into frowning black mountains capped with cloud, I went on with my tale.

## NINE

‘So what are your plans, Roberta?’

Simon’s car was rushing through the darkness, the headlights making a silver tunnel of the overhanging branches. Burgo and I shared the capacious back seat, he lounging with his legs stretched out while I sat primly, knees together, clutching my evening bag.

‘I haven’t any. Not until my mother gets better.’ I explained about the broken hip.

‘It hardly seems fair to expect you to suspend your life indefinitely. Can’t you get a nurse in?’

‘Apparently there isn’t enough money. My father’s just had a line painted round the insides of the baths so we don’t take too much hot water. It’s just as though there’s a war on.’

‘I’m sorry. I hadn’t realized things were so tight. In that case it was extremely generous of your father to make such a substantial contribution to party funds.’

‘He hasn’t! Well! That’s the most ridiculous piece of swank—’

Just in time I realized that Burgo could not possibly be interested in our family travails. I suppressed my indignation. Outwardly that is. I stared unseeing into the bushes as they flashed past. I was simmering with rage. How dared my father tell Brough to change all the lightbulbs in the house to forty watts so that it was virtually impossible to read at night and then make extravagant donations to the Conservative Party merely to impress a lot of men who despised him anyway?

‘Now you’re angry.’ Burgo sounded sympathetic.

‘Not at all. It was a lovely evening. Thank you so much for inviting me.’

‘I can almost hear the snorts of fury.’

‘Do you have a busy day tomorrow?’

‘Yes. Come on, Roberta. You needn’t pretend. You’re miserable and angry because you’ve been forced to live at home. You’re homesick for London and freedom and your job and who could blame you? You hate spending your days in the sickroom and your evenings washing up.’

‘Yes,’ I admitted. ‘It’s grim. I don’t suppose a salt mine could be much worse.’

‘Colder. And darker.’

I explained about the forty-watt bulbs. ‘The worst thing about it is that I don’t feel I’m doing any good,’ I concluded. ‘I could put up with it if I saw the least sign of improvement. My mother barely speaks to me and never gets any better. She seems to prefer Mrs Treadgold’s company to mine. She’s our daily. Though, heaven knows, my mother grumbles all the time about how clumsy she is. No matter how hard I try, tidying rooms, arranging flowers and so on, the entire place feels like a mausoleum for flies. When I planted some heliotrope in the urns on the terrace they went from a healthy green to brown in three days and died. I’m sure Brough watered them with weed-killer. He hates anyone to interfere with his pogrom against Nature.’

‘Can’t Mrs Threadbare do the nursing? It would save your father the cost of your keep.’

‘Treadgold. He’s actually talking about cutting down her hours. I think I might kill myself if he does.’

‘You wouldn’t consider jumping bail?’

‘What, going away and leaving them to it?’ I shook my head. ‘I admit I’ve once or twice considered it. But I can’t. I don’t trust my father and my brother to look after my mother properly.’

‘I thought you’d say that. You’ve a tender conscience.’

‘Not particularly.’

‘Do you think anyone would even ask me to devote myself to domestic vassalage? Of course not. Partly because I’m a man. And because they’d know I’d be useless. But just suppose for the sake of argument they did. I wouldn’t dream of agreeing to do it. I might put up with boredom and discomfort and the suppression of my immediate pleasure for a brief period if it was in my own

interest to do so. I endure things like today's lunch because that's part of my job, which is supremely important to me. You, on the other hand, put up with the lunch solely to please your father.'

'I did escape the major part of it.'

'True. That gives me hope for you. But most people are thoroughly selfish, Roberta, and if you don't make a fight for survival you'll be in danger of being trampled underfoot in the rush.'

'You make me sound feeble-minded and spineless. A doormat. I've always thought of myself as being someone who knew what she wanted and who went out to get it. But I hope not at other people's expense. I know that sounds revoltingly sanctimonious,' I added apologetically.

'That's quite right and proper and it's what we've all been taught. But the doing of it's so much harder than the theory would have it. If virtue is its own reward, it explains why there isn't much goodness in the human race. I'm like everyone else in that it gives me pleasure to do good to others. I'm happy to make the relevant telephone calls, write the necessary letters, have a word in someone's ear. I might even undertake an arduous journey or put myself through a whole evening of dreariness if it benefited someone who deserved my help. But these would be trivial privations. I should never throw away the things that make me what I am, the mainsprings of my happiness. My work, my love, my greater good.'

It occurred to me then that we might not be talking simply about the sacrifice of my *joie de vivre* to serfdom. Was there the suggestion that I might be giving up a valuable contribution to my happiness by withstanding his advances? Then I reminded myself that he had made none.

'Beware the man who begins by telling you that you've got life all wrong,' Kit interrupted. 'It's a prelude to him telling you how right you can get it if you'll only do exactly what he tells you. And before you can say "Family Planning Clinic" you're too busy sending him to heaven a dozen times a day to fret about a *modus vivendi*.'

'Should you be exposing your own sex as a band of cynical, intriguing libertines?'

'I'm not saying we're all the same. Or even that the new Minister for Culture is such a one. Merely remarking that there are some snakes out there, coiled seductively in the grass. Anyway, tell me how the evening ended.'

It had ended without incident. Simon, having satisfied his thirst for speed, drove us slowly over the thin gravel beneath the horse chestnuts that lined the drive and drew up by the front steps of Cutham Hall. The house was in darkness except for a faint light from the third storey where Oliver slept.

'Thank you for a marvellous evening.'

'It was angelic of you to come out at such short notice.'

As the interior light flashed on I grabbed my coat and hopped out rather quickly, conscious of Simon standing to attention, his hand on the open door. Then I turned and bent my head to look back into the car. 'I hope your meeting goes well tomorrow.'

He looked at me solemnly but again there was in his eyes something that made me suspect he might be laughing at me. 'Thanks. Goodnight, Roberta.'

'Goodnight.'

I smiled but probably, as my face was in shadow, he did not see me. I watched the red tail lights disappear among the deeper shadows of the chestnuts with feelings composed equally of relief and regret. Well, to be strictly truthful, there might have been a predominance of the latter. But, anyway, it hardly mattered. I was quite sure that the invitation would not be repeated.

Ten days passed in which I performed my duties with a lightened heart. Being reminded that there was fun to be had and that there were people who did not find me provoking (my mother), self-willed (my father), or bossy (Oliver) was good for my morale.

None the less it was a difficult time. Every day Oliver got up at tea-time and wrote feverishly during the night, covering pages of foolscap which the next morning I collected from the floor of his room where they lay in crumpled heaps round an empty waste-paper basket. I lent him money

from my precious and dwindling fund to buy more paper. Also some biros to replace the fountain pen that leaked and was gradually staining his hands and face until he resembled an Ancient Briton decorated with woad.

My mother had been grumbling about the lumpiness of her mattress. I had a new one sent from Worping. Her complaints trebled, this time about its hardness. She sulked for a whole day when I gave her a piece of toast with her lunchtime consommé in an attempt to persuade her to eat something more nourishing than walnut whips and the violet creams that she devoured daily by the half-pound. The woman who owned the sweet shop had had to place an extra order with the wholesalers to keep up with demand. When the physiotherapist came my mother drew her sheet over her head and refused to speak to her.

‘Poor old thing,’ said the physiotherapist, whose name was Daphne, as I accompanied her to the front door. ‘They get awkward, you know. We’ll be the same, I dare say, when we’re her age.’

‘She’s only fifty-one,’ I said.

‘Never!’ Daphne riffled through a sheaf of notes. ‘Well, goodness gracious, you’re right! Dear, dear! And I’d thought she must be seventy-odd. She’s such a bad colour! And her hair’s that thin you can see her scalp.’ This was true. The quantity of hair I brushed daily from her pillow could have stuffed the offending mattress. ‘You’d better get the doctor to her.’

‘She refuses to see one.’

Daphne tut-tutted as she manoeuvred her hips behind the wheel of her tiny car. ‘Well, I don’t know. Anyway, there’s no point in my coming any more. Ta ta, love. I’d get someone in for definite.’

As I watched her chug down the drive, I wondered what I ought to do. I managed to catch my father by the front door, just as he was going out.

‘There’s nothing wrong with your mother that a bit of effort on her part wouldn’t cure,’ he said. ‘It’s all in the mind.’

‘I’m not so sure. She still can’t walk without help. Her hip ought to be healing faster than this.’

‘What you know about the healing of fractures could be inscribed on a piece of lead shot. If you don’t mind, I’d like to get off.’ He tried to close the door but I hung on to it. ‘Damn it, Roberta, let go! You’d like to warm the South Downs at my expense, I know.’

‘The heating isn’t on.’

He ran down the steps to prevent the rain from spoiling his shining brogues and spotting the nap of his suit. I wondered if he was going to meet Ruby. It was a favourite trick of Brough’s to let out the clutch just as my father was stepping into the car, which caused it to jerk forward and him to fall on to the back seat with a yelp of protest. I could see from the grim satisfaction on Brough’s face as he drove away that, though frequently played, this little joke was by no means stale.

‘I’m *really* worried about Mother,’ I said that evening.

My father, Oliver and I were sitting in the dining room, eating tapioca pudding. My father had removed three of the four bulbs belonging to the brass chandelier. The remaining bulb, high above our heads, only deepened the shadows cast by the giant sideboard and the enormous pseudo-Tudor court cupboard. More useful was a measure of dusty light which sneaked past the rhododendrons that crowded, like inquisitive passers-by, round the dining-room windows.

‘Jam, please.’ My father snapped his fingers in Oliver’s direction.

‘It’s a magnificent colour.’ Oliver stirred the jam and allowed a spoonful to plop back into the pot from a considerable height. Not surprisingly, he missed. ‘Exactly the colour of a ruby, isn’t it? *Ruby*.’ He repeated the action with the same result.

‘*When* you’ve finished smearing food over the table, perhaps you’ll be good enough to let me have it,’ barked my father. I felt like barking too. I had spent nearly an hour that morning polishing the beastly thing which seemed to expand as I laboured to the size of a tennis court.

‘OK. No need to get waxy.’ Oliver sent the jam-pot sliding across the couple of yards that separated them, leaving a long scratch.

‘I am *not* waxy, as you call it.’

‘I read a *delicious* book this afternoon.’ Oliver rolled his eyes and pursed his lips, assuming the camp mannerisms he knew annoyed my father. ‘Such lovely poetry. It’s called *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Such an interesting word, isn’t it? Arabic, I suppose. The *Ruby*-at.’

My father paused in the act of shovelling down his tapioca to regard Oliver suspiciously. ‘If I didn’t know you’d been after every scrubby little tart in the neighbourhood I’d be worried that you were queer.’ He flung down his spoon, tossed his napkin to one side and stood up. ‘I’ll have my coffee in the library.’ He walked off without bothering to shut the door, as though he were a rich milord with an extensive retinue.

‘He’s so stupid he never sees the point of anything.’ Oliver was cross that his barbs had failed to lodge in our father’s conscience.

‘What do you think about Mother? She ought to be getting better by now. She looks at me sometimes in a way that’s quite disconcerting. Huge, staring eyes. And she seems rather muddled.’

‘Muddled?’

‘This morning she complained that the toast smelt of electricity.’

‘Women are never any good at science,’ said Oliver with a complacency I felt was misplaced considering he had failed Physics O level twice. ‘I refuse to believe Father and I have genes in common. I’m really the descendant of an itinerant minstrel and a gypsy princess who carelessly laid their baby beneath a blackberry bush. While they were canoodling among crow-flowers and long-purples an officious person discovered me and carried me off to Worping Cottage Hospital.’

I gave up trying to interest him in my own preoccupations. ‘Help me with the supper things, will you?’

Oliver groaned. ‘You’re a slave-driver, you know, Bobbie. Men don’t like to be bullied. You’ll never get a husband if you go on like this.’

‘I don’t want one if it means I’ve got to wash up every night for two.’

‘I’ve just had the most brilliant idea for my novel,’ he pleaded. ‘If I don’t write it down at once I might forget it.’

‘Make a quick note.’

‘That won’t do. Its brilliance is in the expression, not the naked fact. It’s a question of atmosphere and mood. It’s already beginning to fade as we speak. I must hurry or it will be gone for ever.’

I hesitated. Had Dorothy Wordsworth insisted that William put down his pen to help her sow the peas? I doubted it.

‘Go on, then.’ I gathered up the napkins to be washed.

‘You’re a dear darling, Bobbie. Will you get me some more paper tomorrow?’

‘All right. But couldn’t you write a bit smaller and on every line? It’s getting rather expensive —’ I was speaking to an empty room.

‘Do you think my mother’s getting a little ... confused?’ I asked Mrs Treadgold the next morning as we washed up the breakfast things together.

‘How do you mean, dear?’

‘Not making sense. It might be delayed shock from the fall, perhaps. Have you noticed her saying things that don’t quite add up?’

‘Can’t say I have. Drat, there goes another.’ She put down the cup she had been drying between hands like grappling-hooks and extracted the handle from the tea towel. I went to get the china glue from the drawer. ‘The doctor says my arthrititis isn’t going to get any better. He says I’ll be a wheelchair case before much longer. But I’ll still come in and do what I can, Roberta, don’t you fear. Dolly Treadgold’s never let anyone down yet. And, God willing, she never will.’ She gave a shake of her head, her expression grim. ‘Perhaps that idle good-for-nothing, Brough, could make a few of them wooden ramps to get my wheelchair over the steps. We could tie a feather duster to one wrist’ – she waved what looked like an enviably flexible joint – ‘and a wet cloth to the other.’

‘Let’s hope it won’t come to that,’ I murmured absently.

Mrs Treadgold’s musculature was massive and she could have tossed the caber for the Highlands and Islands. She thought nothing of running up two flights with our ancient vacuum cleaner, which I struggled to lift out of the cupboard. On several occasions she had single-handedly pushed the Wolseley down the drive, with me in it, when it failed to start. I had long ceased to be alarmed when she described spasms, fevers, faints and racking torments that would long ago have carried off anyone less determined to pitch in, rally round, hold the fort and keep the flag flying.

‘What’s your ma been saying then?’

‘Well, she told me the toast smelt of electricity.’ I pulled a face expressive of something between amusement and alarm as I confessed this.

Mrs Treadgold slapped her hands against her aproned thighs, leaving damp palm prints. ‘That’s a funny thing! I was thinking the very same myself yesterday. Well, we can’t both be wrong. You’d better have that toaster seen to.’

I abandoned the conversation.

## TEN

On Saturday it rained without ceasing. This was doubly annoying because the rest of the country was having something close to a heatwave and the newspapers were full of alarming stories about people being swept out to sea on lilos, dogs being suffocated in cars and the population being laid waste by the injurious effects of sunburn and heatstroke. I was standing in the hall, staring through the window at the dripping laurels and wondering whether I had time to make a treacle tart for supper or whether it would have to be baked bananas again when the telephone rang. I picked it up at once. Nearly two weeks had gone by since the dinner party and I had heard nothing from Burgo. I had given up letting the thing ring six times before answering.

‘Hello?’

‘Hello, Roberta?’ It wasn’t Burgo. It was a much louder voice accompanied by noisy breathing. ‘This is Dickie Sudborough speaking.’

It took me a second or two to make the connection. ‘Dickie! Hello! It was a lovely party. I’d have written to say so but I haven’t got your address. I did enjoy it.’

‘Did you?’ I imagined his pink, eager face crumpling, pleased. ‘We were all so delighted to meet you. Now, look, Roberta, why I’m ringing you is this. Burgo says you were quite taken with my little temple and had some good ideas I ought to take on board.’

‘Well ... that’s putting it rather strongly. I’m sure you have your own—’

Dickie interrupted me. ‘I’m really keen to talk about it with you. What about coming here for lunch on Wednesday? No other visitors, just us. If that wouldn’t be a bore?’

I hesitated. Perhaps Burgo had put Dickie up to this? I might arrive to find the scene reset for seduction. Even that Dickie and Fleur had been mysteriously called away.

‘I’m not sure about Wednesday. I’m rather tied up ...’

‘Oh.’ Either Dickie was a good actor or he was genuinely disappointed. ‘I realize it’s asking rather a lot. Particularly as Burgo will be in Leningrad so we can’t offer him as an inducement. I expect I’m being awfully self-centred asking you but I was so bucked to think you admired my little folly—’

It was my turn to interrupt. ‘Actually, I think I can rearrange things. I’d love to come.’

‘You would? That’s excellent. Shall we say twelve-thirty? Fleur will be so delighted.’

On Wednesday, having bribed Mrs Treadgold to look after my mother with the present of a scarf she had always admired, and left a breakfast tray loaded with orange juice, muesli, grated apple and vitamin pills across Oliver’s sleeping stomach (which had a greenish hue too I noticed), I drove myself over to Ladyfield at the appointed time. My father had arranged to go up to town for the day so I dropped him off at the station, looking patrician and affluent in what I could have sworn was a new suit. Naturally he travelled first class.

Ladyfield looked even handsomer in sunlight. Its lovely red-brick front was bare of climbing plants but on each side of the front door was a box hedge enclosing carpets of silver artemisias. Dickie came limping out to greet me and kissed my cheek.

‘This is good of you, Roberta.’ He glanced at the Wolseley. ‘My goodness, what a splendid old motor!’

Fleur ran out after him and flung her arms round me.

‘Bobbie! How lovely! Have you changed your mind about the puppy?’

‘I’m afraid not. My father ...’

‘Aren’t fathers horrible! I hated mine. So did my mother. The minute he died she had all her skirts shortened and went down to the docks to get a tattoo. Oh, yes,’ she added, seeing from my face that I only half believed her. ‘She got the tattoo and a dose of something she hadn’t bargained for, as well. Poor darling, it killed her.’

I looked at Dickie for confirmation.

‘It’s true,’ said Dickie. ‘Fleur’s mother, poor woman, died of ... of a most unpleasant contagious disease. But we don’t talk about it more than we can help, do we darling?’

‘I do,’ Fleur said immediately. ‘It was syphilis. I think people ought to know how dangerous sex can be. Fatal, in fact.’

‘Only, darling, if you sleep with people who’ve already contracted it. And even then it’s curable with penicillin. Your mother wouldn’t accept there was anything wrong, that was the trouble.’

‘She thought her hair was falling out because the hairdresser was too rough with it,’ said Fleur. ‘So she got me to wash it for her. I didn’t mind but there was so little left in the end it was rather a waste of shampoo. When her nose dropped off we made her go to the doctor but it was too late by then.’

My eyes, which must have expressed the horror I felt, met Dickie’s once more.

‘You’re exaggerating, Fleur. As usual. It was the septum, darling, not the whole nose. Anyway, you’re upsetting Roberta.’

‘Am I?’ Fleur turned to me and gripped my arm. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t want to do that. I like you and I know Burgo does too. In fact, I think ... Ah, well, let’s go and have lunch. I’m starving!’

My appetite was only briefly affected by Fleur’s account of her mother’s illness. The salmon was delicious, caught by Dickie’s brother and sent down from Scotland the day before, the peas and tiny potatoes were from the garden, the cucumber from Dickie’s own frames. We had tiny alpine strawberries and cream.

‘How odd,’ I said, tucking into my second helping of strawberries, ‘to think that our house is only fifteen miles distant and yet it’s the opposite of this place: dark and dismal and ugly, where nothing seems to thrive but laurel and every member of the household is either angry or depressed. Even the weather’s better here. It was raining when I left home.’

‘Is it really that bad?’ Fleur paid attention to the conversation for the first time. She had been feeding bits of salmon to a cat under the table.

‘It’s terrible.’ Because Fleur seemed interested I told her about my parents and Oliver, Mrs Treadgold and Brough.

‘Perhaps there’s a spell on the place,’ suggested Fleur. ‘Perhaps your father is a wizard.’

‘Not a very good wizard, if so,’ I said, ‘or he’d conjure up some money.’

‘He may have. He just isn’t sharing it with the rest of you so he can keep you under his brutal thumb, poor, dejected and ill used, to satisfy his sadistic impulses.’

‘Now, darling, I don’t think you should speak so impolitely of Roberta’s father,’ said Dickie.

‘It’s quite all right,’ I said. ‘It’s a most interesting theory.’

I guessed from Fleur’s expression that she was half serious. Her childlike face was dreaming, her bony wrists bent at right angles as she propped her chin on her clasped hands.

‘I wish I could do magic,’ she said. ‘I’d wish myself far away to an island covered with forest where I’d live like a savage, wearing a skirt of leaves, or perhaps nothing at all, and I’d eat nuts and berries and bird’s eggs – never taking more than one from the nest, of course – and I’d tame a wild goat and drink her milk from a wooden bowl I’d carved from a tree.’

‘How would you like cutting down the tree?’ said Dickie in a humouring sort of voice. ‘Remember how upset you were when I had those sycamores felled last year?’

‘I wouldn’t cut it down, silly.’ Fleur was scornful. ‘I’d just carve the bowl out of the trunk and leave the place to heal over. I’d have the cats and dogs and Stargazer with me, of course. And Burgo, natch. And you could come if you liked, Bobbie.’

Her exclusion of Dickie was pointed. He stirred sugar into his coffee, smiling. It was impossible to tell if his feelings were hurt.

‘I’m not good at camping,’ I said. ‘I’d be nothing but a liability. I hate that dreadful ache you get in your hip joints from lying on hard ground. I frighten easily. I should spend all my time worrying what that peculiar rustling was, imagining a man with an axe creeping up on me – when I wasn’t

worrying whether that tickling sensation on my leg was a leaf or a scorpion. And I'm pretty bad-tempered without a proper night's sleep.'

Fleur looked annoyed. 'It isn't always night on an enchanted island.'

'Ah, no. But during the day I'd be hungry. I'm fond of nuts and berries but not invariably. And there wouldn't even be those in the winter. Bark and roots don't tempt me in the least. I'd rather stay here at Ladyfield. For me this is an enchanted place.'

Fleur scowled. 'What you really mean is that you're sorry for Dickie and you think I'm a pig. Well, you're right. I *am* a pig. But' – she shot him a glance of defiance – 'you shouldn't treat me like a child. Don't *indulge* me all the time. Of course I know I behave badly. Why don't you tell me to shut up or at least look contemptuous? All right, take no notice. I'm being unreasonable again.' She brushed away a tear and made an effort to smile. 'Be careful, I might put a spell on you.'

She really was a strange girl. I guessed part of the trouble was that she *had* put a spell on poor Dickie. His adoration was patent. But unless you are extraordinarily vain (and Fleur, I thought, was unusually without vanity for such a good-looking girl) being adored quickly becomes irritating and guilt-inducing.

'Let's go into the garden straight after coffee and look at the Temple to Hygeia,' he suggested as though the conversation had not taken place.

'We'll go now,' Fleur stood up. 'We can take our coffee cups with us.'

'You'd better let me bring the tray, madam.' Mrs Harris, who had waited at table with admirable discretion, slid round the door with such alacrity I wondered if she had been listening. 'The pattern's been discontinued and it'd be a pity to spoil the set.'

'Ha, ha! Come now, Mrs Harris.' Dickie crinkled his face in pacifying smiles, his pale eyes kind and serene. 'What does a little broken china matter?'

'I haven't actually broken it yet.' Fleur's face was cold. 'But if I did that would be my business and no one else's.' She picked up the cat and left the room.

'Never mind, Mrs Harris.' Dickie began to get up, leaning heavily on the arms of his chair. 'Least said, soonest mended, eh?'

'Why don't I carry the tray?' I suggested.

'I'd best bring it myself, to be on the safe side,' she replied with a stiffening of her jaw. 'The path's quite uneven in places.'

I saw that she was jealous of her office so I did not press the point.

'Your stick, sir.' Mrs Harris handed it to him. 'What about leaving your coat, sir?' She brushed a crumb from the sleeve of his tweed jacket in a manner that was almost maternal. 'It's getting quite warm. You don't want to overheat.'

'Thank you, I shall be all right as I am.'

I could see from Mrs Harris's expression that she thought he was very much all right as he was. And, looking at him through her eyes, I saw that his affability, his presumption of power in his own kingdom and his courtliness in exercising that power was attractive. But to a girl like Fleur probably these things did not count.

'You'll beware, sir, where Billy's put that wet cement? We don't want you having a nasty accident.'

'I'll take care not to fall.' There might have been a little resentment in his tone and he seemed to stand up straighter as though encumbered by so much solicitude. 'Thank you, Mrs Harris,' he added in a softened tone. 'Where would we all be without you to take care of us, eh?'

A wave of colour ran over Mrs Harris's face. 'It's my pleasure, sir.' She began to clear the table, an expression of satisfaction curving her lips.

'A good woman,' muttered Dickie as we crossed the hall to the garden door. 'None better. But not always tactful. Damn! I wonder where Fleur's got to? I'm always afraid that when she flies into a pet she'll do something stupid on Stargazer. He's a wonderful animal but he gets a look in his eye ...'

Dickie set the pace to the Temple, or the China House, which was how I thought of it. By daylight the garden had lost its mystery but was still lovely.

‘What a fabulous rose!’ I stopped to sniff at its tumbled raspberry petals revealing a glimpse of gold stamens. ‘Oh, the scent! I wonder what it’s called?’

‘Souvenir du Docteur Jamain,’ said Dickie, without stopping. ‘French hybrid perpetual.’

‘And this?’ I cupped my hands round an exquisite quartered bloom of blush pink.

Dickie threw a glance over his shoulder. ‘Queen of Denmark. An alba rose, probable parentage Maiden’s Blush.’

I longed for information about the other roses that dropped showers of pink, yellow, white and crimson petals on the path as Dickie brushed hastily past but his anxiety was so manifest that it seemed cruel to detain him for a second. We came rushing through the gap in the hedge which surrounded the China House to find Fleur sitting on its front step, talking to a young man. When he saw us he stooped in a leisurely way to pick up a trowel and began to slap cement from a bucket on to a piece of ground marked out with string. This, obviously, was Billy. He had short hair, tipped blond, and a craggy sort of face, good-looking in an aggressively masculine way. He was shirtless, his back burnished by the sun. His legs revealed by cut-off jeans were muscular and his wrists were bound with leather straps. He cast me a look of interest that hardened into something more like approval.

‘Arternoon, guv,’ he said, in a high nasal voice that spoiled the tough, lion-tamer image.

Dickie was scarlet in the face. Beads of sweat sat on his forehead and his voice was not quite under his command for he was panting.

‘Hello, Billy.’ He looked at Fleur. ‘There you are, darling. I wondered what had happened to you.’

‘You look as if you’re going to pass out.’ Fleur sounded unsympathetic. ‘Why don’t you take off your coat? For heaven’s sake, it’s high summer and you’re wearing a tie! I’m boiling!’

She pulled up her cotton jersey and hauled it over her head.

‘Well, girls, if you don’t mind, I think I will.’

Dickie leaned his stick against the steps and began to unknot his tie. I saw Billy looking at Fleur’s breasts. Her nipples were prominent beneath her thin, not altogether clean T-shirt. Her armpits had tufts of dark hair. The gypsy look is not one I normally care for but on Fleur it seemed fine, even attractive in an earthy way. Billy’s eyes narrowed and he licked his upper lip. I glanced at Dickie but he was still fighting his way out of his coat. Perspiration was damp on the back of my neck but I was disinclined to remove my jersey beneath Billy’s lascivious gaze. Mrs Harris appeared with the coffee. I saw her eyes take in everything.

She put the tray on a table that stood outside the China House. ‘I’ll take that coat, sir, then you won’t have to carry it back. You’d better put your shirt on, Billy,’ she added sharply. ‘It isn’t decent in front of ladies.’

Billy looked at Dickie.

‘Mrs Harris is always right.’ Dickie smiled. ‘We must do as we’re bid.’

Billy showed by the contemptuous drooping of his eyelids precisely what he thought of the housekeeper. He put on his T-shirt and bent and stretched languidly over his task, pausing now and then to look at Fleur and sometimes at me. Once when I caught his eye he turned his back to the others and rested his free hand casually on his groin. I stared with cold dignity at a clump of delphiniums.

‘Now, Roberta.’ Dickie sank into a deckchair. ‘Tell me honestly what you think.’ He waved his hand at the China House.

‘So far, excellent,’ I said. I noticed that Fleur was amusing herself by chucking little stones into Billy’s cement and that he was fishing them out and waving his trowel at her in mock anger.

‘I’ve consulted pre-war photographs, though it was nearly a ruin then,’ said Dickie. ‘But outside, at least, it’s as near as dammit to the original.’

‘It’s lovely. Did you know it was traditional to hang bells from the eaves, beneath the curled-up corners of the roof? So you get a tinkling sound whenever the wind blows. You could have a whingding at the apex. That’s a sort of pinnacle. Something fanciful. Perhaps a crouching dragon with a long tail spiralling upwards?’

Dickie was thrilled by these suggestions and began to make notes on the back of an envelope. Fleur lobbed a stone that bounced on a bucket and struck Billy’s thigh. He mimed a parody of spanking and she giggled. I heard him give a low growl. The little square of garden seemed to throb with dark primitive urges.

‘You could paint the roof with a scale pattern, like a goldfish,’ I continued, though my mind was not wholly on the subject. ‘Scarlet, white and green would be appropriate colours. And you ought to reach it by crossing a little scarlet Chinese bridge across a square or circular pool. Strictly speaking, though these roses are lovely, if you want to be traditional the only flowers should be water lilies. Otherwise masses of ferns and rocks.’

‘Roberta, you’re absolutely right!’ Dickie looked delighted. He turned to Fleur and just missed seeing her sticking out her tongue at Billy. ‘Isn’t it marvellous to have found someone who knows? Won’t it be fun, darling? I’m determined we shall do the thing right. Now tell me, what should the bells be made of?’

‘Anything you like. Often they were wooden but you could just as well have brass—’

I was interrupted by the sound of breaking china. ‘Oh, bugger,’ said Fleur. A pretty pink and gold Coalport tea cup lay in pieces on the gravel. ‘Mrs Harris’ll have a field day.’ Then she giggled. ‘It’s your fault, Billy. You shouldn’t make those ridiculous faces.’

Billy chuckled, an unpleasantly lubricious sound.

‘Better pick up the pieces, darling,’ said Dickie. ‘Perhaps it can be mended. But be careful not to cut yourself—’ It was too late. Fleur was sucking her thumb. The unselfconsciousness of the babyish pose was utterly charming and seductive. When she took it from her mouth drops of crimson fell on to the wet cement. ‘Here’s my hanky.’ Dickie sounded alarmed. ‘Put pressure on it and hold it above your head. We’ll go in and get a plaster—’

‘Don’t fuss.’ Fleur stood up. ‘It’s just a little cut. I was going to see Stargazer anyway. You stay and talk gardens with Bobbie.’ She fluttered a hand at me. ‘See you later.’ Then she was gone through the gap in the hedge.

Billy put down his trowel. ‘If you’re going to put a pond in, is it any good me going on with the paving?’

‘Well, no, I suppose not. You’d better leave all this for the time being and go and help Beddows with the grass.’

‘I was thinking maybe I’d go and help Mrs Sudborough with the horse. She’ll be a bit unhandy with that thumb.’

‘Good idea. Off you go then.’

Billy gave me a last lecherous look, then strode from the garden. I gazed at Dickie’s round pink face with his guileless eyes, snub nose and small mouth pursed up in an expression of whole-hearted enthusiasm and innocent pleasure and could have wept for him.

‘I don’t know though,’ Kit interrupted. ‘My sympathies are with the beauteous Fleur. Think how grim to be young and filled with the joys of spring and to be tied to a decrepit old buffer – however decent – incapable of gratifying one’s appetites. Or did the dear old fellow wink an eye when the lickerish Billy put in a spell of overtime? If so, it was probably sensible of him.’

‘A typically masculine reaction,’ I said scornfully.

‘Isn’t that reassuring? I am after all a man.’

‘For one thing, you talk as though Dickie’s in his dotage. He’s only fifty. And even if he were too old or too infirm to gratify anyone’s appetite, as you so charmingly phrase it, you seem to assume that those appetites are important enough to justify Fleur sleeping with an ignorant lout for whom

she cares nothing, and who doesn't give a fig for her. Are you telling me that men and women can't live entirely happily together without sex?'

'Yes.' Seeing that I looked indignant, he added, 'Well, you asked. With affection, yes, contentedly, possibly, but entirely happily? I doubt it. Not unless they're both over seventy.'

'You're entitled to your view, of course,' I said with a superior air.

Dickie lost no time in putting into practice my proposals for the China House. He was anxious to consult me on every detail and soon it was taken for granted that I would go over to Ladyfield for lunch or supper once or twice a week. It was wonderful to escape the dullness of Cutham for a few hours and the Sudboroughs' hospitality was never less than munificent. When the weather was good we ate on the terrace beneath a wisteria-covered pergola. When it was wet, in the dining room. Sometimes we had lunch in the China House. For a greedy person like me it was heaven to have straight from the garden tiny broad beans, carrots like baby's fingers, beetroot the size of olives and little purple artichokes to be eaten with a green mayonnaise and followed by tender noisettes of lamb or roast chicken with tarragon or skate with black butter. Mrs Harris's puddings were first class, too. I remember with particular fondness her omelette Rothschild, a wonderful concoction of nectarines, strawberries and kirsch baked inside a hot vanilla-flavoured froth of eggs.

Of course, the food was not the chief incentive for my visits to Ladyfield. I rapidly grew fond of both Fleur and Dickie and I thought they were often glad to have someone around with whom they were both ... well, not intimate exactly, one cannot become that in a matter of weeks, but thoroughly relaxed. Three is only a crowd when two of the three are in love. Fleur told me she had never had a close female friend. At her smart and expensive school her farouche manners had not helped her to win popularity with staff or girls. Also she had hated tennis, dances and Radio Luxembourg and had been wholly uninterested in clothes, make-up and boys. Her experience of living as an outcast in an intensely conformist society had been enough to put her off other girls for good.

She excepted me from this comprehensive proscription, I divined, because her beloved brother had expressed a desire that we should be friends. For my part I found it easy to comply with Burgo's wishes. Fleur was honest and affectionate, which I appreciated, coming from a family who would have preferred to be grilled over hot coals than show one any tenderness. And she was extremely generous. I learned not to praise anything for I would find it on the back seat of my car when I reached home. Once she gave me her favourite dress when I admired it, another time it was a beautiful emerald ring which had belonged to her mother.

I returned the dress on the grounds that it was too short. The ring I gave back to Dickie who promised to put it for safe-keeping in the bank. But he insisted I keep the Mennecy silver-mounted snuff box painted on the lid with sprays of roses. I have it still and treasure it despite associations of guilt. When Fleur was riding (often with Billy, much to my regret) or walking the dogs, again accompanied by Billy as often as not, Dickie and I would talk about gardens and draw up plans for the China House.

Though I knew quite a bit about the history of gardening and could just about tell a *Lychnis* from a *Linaria*, I knew little about the practical side of horticulture, never having owned a garden. Discovering this, Dickie loaded my car after each visit with gardening books with which I cheered the hours at Cutham. I learned the comparative virtues of a Portland rose and a Bourbon, the pruning requirements of various groups of clematis, which Michaelmas daisies were resistant to mildew and to recognize the absolute desirability of a *Paeonia mlokosewitschii* however fleeting its flowering. Dickie and I spent happy hours among the flowerbeds, planting, weeding, staking and dead-heading until our hands and clothes were imbued with the scent of catmint, rosemary, bergamot and thyme. Those seven weeks – was it only seven? it seemed like an entire summer – were a delightful respite.

I had news of Burgo occasionally. He sent Fleur a scribbled postcard from Leningrad, then one from Moscow, after that from Kiev and finally from the South of France. She always showed me the cards, assuming that I would share her pleasure in reading them. His style was laconic. Something

about the traffic or the hotel, the view or the heat. My apprehensions about Burgo dissolved as I began to forget what he was like in relation to me, and saw him instead through Fleur's eyes as an older brother, generally absent, preoccupied, wonderfully clever, sometimes impatient and unkind but just as often forbearing.

One evening – it was the beginning of August – Dickie rang to suggest a picnic in the garden of the China House. The cement was dry in the newly constructed lily pond and he wanted me to come and celebrate the turning on of the hose. I drove over to Ladyfield and walked out on to the terrace. Burgo was sitting at the table beneath the wisteria.

'Hello, Roberta.' He stood up as I approached. His hair, bleached whiter by foreign sunbeams, brushed against the dangling bronzed leaves. He was smiling. I had forgotten that he always looked as though he saw something amusing that was hidden from the rest of us. 'How delightful to see you again.'

He had the advantage, of course. He had known I was coming. As I felt the blood drain from my limbs and rush to my heart with a jolt that was thrilling to the point of being painful, I realized at once that I was in terrible trouble.

## ELEVEN

‘Have a drink.’ Burgo poured me a glass of wine. ‘Fleur’s polishing Stargazer’s hoofs and Dickie asked for twenty minutes’ grace to get his hoses linked up.’

I sat down. The garden had grown dim and my ears were filled with a sound like rushing water. I picked up the glass and took several reviving sips. He was saying something but I could not understand it. I tried to pull myself together and fixed an expression on my face which I hoped was intelligent, or at least sensible.

Burgo’s eyes were Fleur’s shape exactly, slanted, sylphic. But his were darker and sharper. He was wearing a dark blue shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows, jeans that had once been khaki and were faded by the sun and scruffy navy espadrilles. The impact of his presence left me in no doubt that I had been deceiving myself if I thought I was interested in him only as Fleur’s brother. He was saying something about England in summer. I forced myself to concentrate.

‘It’s perfect.’ Burgo narrowed his eyes to look across the expanse of lawn down to where a pair of crinkle-crankle hornbeam hedges drew one’s gaze to a statue of Flora and beyond that to where the beechwood began. ‘I’ve longed for this.’

He leaned back in his chair to follow the progress of a house martin as it swooped over the grass, looking for insects. The wisteria’s second flowering, nearly over now, dripped scent over our heads and bees foraged ceaselessly in the collapsing mauve blossoms.

‘Have you?’

‘Now, for a brief while, I can stop thinking,’ said Burgo. He brushed back his hair from his forehead. ‘I can breathe again. Allow myself to feel.’ He turned his head sharply and looked at me.

I dropped my gaze immediately. I wished I could breathe. I drank half my glass of wine in several swallows and stared fiercely at the grey teak of the table, mottled with silvery patches where wasps had tried to chew it.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ he asked.

‘Only on loan. How was Provence?’

‘Hot. Dry. Scorched to dust.’ He glanced at the knot garden, swirls of box, germander and lavender, which surrounded the terrace. ‘I much prefer the sound of blackbirds to cicadas.’

I was conscious of a feeling of gratification. I had no idea then that this was the beginning of a hateful process of keeping a tally. It took me weeks, months even, to recognize that in some secret, shamefaced part of my mind I was reckoning the score between Anna and me.

‘How was Leningrad?’

‘Beautiful but depressing. It confirmed all my assumptions about Communism.’

While he talked I examined a patch of violas flowering in a gap between paving stones at my feet. I came to know intimately the blushes and streaks of lilac on their primrose-coloured faces. Suddenly he was talking about my mother.

‘Oh, it’s kind of you to ask. She’s no better, really. If anything, slightly worse. At least ... physically she’s the same but she seems rather confused.’

‘What do you mean confused?’

I related the conversation about the toaster.

‘I’ve known Cabinet Ministers who believed there were fairies at the bottom of the garden.’

‘Lots of people don’t have much grasp of science. I’m one of them. But she’s said other things that bother me. Yesterday she refused to eat her potatoes because she said they were winking at her and it put her off. And when she talks she sometimes growls like a dog. She used to have a light, rather charming voice but these days she sounds like a sailor from Marseilles. In timbre, I mean. Of course, she speaks English.’

‘Perhaps she’s been lying down too long and isn’t getting enough blood to the brain.’

‘Perhaps. I wonder.’ What a relief it would be if the explanation were so simple. These days a thread of anxiety about my mother ran through all my waking hours. Talking about my fears with someone who did not immediately dismiss them as nonsense was comforting. But of course he was being polite. The symptoms of my mother’s illness could not be of interest. ‘I’m sorry. It’s a tedious subject: other people’s sick relations.’

He made a motion with his hand, sweeping this aside. ‘Has a doctor seen her recently?’

‘In desperation I persuaded our GP to call but she shut her eyes and refused to speak to him. He went away very cross.’

‘If the man’s not up to dealing with a mildly difficult patient I’d go over his head and get a specialist in.’

‘Do you think I should? But I don’t know how. I thought one was supposed to ask to be referred.’

‘Sometimes you have to cut corners. Leave it to me. I’ve got meetings all day tomorrow but I’ll sort something out. Don’t worry.’

It was as though the clouds had parted and a god had descended on suitable throne-bearing apparatus. But fear of disappointment made me tell myself he would have forgotten all about it even before I left Ladyfield to return to Cutham.

Aloud I said, ‘That would be a greater kindness than I could ever repay.’

Burgo gave me a look I recognized, which seemed to ask if I intended to maintain the fiction that social punctilio had any part to play in our relationship. I felt the blood rush to my face.

‘Here we are!’ Dickie appeared round the corner of the house. ‘Hello, Bobbie.’ He hobbled round the table to kiss my cheek. ‘The pool’s filling nicely and Mrs Harris is setting out the grub. Exciting, isn’t it? Of course Fleur doesn’t care two straws for our little garden and we all know Burgo’s mind is fixed on solving the troubles of the world. But you share my pleasure in our own little Utopia, eh?’

‘I certainly do! I’m longing to see the pool with water in it.’ I kissed Dickie with real affection. He was perhaps the nicest man I knew. And I was thankful to have a third person to ease the tension that continually threatened to take Burgo and me to a point beyond the bulwarks of propriety when we were alone. ‘And I adore picnics.’

‘It won’t be a real picnic,’ said Burgo. ‘I saw Beddows and Billy carrying down a table and chairs. We shan’t have to sit on rugs that smell of dogs, eating disintegrating Scotch eggs and drinking tepid tea.’

‘At my age,’ said Dickie, ‘I like to be comfortable. And the leg doesn’t take kindly to the hard ground. I agree there ought to be something primitive about a real picnic. But Mrs Harris has her standards and it makes her miserable to fall below them.’

‘I once went to a smart entertainment which the hostess called a *dîner sur l’herbe*,’ said Burgo. ‘We were rowed out to an island in the ancestral lake by uniformed flunkeys. We ate lobster and swan from heirloom porcelain and silver and were entertained by a wind trio of hautboy, serpent and crumhorn. On the return journey the flunkey in charge of the picnic baskets, who had been keeping up his spirits with the lees of the bottles, upset the boat. The male guests had to dive to the bottom of the lake to fetch up priceless Sèvres and dishes hammered by Paul Storr. My dinner jacket shrank to the size of a baby’s vest.’

Dickie and I laughed at this and I felt immediately reassured. What remained of my disquiet dissolved as we walked down to the China House.

‘It’s a funny thing,’ said Dickie. ‘I know so little about the Chinese except unpleasant practices like binding women’s feet and the slow drip, drip of the Chinese water torture.’

‘Don’t forget Chinese burns,’ I said.

‘There you are! How can you reconcile these barbarisms with such a developed sense of beauty?’

‘It’s a question of obedience, perhaps,’ suggested Burgo. ‘A national concept of beauty depends on a conformity of ideas. I believe you can indoctrinate any race to do brutal things by convincing it that they’re not outlandish practices but the norm.’

‘I really don’t think I could be persuaded to push bamboo shoots up anyone’s fingernails,’ Dickie protested. ‘And I’m positive our dear Bobbie’ – he patted me on the arm – ‘is incapable of behaving barbarously.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It would depend on what the pressures were. Supposing the only way you could save your own family from torture was to torture someone else’s? Where would one’s principles be then? It’s easy to lose sight of the unreasonableness of demands when there isn’t any reasonable behaviour to show them up.’

‘Where would politicians be if people were able to resist psychological manipulation?’ said Burgo.

‘Now, you don’t mean that, Burgo,’ said Dickie. ‘You’ll give Bobbie the wrong impression altogether. She’ll think you’re not to be trusted.’

‘She thinks that already.’ He sent me a sideways glance and again I felt an electrifying sense of danger.

‘Nonsense!’ said Dickie.

We had reached the China House so I was saved the necessity of replying. We pushed through the narrow gap in the hedge that led into the little garden. Mrs Harris was laying the table that had been set up on the grass in front of it. The pool contained an inch of water which had captured the hue of a robin’s egg from the sky. Limestone boulders had replaced the rose-beds and already there were fronds of young ferns in the crevices.

‘I wish Bobbie would come and live here with us,’ said Fleur to Burgo as we ate lovage soufflé followed by turbot, then camembert and figs. ‘We adore having her but she insists on going home, even though her parents are monsters of stinginess and selfishness.’

‘Fleur!’ protested Dickie. ‘It’s extremely rude to criticize Bobbie’s parents.’

‘I don’t think they’re as bad as that,’ I said. ‘If that’s the impression I’ve given I was probably exaggerating in a bid for sympathy. The truth is, they should never have married. They’re quite unsuited.’

‘I can’t think of many marriages that make the people in them feel better rather than worse,’ said Fleur.

‘Mine makes me feel heaps better,’ Dickie said at once. ‘It’s the very best thing in my life.’

Fleur’s cheeks took on a bright colour. Her eyes grew soft. ‘That’s kinder than I deserve.’

I was pleased by this evidence of Fleur’s fondness for Dickie. Though I loved being with them I was often wounded on his behalf by Fleur’s careless attitude. Particularly when I saw her with Billy.

‘Marriage is a means to an end. One marries to have children, to secure property, continue a line, to simplify taxation,’ said Burgo. ‘Why people should yoke themselves together fiscally *and* expect to relish each other’s maddening inconsistencies is more than I can understand.’

‘There you go again, pretending to be cynical,’ protested Dickie. ‘It’s learning to like people’s maddening little ways because they’re part of *them* that makes for love. The rest, fancying the cut of their jib, wanting to kiss them, is all very enjoyable but nothing to do with real love.’

Fleur dropped her head back and crammed a fig whole into her mouth. A trickle of juice ran down her chin. With her dark curling hair and slanting eyes she looked like a bacchante.

Poor Dickie. I had several times been up to Fleur’s bedroom. It contained a double bed but the single pillow and the solitary bedside lamp beside a large photograph of Burgo confirmed the fact that Fleur slept alone. Bowls of water and biscuits and baskets took up much of the floor space. The counterpane was marked by fur-lined depressions, the furniture was scored with claw-marks and there was a distinct smell of tom-cat. It was hardly surprising that Dickie was keen to play down the importance of the physical side of marriage.

‘I disagree.’ Burgo spoke rapidly and waved a hand for emphasis, an elegant hand with long fingers like Fleur’s, though cleaner and without bitten nails. ‘It isn’t cynical at all. I don’t say there’s no such thing as love. Of course there is, and it includes finding other people’s idiosyncrasies enthralling, besides desiring them physically. It may even co-exist with marriage. But marriage is for other purposes and you shouldn’t ask too much of it. It’s like being disappointed that an aeroplane isn’t a time machine. A plane is a superbly efficient method of getting about the globe fast. But to expect it to take you to the fourteenth century is unreasonable.’

‘I don’t see how you can separate things into different compartments like that,’ Dickie objected. ‘Marriage, if you spend any time together, can’t be just a contract to give the income-tax man one in the eye. You’d be bound to have some pretty strong feelings about your spouse – though not necessarily all affirmative, I grant. Eskimos, Maoris, Choctaws; they all have ceremonies of some kind. It’s human nature for men and women to want to get together beside their very own cooking-pot in some sort of exclusive arrangement to keep the world at bay. And it’s just what the doctor ordered when you’re past your first youth: swapping the hurly-burly of the what’s-it for the deep peace of the double bed and all that. Darby and Joan, Jack Sprat and his wife.’ He stared up at the deepening sky seeking further illustration. ‘Adam and Eve, you know.’

‘They didn’t have much choice.’ Burgo smiled. ‘As far as I remember they were the only two people there.’

Dickie laughed good-naturedly. ‘You know what I mean. I’m no good at arguing. What do you think, Bobbie?’

‘As the only unmarried person present obviously I can’t speak from experience. I think probably my own idea of marriage is much more exacting than wanting to be taken to the fourteenth century. But if those hopes weren’t fulfilled I suppose I’d try to persuade myself that a good marriage was whatever I had.’

‘You’d risk settling for something thoroughly inferior by doing that,’ said Burgo. ‘But you might be right. Perhaps self-delusion is necessary for happiness.’

‘Strike me purple and knock me down with an express train,’ said Fleur. (This was one of Billy’s favourite expressions.) ‘I don’t ever remember you agreeing with anyone before. You always say that unanimity makes for dull conversation.’

‘On this occasion I reserve the right to contradict myself. Must you do that?’

Fleur was tossing scraps from our plates to Lancelot, her red setter, who was leaping to catch them, knocking against the table and making the knives and forks rattle. She stopped at once.

‘I like agreement,’ said Dickie. ‘It’s pleasant and restful. I hate quarrelling.’

‘Not agreeing with someone isn’t the same as quarrelling.’ Burgo leaned across the table to pour me a glass of red wine to accompany the camembert. ‘Discussion – or argument if you like – is the proper way to get to the truth.’

‘I don’t know that I care about truth as much as all that.’ Dickie cut himself a piece of camembert. ‘I’d rather be comfortable and jolly any day. What do you say, Bobbie?’

I had the sensation – probably due to the heat and the wine and the pleasure of being in the garden – of having reached some plateau of happiness and the idea that if I remained exactly as I was and made no conscious mental effort in any direction I should be able to retain this for a while longer.

‘I want ... I want everything. Truth, beauty, comfort, jollity – I don’t want to have to choose between things.’

‘I agree.’ Burgo took a fig and quartered it, exposing crimson flesh, crammed with pips. ‘It’s too perfect an evening to be serious about anything.’

Fleur began to laugh, though at what she would not say.

‘I see now,’ said Kit. ‘It was the Garden of Eden. Ripeness and plenitude. Beauty and deceit. Fleur and Billy munching happily away at the fruits of the tree of knowledge without retribution. And slowly, steadily, resolutely the serpent was gliding towards you.’

‘That makes it sound as though I couldn’t help myself. I’m afraid that isn’t true.’

‘Well. We shall see. Go on.’

‘I think I’ll turn in.’ Dickie groped for his stick and stood up. ‘You’ll forgive me, Bobbie, if I leave Burgo to do the honours. I was up at six watering the strawberries. Beddows always forgets.’

Moths dithered around the candles, repeatedly flopping down to the table as though scorched to death, only to revive minutes later to dash back into the flames. My head was spinning with the combination of wine and the scent of flowers and grass, intensified by night.

‘I’ll go home now,’ I said as Dickie bent to kiss me. ‘Thank you for a wonderful evening.’

‘You can’t go,’ Fleur said to me. ‘We’re so happy. You’ll spoil everything if you leave now. Remember that poem about the strawberries you used to tell me when I was little?’ Fleur offered her cheek to Dickie but looked at Burgo. ‘Something about a wood. Do say it again.’

‘If I can remember it.

‘The man in the wilderness asked of me,

How many strawberries grow in the sea?

I answered him as I thought good,

As many red herrings as grow in the wood.’

‘What a relief!’ said Fleur. ‘It isn’t meant to make sense. As a child I thought I must be stupid because I didn’t understand it. There *are* some advantages to being grown up. I used to feel confused, like watching a film or a play in a foreign language. Now, though I don’t often feel the same, I’ve some idea what the plot’s supposed to be.’

‘Ah, but then something extraordinary happens that turns logic on its head and again you’re floundering.’ Burgo’s face was hidden in shadow. ‘You think you know where you’re going, what you want, what other people want of you. But then you read something, or see something, or meet someone who startles you out of your preconceptions and you’re left bewildered.’

I got up. ‘I really think I will go home.’

‘We’ll walk back to the house with you.’ Burgo stood and began to put coffee cups and brandy glasses on to a tray.

Fleur put her hand on his sleeve. ‘But you haven’t seen inside the China House yet. He must, mustn’t he, Bobbie?’ She took a candlestick and went across the grass to the little pavilion. ‘Look at the bells hanging from the roof.’ Fleur tapped one so that it rang with a sweet shivering chime. ‘Bobbie did drawings of them and Dickie got the blacksmith to make them. But come inside. That’s the best bit, though it isn’t finished yet.’ She tried to open the door. ‘Help me, will you? It still sticks a bit.’

Burgo applied pressure and opened it.

‘See!’ Fleur held the candlestick up high. ‘There’s the Chinese daybed. Bobbie designed it. Don’t you love its little curly roof like an hysterical four-poster? It isn’t finished yet. It’s to have silk curtains and cushions embroidered with dragons. Someone Bobbie knows in London’s making them. It’s costing a fortune but Dickie’s adoring doing it—’

‘Scuse me for butting in.’ Billy’s head and shoulders appeared round the door. ‘Evening, all.’ He nodded at me. ‘Sorry to bother you, Mrs Sudborough, but Stargazer’s leg is troubling him, like, and I was wondering if a bran poultice might do the trick.’

‘I’ll come at once.’ Fleur was at the door in an instant. ‘Bye, Bobbie.’ She kissed me briefly. ‘Burgo’ll see you off. I’ll ring.’

We were alone.

‘We’ve had a lot of fun,’ I said. ‘Isn’t the lantern a success?’ I pointed to the wood and glass lamp in the shape of a pineapple. ‘It’s charming, isn’t it?’

‘Oh yes.’ Burgo ignored the lantern.

‘Don’t you think Fleur’s looking well?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m so grateful to you for introducing me to them. I’m feeling enormously cheered up.’

‘Good.’ I thought I saw a suspicion of a smile.

‘It must have been marvellous in Provence. I haven’t been for ages. I once spent a month in a villa near St Rémy. We were students so we could barely afford to eat.’

‘Really.’

‘We had fish soup every day at a little café. I can still remember the taste of the *rouille* – you know, the hot peppery sauce that goes with it.’

‘I know what *rouille* is.’

‘Of course.’ I felt a complete fool. A silence fell which I felt I must break at the cost of making more of an idiot of myself. ‘Your wife must have been so pleased to have you to herself for a while.’

‘We had people staying all the time.’

‘Oh. Oh, how sad.’

‘Why?’

‘Well ... because ... I mean, you must miss each other and ... and you know that saying about absence – La Rochefoucauld, wasn’t it?’ I laughed unnaturally. ‘It usually is.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Oh, something about absence extinguishing little passions and increasing great ones, like the wind that blows out a candle but blows up a fire.’ Another pause. ‘So obviously, in your case, absence must be a good thing ...’ What on earth was I doing, talking about his marriage? It was an extraordinary impertinence.

‘A good thing for us to live apart?’

‘Yes ... no ... I don’t know.’

I stared at him in hopeless confusion. He did nothing to help me. If he’d made the least attempt to flirt I could have made it quite clear that there was no possibility of anything between us. As it was, he was entirely cool and collected while I stammered and stuttered like a schoolgirl.

After a pause, Burgo said with a solemnity that might have concealed annoyance, or possibly amusement, ‘It’s kind of you to be concerned.’

‘It’s late. I’d better go home.’

‘I’ll see you to your car.’

‘Don’t bother, really. It’d be a bore for you. I can manage. Goodnight.’

In a moment I was through the door and the gap in the hedge and running along the path that led back to the house. Tricked by fitful beams of moonlight, I stumbled into flowerbeds, twisting my ankles and scratching myself on thorns and twigs. When I arrived, panting, within the area that was lit by the lamps each side of the garden door, I wondered what on earth I was doing, behaving like a child frightened by my own imagination. I walked round to the Wolseley, feeling indescribably foolish, and drove back to Cutham, thoroughly out of humour with myself.

The silent house welcomed me into its chill embrace with an exudation of floor-polish and damp. By the light of the dim bulb in the hall I saw there was a message by the telephone in Oliver’s hand.

*Jasmine rang. She says to call her the minute you get in no matter how late as she won’t be able to sleep a wink until she has spoken to you. Is she as pretty as she is crazy?*

## TWELVE

'You mean he had you for a second time all to himself in that seductive little Chinese grot and he didn't make love to you? Or at least attempt it? Can he be flesh and blood?'

'Not every married man behaves like a fourth-former let out of school the minute he's alone with a girl not his wife.'

'That's just what you'd like to believe, my dear Bobbie. And now he's one of the powers in the land. It bodes ill for the country, that's all I can say.'

The telephone rang for a long time and I began to feel worried. Eventually someone lifted the receiver and I heard the sound of snuffling and rustling.

'Jasmine? Is that you? It's Bobbie.'

Several yawns and groans. 'What ... Who ... Oh, hello, darling. I was asleep ...'

'I'm sorry. The message said to ring you at once. I'll telephone you in the morning.'

More yawning and sighing. 'No. Don't ring off. I'm dying to talk to you. Just let me gather my wits ...' A long pause.

'Jazz? Are you still there?'

'Sorry. I'm awake now. You know how hopeless I am first thing in the morning.'

'Actually it's last thing at night. It's just after twelve.'

'No, really? Well, anyway, what the hell, it's all the same to me now. Teddy's left me!' She began to cry. I had a vision of tears shining in her coal-black eyes and spilling down her golden cheeks.

'Oh dear! Poor Jazz! I'm so sorry. You must feel wretched!'

'I'm going to kill myself. I just thought I'd say goodbye as you are my *very* best friend in all the world.'

'Thank you, but for God's sake don't do anything rash. Teddy isn't worth it. I understand how you feel but, believe me, this despair will pass.'

'You *don't* understand! You've never been agonizingly, sickmakingly in love with anyone ever, have you? You were a tiny bit fond of David and perhaps that Russian, whatever his name was, for a week or two, and that man with the Daimler Dart who had that collection of dreary old books.'

'Incunabula.'

'What?'

'That's what you call books that are pre fifteen hundred ... Oh, never mind. I expect you're right. I've never been properly in love and I don't know what you're going through. But, dear Jazz, Teddy's made you so miserable so often. There are other men in the world. Nicer, more intelligent, more amusing men who aren't married. Better-looking men.'

'Teddy's the only man I'll *ever* love. No one else interests me in the slightest. I can't live without him. He only has to touch me and I feel faint with desire.'

I saw in my imagination Teddy's porcine eyes in which there was always a leer, heard his self-satisfied laugh, remembered his damp hands that found excuses to clutch at any girl young enough to be his daughter. The paunch and the shining scalp were perhaps just a question of taste.

'You think that now, but if you could only get through the first few miserable days you'd begin to see that he wasn't so perfect. Don't you think it's rather mean of him to treat the two women he's supposed to love, you and his wife, so badly and make you both so unhappy?'

'Lydia isn't unhappy a *bit*! She still doesn't know about me.'

'Hang on, I thought you'd insisted that he tell her. You said how much better you felt now the affair was out in the open.'

'Apparently he only said he'd told her to please me. He couldn't face telling her. That's why he's left me. Because he's afraid she won't let him see the children ever again. That's the sort of woman she is! She's bullied my poor darling Teddy, playing on his paternal feelings until he'd rather stay in

a loveless, sexless marriage than desert his children. He's got *such* a strong sense of duty. It's one of the things I love about him.'

'Either that or he's a lying, two-timing bastard.'

This provoked such a wail of misery that I repented at once.

'It's a difficult situation for everyone,' I temporized. 'But remember that you're a beautiful, kind, funny, delightful girl whom any man would be lucky to have. They'll be falling over themselves to take you out once they know Teddy's off the scene and you won't have time to mourn the end of that particular affair.'

'What do you mean, funny?'

'Well, entertaining. You know, good to be with.'

'You mean I'm not brainy like you and Sarah.'

'No, not at all ... I didn't ...'

'Oh, don't worry. I know it's true. Sarah said her little brother's stick insect is more intelligent than I am.' Sarah could be extremely forthright. 'She says Teddy has the charisma of a senile skunk.' She wept again.

'Don't cry, Jazzy. Go back to bed and get some sleep. I'll ring you tomorrow to see how you are.'

'I shan't sleep a wink. Everything here reminds me of him.' I could not imagine why since Teddy rarely spent an evening at Paradise Row. I think he was conscious of Sarah's and my dislike of him. 'Bobbie darling, would your parents mind if I came to stay with you? I *long* to get away.'

'Oh. Well ... it's a bit awkward with my mother being ill ... and it's so horrible here I think it would only depress you even more. It depresses me.'

'You don't want me. Nobody wants me! I'm going to be alone for the rest of my life! I'm too boring and ugly and stupid ...' The rest was drowned by sobs.

'All right, Jazzy, if you think it will make you feel better, of course you can come. I'd love to see you. But you mustn't mind if my father's bad-tempered. He's like that with everyone.'

'Of course I shan't mind. *My* father's not exactly a thrill on wheels. How many evening dresses should I bring, do you think? And do you have a pool? I've just bought the prettiest bikini ...'

Before hanging up I advised her about sensible shoes, jerseys and mackintoshes and assured her that we would not be attending Cowes Week. In fact, I reflected as I climbed exhausted into bed, she would need nothing but jeans. The only social life I had enjoyed while living with my parents had been suspended, temporarily or permanently. I could not go to Ladyfield while there was any danger of meeting Burgo there. Jasmine's telephone call had been a timely reminder, if I had needed one, of the inadvisability of having anything to do with a married man. The greatest excitement I could offer Jasmine was a Viennese split at the Bib 'n' Tucker in Cutham High Street.

I thought a lot about Jazzy the following morning as I dawdled through the trivial round, the common task. Or was it the common round and trivial task? Anyway, I made soup and chicken liver pâté, scrubbed out the larder as Mrs Treadgold's back was playing her up again and she had a mysterious pain in her knees, and took out the rubbish, including a sackful of rejected paragraphs from the great work, *Sunlight and Cucumbers*. As I was returning from the dark little yard that housed the bins and coal I heard the telephone ring. It was Dickie.

'Bobbie, you've got to help me. If ever a man needed a friend it's now.' I could tell from his tone that the crisis was not of the life-and-death kind so I told him to hang on while I cradled the receiver under my chin and attempted to bandage with my handkerchief a finger dripping with blood. I had cut it on some broken glass in the dustbin.

'I will if I can,' I said cautiously when the flow had been stemmed.

'It's the Ladyfield Lawn Tennis Club's annual doubles thrash this afternoon. This year they're playing the Tideswell Parva team. It's a grim occasion but they've always had it here and I can't let them down. We've got a hard court *and* a grass court, you see, so what with the two courts at the village school just down the road and a grass court at the Rectory next door they can get through the

whole tournament in one afternoon. I'd like to get rid of them both, really – the courts, that is – since neither Fleur nor I play. Ugly things with all that wire netting. If you've got children of course ... Anyway, there's a certain obligation if you've got the only house of any size in the area to host these things. I'm sure you have the same problem.'

'Actually, when the vicar last asked us to have the fête my father said it was too much wear and tear on the grass. Luckily the vicar's never seen our balding, moss-ridden lawn. And the tennis court's got a forest of elders growing through the tarmac.'

'Really?' Good husbandry was second nature to Dickie and I could tell he was rather shocked. 'Well, the only thing that might operate in my favour is a spell of heavy rain but a cloudless day is forecast. Before the final match everyone converges on the top lawn for wine-cup and what's rather unattractively called a finger buffet. I feel obliged to join in as much as I can, which means consuming huge amounts of sausage rolls and clapping like billy-o. Fleur always sneaks off and I don't blame her. But I feel that for both of us to duck out would look ... well, snobbish, I suppose.'

'You want me to make a cake?'

'Heavens, no. There are ladies aplenty to provide scones and sausage rolls and whatnot.'

'You want me to come and be nice to people and hand the scones round?'

'Rather more than that, I'm afraid. The Ladyfield team is one short. I was wondering if you'd be angelic and stand in for the fellow who's most inconsiderately having a wisdom tooth out.'

'You want me to *play*?'

'We'd all be so grateful. The secretary's been scouring the countryside for a stand-in but so far no luck. I'd do it myself but with my leg ... Somehow I feel in my bones you're a good player.'

'Never gamble so much as sixpence on those bones of yours. I'm extremely average and haven't played for at least two years.'

'Not to worry. They're all middle-aged to elderly, I promise you. Tennis clubs are rather *vieux jeu*, it seems. The young of Ladyfield prefer to go to the cinema or dance themselves into a stupor on amphetamines. I know for a fact that Dinwiddie – the man who's having his tooth extracted – is my senior by several years. It's just a bit of fun.'

'The only difficulty is that I've a friend coming to stay. I'm picking her up from the station at half past one. What time does the match start?'

'Two-thirty.'

'In that case I can just about make it, if you don't mind me bringing her.'

'Of course, of course! I'm so grateful. I always feel a responsibility to see that all goes well. Ridiculous, really, since I'm nothing to do with them. But somehow when it's in your garden ...'

'Just don't expect too much, that's all.'

'You're a perfect angel, Bobbie dear.'

By the time I had dusted one of the spare bedrooms and made Jasmine's favourite pudding (profiteroles), my finger had swollen a little and was red. I just had time to puncture the choux buns to let the steam out and put them on a rack to cool before driving to the station to meet the train. Jazzy was not on it. The next train from London was not for another hour. I drove home, feeling a little anxious. There was a note by the telephone in Mrs Treadgold's writing. *Your friend rang to say she is not coming. She will ring you from the Isle of White. She says a million apology's for the change of plan.*

Before leaving for the station I had dug out my tennis racquet from the cupboard beneath the stairs and found that my old tennis skirt was grey from having been washed with someone else's socks. One of my gym shoes had a lace missing so I was obliged to tie it with a black one borrowed from Oliver. I dreaded the tournament but it was the least I could do for Dickie who had entertained me so frequently and lavishly. I had once been reserve in the school team and could usually get my second serve in. It was fortunate, I reflected heartlessly, that my opponents would be much older than me and handicapped by things like arthritis and spectacles.

Arriving at Ladyfield I was greeted on the drive by a man who must have been about sixty but whose calf muscles, below immaculate white shorts, bulged like grapefruits.

‘You must be Miss Norton.’ He shook my hand with an enthusiasm that made my cut finger throb. ‘I’m Roderick Bender, your partner for the afternoon. We do appreciate you standing in at the last moment. Our captain was in considerable pain or he’d never have let us down like this. I know he’ll be fed up at having to miss an opportunity to give the Tideswell Tigers a walloping. They’ve never beaten us yet.’

I smiled politely. ‘I’m afraid I shall be a poor substitute. I’m rather rusty.’

‘False modesty, I’m sure. Of course, no one’s expecting you to be up to Dinwiddie’s standard. He once played at Wimbledon, you know.’ Before I could mutter some excuse, get back into my car and drive rapidly away, he gripped my elbow with fingers of steel and steered me across the lawn in the direction of the courts. ‘Luckily, we’ve some time in hand before the others get here. We’ll knock up together and see what sort of game you play before we decide on our strategy.’

‘I don’t think my game’s sufficiently consistent to deserve a strategy.’

‘Come, come! No defeatist talk, now, Miss Norton. Attitude’s extremely important. We’ve got to put winning into the forefront of our brains and keep it there. Attack’s the name of the game. Think slam, think smash, think victory!’

‘Do call me Bobbie.’

‘All right. And you can call me Roddy. Here we are. We’ve drawn hard. Less finesse required than on grass but it’s an opportunity to display a bit of vim. It’ll suit your game, I hope?’

I was about to say that as far as my game went the surface was immaterial but thought better of it. There was no point in rushing to embrace disaster. Roddy made minute adjustments to the net while I changed into gym shoes. There was a delay while I struggled with the zip of my racquet cover, which had become corroded by the damp endemic to Cutham. After a minute or two Roddy left the net and came to help. He wrestled with the obstinate zip for some time before saying, rather pink in the face, ‘Dear me, this isn’t a good beginning, is it?’

I humbly agreed that it wasn’t.

‘I’ll go and see if any of the ladies have a spare you can borrow.’ There was perceptible annoyance in the tilt of Roddy’s head as he strode back to the house.

People in tennis whites began to drift in small groups across the lawn. I was delighted to see that no one was a day under sixty.

‘Yoo-hoo!’ hallooed a solidly built woman with fluffy grey curls as soon as she was in earshot. ‘Lovely day, isn’t it?’

I looked up obediently. I was disappointed to see that there was not a raincloud in sight. ‘Lovely.’

‘I’m Peggy Mountfichet. You must be a new member.’

‘I’m Bobbie Norton. I’m just standing in for Mr Dinwiddie. He’s gone to have a tooth out.’

‘Three cheers!’ chortled Mrs Mountfichet, hurling up her racquet and failing to catch it. ‘Listen, folks,’ she carolled to her team mates. ‘Old Dinwidders isn’t playing today.’ She walked on to the court and flung off her cardigan, exposing sagging, liver-spotted arms from which I meanly took comfort. ‘Don’t think me unkind, dear, of course I’m sorry for anyone going to the dentist, but he takes it all so damned seriously you’d think we were playing for Great Britain instead of for the fun of it. This is Adrian Lightowler.’ She indicated the stooped old man behind her who seemed to be having difficulty in opening a box of new balls.

‘How do you do?’ I watched Mr Lightowler’s attempts to prise off the cellophane with palsied fingers, feeling further encouraged.

‘You’ll have to speak up, he’s terribly deaf. Nearly eighty, you know. Wonderful for his age. How extraordinary!’ Mrs Mountfichet looked about her. ‘Where’s Roddy Bender? In all the years I’ve played for Tideswell he’s always been first on the court. Makes a point of it so he can pretend we’ve kept him waiting, the old so-and-so! Typical of men, dear, really, isn’t it?’ she added to me

conversationally as she exchanged her Clark's Skips for a pair of plimsolls. 'Such babies, hating to lose. I've made fifty meringues, two dozen sausage rolls and a lemon mousse this morning besides turning out the airing cupboard and walking the dog. I bet Roddy's done nothing but blanco his shoes.'

'I'm afraid it's my fault he isn't here.' I confessed to the ignominious circumstances that had made Roddy break the habit of a lifetime.

'Don't you worry, dear. It's sweet of you to give up your valuable time to play with a lot of old crocks like us. Take my tip and be sure to get to the tea table early on. The meringues go in a winking. And don't, whatever you do, have any wine-cup until after the match. Mr Lowe-Budding makes it from lemonade and pomagne but Dickie always adds a bottle of brandy when he thinks no one's looking. He likes to jolly us up, you see; stop the men taking it so seriously. It's quite lethal. After one glass you won't be able to hit a thing.'

'Thanks for the warning.' I was really beginning to like this game old lady.

When Roddy reappeared he looked quite angry to find Mrs Mountfichet and Mr Lightowler already on the court, patting a ball gently back and forth to each other.

'Hello, Roddy,' she called. 'Who's a lucky boy then? You'll be the envy of the other men with such a beautiful partner.'

Roddy forbore to answer. 'This ought to be about the right weight.' He handed me a newish-looking racquet. 'Don't know about the grip, though.' It seemed to have been made for a gorilla's paw. I could hardly close my fingers round the handle. 'Never mind,' continued Roddy. 'You'll have to make the best of it. There isn't time to find another.'

'Hello, Bobbie my dear.' Dickie limped over to the umpire's chair. He looked smart in blazer and flannels and was carrying an official-looking clipboard. 'Lovely to see you. Let's make a start. The others have already begun their matches.'

'My partner and I haven't had a chance to warm up yet,' protested Roddy.

'Come on, you old fusspot!' said Mrs Mountfichet. 'You toss and I'll call.'

Mrs Mountfichet won the toss, to Roddy's evident displeasure.

'You'd better get up to the net as soon as you can,' he muttered to me. 'I'll stay back.'

I prepared myself to receive Mrs Mountfichet's serve. I repressed a smile as I saw Roddy bent double with a fiendish grin on his face, hopping from foot to foot, the silly old—Whang! The ball left Mrs Mountfichet's racquet at something near the speed of light and raised a cloud of chalk as it bounced on the line to thwack into the netting behind my head. I had not had time to lift my racquet.

'Sorry, dear,' she called. 'I don't think you were quite ready. We'll play that point again.'

'Good idea,' said Dickie breezily. 'All right, everyone? Play!'

This time I had my racquet lifted and my eye on the ball. It struck my racquet and knocked it clean from my hand, hurting my cut finger considerably.

'Sorry!' Mrs Mountfichet looked concerned. 'Do you want to play that point one more time?'

'For heaven's sake, let's get on,' snapped Roddy.

'Fifteen, love,' called Dickie.

Mrs Mountfichet changed sides and served to Roddy. He smacked it smartly back over the net and a pounding rally began during which he and Mrs Mountfichet whirled like dervishes and Mr Lightowler, standing at the net, volleyed like a champion without moving below the waist. The rally ended when I managed to hit the ball properly for the first time, unfortunately straight into the net.

'Thirty, love,' called Dickie with a suggestion of sympathy in his voice.

'Watch out for the top-spin Mountfichet always puts on her serve,' growled Roddy to me as I bent and grimaced into the sun.

I had no idea what to do about top-spin even if I recognized it. The ball skimmed the net by a millimetre and bounced short. I gave it a wallop. Somehow it came into contact with the wood and shot off sideways.

'Forty, love.' Dickie's voice was so sympathetic he sounded on the point of bursting into tears.

Mrs Mountfichet served to Roddy. He returned it with a punishing backhand, slicing it across court at a impossible angle, but Mr Lightowler stretched forth a sinewy arm and just popped it over the net.

‘Yours!’ bawled Roddy.

I rushed forward and in my enthusiasm scooped up a spoon’s worth of fine gravel, flinging it straight into Mr Lightowler’s rheumy old eyes.

‘Game,’ Dickie almost whispered as we all converged to offer handkerchiefs.

Mrs Mountfichet fished and poked and prodded about in Mr Lightowler’s eyes with ruthless efficiency until his sight was more or less restored. After that, every time I caught sight of his scarlet eyeballs blinking at me over the net, I felt a stab of guilt. None the less he managed to return every shot that came his way with tactical brilliance.

We had gathered quite a crowd of spectators now, who applauded almost every point and maintained a polite silence whenever I bungled a return. Roddy contrived to hang on to his serve by spinning about the court as though under attack from bees, intercepting any ball that was directed towards me. I was vastly encouraged when I managed to return one of Mr Lightowler’s rather feeble serves, sending it down the line between our opponents. There was a storm of applause quite out of proportion to the skill of the shot. I felt bucked to discover that I had the sympathy of the crowd.

That, as it turned out, was my only moment of glory, but I did manage after that to whack the ball back over the net a few times only to see it driven practically through the tarmac by Mrs Mountfichet or directed cleverly just out of my reach by Mr Lightowler. They won the first set 6–2, owing to me losing both my service games.

‘I’m terribly sorry,’ I said to Roddy as we changed ends. ‘I hadn’t realized you were all so good or I’d never have agreed to play.’

‘It’s too late to think of that now,’ said Roddy, rather ungraciously I thought. ‘It’ll be better if you stay back. Try to get the baseline shots and I’ll cover the rest of the court.’

We got on better with this method and actually got to thirty all during my service game. Mr Lightowler sent up a high lob. Skipping energetically backwards to be sure of getting it, I slipped on the loose gravel and fell hard, grazing my elbow. The ball bounced two inches inside the baseline and, to add injury to insult, struck me on the chest. There was a murmur of concern from the spectators and a burst of laughter from several of the children so I could be certain I had looked a complete fool. Roddy bared his teeth at me.

I was tempted to throw down my racquet and walk off in a huff but a glance at Dickie’s anxious face restored me to my senses.

‘I’m absolutely fine,’ I said in answer to his enquiry. ‘Not a bit hurt.’

‘Thirty, forty,’ he murmured kindly.

My elbow was now throbbing every bit as painfully as my finger. I had a moment of mild success when I returned one of Peggy’s ballistic backhand passes, though the impact jarred my arm from my wrist to my shoulder. I was running forward with a renewal of confidence to tackle what looked to be a fairly easy drop volley when Roddy yelled, ‘Mine!’ but just too late. My outflung racquet collided with his prow of a nose. He gave a howl of pain as the ball flew unhindered into the tramlines.

‘Game.’

‘I’m awfully sorry,’ I said.

There was another flourishing of handkerchiefs. Poor Roddy’s nose splashed his snow-white shirt with scarlet and the concerted mopping seemed to make it worse. A key was requested from the crowd and put down Roddy’s shirt but did no good.

‘Pinch his nostrils,’ suggested Dickie.

‘Ow-how!’ protested Roddy as Mrs Mountfichet almost twisted his nose off his face.

After ten minutes of copious bloodshed it was agreed that he should go and lie down with an ice-pack.

'I'm so terribly sorry ...' I began but Roddy was stalking away holding a towel to his face and affected not to hear me.

'That's put a spanner in the works,' said Mrs Mountfichet.

I hung my head.

'Damn shame,' said Mr Lightowler. 'I was just warming up.'

Dickie turned to address the audience. 'Perhaps someone would be good enough to stand in for Mr Bender. Just for a few games until the bleeding stops.'

'Good idea!' seconded Mrs Mountfichet. 'Come on, somebody,' she urged the watching crowd. 'Be a sport! It's only a bit of fun.'

The spectators blanched and shook their heads.

'I will,' said a voice from the crowd.

I experienced a frisson of horror as Burgo stepped on to the court. He was wearing white duck trousers, a red shirt that had faded to pink and his ancient espadrilles. On his face was an expression of great good humour. He had told me that he had meetings all day. Had I not been absolutely sure that he would be in London I would never have agreed to come to Ladyfield. I wondered how much he had witnessed of the exhibition I had made of myself. He must have seen me flat on my back in the dust.

'A round of applause, ladies and gentlemen, for our Member of Parliament, Mr Burgo Latimer,' said Dickie.

The crowd clapped and whistled, delighted that their entertainment was not to be cut short. I debated whether to faint or run away. Burgo was going to leap athletically round the court like a knight errant, demolishing the opposition, saving the day and completing my humiliation. Little did he know, I thought with savage satisfaction, that there was nothing I disliked so much as a show-off.

'Hello,' he said pleasantly as he strolled over to me, twirling Roddy's discarded racquet with a careless assurance. 'You seemed to be having such a good time that I couldn't resist the call to arms.'

'I suppose you're going to make mincemeat of all of us.'

'Hardly that. I haven't played for at least ten years. I can barely remember the rules. But it seems a pity for the match to fizzle out.'

I smiled coolly. At least it was an opportunity to impress the voters so his time would not be entirely wasted.

'Play!' called Dickie.

Mr Lightowler flipped a gentle serve over the net. Burgo hit it so far into the air that we all peered for what seemed like minutes into the sky until our eyes watered.

'I think it's gone into orbit,' giggled Mrs Mountfichet.

'Ouch!' Dickie rubbed his skull. 'Fifteen, love.'

Mr Lightowler served again. I slammed it back. It came flying over the net and Burgo took a swipe at it, missed, pirouetted on the spot, ran backwards, picked it up on the rim of his racquet and hurled it over the wire netting where it fell into the cheering crowd.

'Thirty, love.'

'Sorry,' Burgo said easily. 'I did warn you.'

After that I managed to place a few unremarkable shots and Burgo got in a spectacularly good return by what was clearly a fluke. He had a way of running up to the ball, seeming to hesitate and then either rescuing the point with extraordinary brilliance or losing it with such spectacular ineptitude that I became suspicious. Whether he hit it in or out the spectators began to enjoy themselves so much that they reached a state in which they found everything funny. The prevailing good humour was irresistible. Soon I was giggling helplessly. Mrs Mountfichet and Mr Lightowler made stern attempts to control themselves but that only made us laugh more. In the end they stopped playing seriously themselves, to the detraction of their game.

The match ran swiftly on to a final score of 6-2, 6-1, 6-3. The crowd revelled in it. That a Member of Parliament, an important man in the county, whose name was frequently in the

newspapers, was prepared to make a cake of himself to save their tennis party was a marvellous thing and they loved him for it. When he came off the court they would willingly have carried him shoulder-high through the streets, had it been at all convenient.

The players and spectators converged on the tea table with enthusiasm to devour sandwiches, sausage rolls, cream horns, brandy snaps, meringues, plum cake, gingerbread and eclairs. I found I was extremely thirsty. The tea, stewing in a giant aluminium pot, was brown and bitter. I was no longer required as a player so I had a glass of wine-cup. Though it was the colour of marsh water with a flotsam of rapidly bruising fruit, it was refreshing, so I had a second. I felt suddenly light-headed and a little dizzy and resolved that it should be my last. Roddy Bender, his nose swollen and purple like an exotic fruit, loomed into view. By mutual consent we pretended not to have seen each other.

‘I’ve saved you one of my specials.’ Mrs Mountfichet handed me a plate on which two meringue halves were held together by cream and raspberries. ‘You were a thoroughly good sport, dear. You mustn’t worry about Roddy. Do him good to have his nose put out of joint.’ She laughed heartily at her own joke. ‘He’s so competitive. Mr Latimer was a breath of fresh air.’

I looked across the lawn to where Burgo stood, surrounded by adoring women who were insisting he try their own particular contribution to the banquet. I saw he was charming them like birds to his hand. He looked both handsome and intelligent, a rare combination. His pale hair, slightly disordered after the game, and dégagé appearance contributed to a panache that made him extremely attractive. He seemed to have a sort of glow about him that had nothing to do with sunburn. It was the magnetism of complete self-assurance. I tore my thoughts away with difficulty and fastened them on what Mrs Mountfichet was telling me about her *Clematis viticella* ‘Purpurea plena elegans’.

‘Pruning group three, dear. Savage it in February. It’s the only way to stop it flowering in a horrid tangle at the top.’

‘I’ll be certain to do that.’

‘I doubt it, dear. You haven’t heard a word I’ve been saying, have you?’ She leaned closer and said, almost in my ear, ‘He’s very good-looking. If I were twenty years younger I think I’d be ready to throw my cap over the windmill. And Mr Mountfichet after it. But no doubt I’d be sorry later. A man with two women eager to tend to his needs is rather too comfortably circumstanced for his own good. Certainly for anyone else’s.’

‘Have some wine-cup, Mrs Mountfichet?’ Burgo was beside us, holding a jug. ‘Not exactly the milk of paradise but it has quite a kick.’ He filled my glass despite my murmurs of protest.

Mrs Mountfichet shook her curls. ‘Not for me, thanks. I’ve got to play again, thanks to you. You can crown the occasion by drawing the raffle if you’d be so kind. I’ll just go and check that they’ve sold all the tickets.’ She marched off.

‘You’ve made a hit,’ I said. ‘I don’t suppose that was all put on, was it? Being hopeless at tennis, I mean.’

Burgo looked injured. ‘What do you mean, hopeless? I thought I played rather better than usual.’

‘Remember, a liar needs a good memory.’

‘You’ve got cream on your chin.’

I had to have recourse to the back of my hand, my handkerchief having been saturated with Roddy’s blood.

‘It’s all over your cheek now,’ said Burgo. ‘Here, let me.’

He took a spotted bandanna from his pocket and dabbed at my chin with it. Something extraordinary happened to my knees. A second that seemed like an age passed before I looked down at my glass and drank its contents in three swallows.

Mrs Mountfichet was back. ‘Come with me, Mr Latimer, and we’ll do the draw now. Perhaps a little speech?’

While Burgo was encircled by the crowd I wandered about its perimeter and had another glass of wine-cup. How they lapped up his words and laughed at his jokes! I tried to listen to what he was

saying but my mind fragmented, soared and swooped uncontrollably. The sun had ceased to scorch but gusts of heat rose from the parched turf and Dickie's beloved roses hung their heads, longing for the cool of evening.

'Hello, Bobbie.' It was Dickie. 'You look very happy.'

'Do I? So do you.' I wondered why I was laughing. 'What did you put in the wine-cup? I'm pretty sure if I flapped my arms hard enough I could fly.'

'I put in an extra bottle of cognac while you were coming off the courts. It's a relief that it's all gone so well. I feel I owe it to the old place to try to make these things a success. Don't know why I should care but I do.'

'Let me give you a hand with those.'

Dickie handed me the bag of old balls. 'Thanks. We always change them before the final match though there's nothing wrong with them. They're not heavy but a bit awkward with this damned leg. I thought I'd put them behind the screen in the China House for the time being. Really, I want an excuse to look at the ferns. I've been too busy getting the garden ready for the tennis to check they've been properly watered.'

We turned off along the path that led to the Chinese garden. Regal lilies with white, waxy throats and garnet streaks on the backs of their petals leaned over the rosemary hedge. Their powerful exhalations were like a drug, setting one's mind free to dream. Tortoiseshell butterflies fluttered like twists of coloured paper among the frothy stands of *Verbena bonariensis*.

The ferns were taking root and beginning to put out new fronds. The interior of the China House seemed velvety dark to our dilating pupils. I leaned against a bedpost while Dickie stowed the balls out of sight.

'The silk for the bed came this morning,' said Dickie. 'I'll pop back to the house and fetch it, shall I, so we can get an idea of how it's going to look?'

'Lovely,' I said, marvelling at the myriad emerald flecks that buzzed round the room everywhere I rested my eyes. When I closed them they were still there, swirling like clouds of gnats.

'I may be five minutes or so. I want to check that everyone's got what they need.'

'No hurry.'

After Dickie had gone I sat on the Chinese bed. The old counterpane that was its temporary covering was deliciously cool and soft. I removed my shoes and stretched out full length. The room revolved in time to the strange music inside my head, a combination of buzzing bees, singing birds and the pulse of my own blood. I heard Dickie come back. Felt the bed sink beneath his weight, felt his arm slide beneath my head that was as weak as a snapped stalk. Heard him say, 'My love, my love. Don't resist me any longer. This had to be.'

It was not Dickie. I knew this by a violent quiver of joy that ran from my burning forehead to my naked feet.

'Of course,' I murmured. 'But I ... so terribly ... didn't ... want ...'

'It's too late for regret. It always was.'

He was right. I had been a hypocrite, paying lip-service to propriety, trying to cheat myself into believing that my own sense of probity could conquer selfish desire. From the moment we had stood in that hideous room at the Carlton House Hotel sharing a dish of stale peanuts I had known that it was only a matter of time before I became Burgo's lover. I gave myself up to the inevitable.

## THIRTEEN

‘Do look at those sheep.’ I peered through slashing rain at bundles of grey and white wool crouching down beside rocks. ‘They’ve got the most magnificent curling horns.’

‘Remember what it says in the Bible about dividing the nations, the worthy from the unworthy? You’ll never make a shepherdess if you can’t tell sheep from goats.’

‘You mean there are wild goats here? How romantic! We might be in Ancient Greece. Apart from the weather.’

‘Those are the Maunturk Mountains.’ Kit pointed to our left. ‘And beyond them in the distance a group called the Twelve Bens.’

All around us were sombre mountains, water running down them in rills. At their feet the ground fell to the road in tracts of undulating green dotted with rocks and clumps of spiky grass.

‘That’s cotton grass,’ said Kit. ‘It means the ground’s boggy. Thousands of years ago prehistoric man lived by slashing and burning the woodland that covered these parts. Eventually a layer of carbon formed that stopped the land from draining and thus the bog was created. When the woodland was all destroyed, the people who lived here could only get wood by digging up ancient trees from beneath the peat layers. Hence bog oak. A useful lesson for today.’

‘I’ve seen furniture made from black bog oak but I’d no idea how it was formed.’

‘So, during the game of tennis that so effectively demolished your defences, what was it, exactly, that you suspected? Are you unique among girls, do you think, in finding incompetence more disarming than proficiency?’

‘I thought you were the expert on female psychology.’

‘What was troubling you? Besides a sense of what you persist in seeing as impending moral collapse on your own part?’

‘Don’t you ever forget anything?’

‘Not when it’s a story.’ Kit slowed to let a ewe and her lamb, their underbellies brown with mud, cross the road. ‘Agents have to carry details in their heads. They’re the long stop for major authorial blunders.’

‘All right. Something made me think that he might be losing the game on purpose; that he was a much better player than he’d pretended. Then, in the excitement that followed, I didn’t think anything more about it. But weeks later the suspicion resurfaced when I was returning some gumboots I’d borrowed to the downstairs cloakroom at Ladyfield. The walls are hung with old school photographs, mostly of Dickie at Harrow: the usual rows of blazered, boatered boys, plus photographs of Dickie in the First Eleven and the Second Fifteen. I’d never bothered to look at them properly but something must have registered subliminally because I spotted at once a photograph of Westminster School’s Senior Tennis Team and guess who was sitting in the middle of the front row holding a large silver cup?’ I waited politely for Kit to finish laughing before adding, ‘Given that Burgo may not have played for a long time, is it possible for anyone’s game to deteriorate so drastically?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. You either have good hand – eye co-ordination or not. Besides, Burgo had been keeping his athletic prowess honed playing polo, hadn’t he?’

‘My goodness, I hope your authors deserve you.’

‘Did you take him properly to task?’

‘No. I tried to forget about it. I suppose I didn’t want to discover anything that made me trust him less. I wanted so badly to see him as perfect ... and perfectly irresistible. In order to justify what we were doing I had to make myself believe he was the love of my life. And that I was of his.’

‘And despite everything you still believe that.’

I did not answer. I was no longer capable of interpreting my own feelings.

‘We’ve only ten miles to go until Kilmuree,’ said Kit. ‘Just tell me a little about the good times and I’ll pretend the tale’s been nicely rounded off. A sort of happy ever after that fades into oblivion. That’s what we all want from a story. Physical consummation isn’t enough. It wouldn’t be enough for Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy to climb between the sheets and indulge in erotic acts before going their separate ways. Or for Mr Rochester to take Jane Eyre through the *Kama Sutra*. The climax of a narrative is actually the moment when two people reveal themselves to each other by declaring a deeply felt, highly significant attachment.’

‘It’s strange that we get such vicarious pleasure from imagining other, wholly fictitious people falling in love. Is it just because we identify with one of them?’

‘I don’t see myself as Burgo Latimer. A public man, an orator, a manipulator of minds. Sorry if that sounds slanderous. Of course I’m jealous. In my mind he’s as fantastical a being as the Minotaur. He’s made you unhappy and left you to defend yourself.’

‘I quite agree with you about happy endings. We want to leave them suspended in blissful communion. We don’t want to be told afterwards how Jane and Mr Rochester remodelled Thornfield Hall in the style of William Burges. Or that Lady Catherine de Bourgh was catty about Elizabeth’s taste in bedding begonias.’

‘And I also want to know what happened to the lovely, feckless Jasmine. I realize her relationship with Teddy is a leitmotif of textbook adultery that runs parallel with your own love affair. Your audience is eager in anticipation.’

After Burgo and I became lovers, after those ten, perhaps fifteen minutes of intense physical pleasure, we lay in each other’s arms waiting for our hearts to slow and for our minds to begin working.

Then I said, ‘Dickie’s coming back any minute.’

‘I asked him to ring Simon for me, to tell him to bring the car round in half an hour. But he must have done that by now.’ There was a brief silence, during which I tried to calm my breathing and focus my eyes. Burgo said, ‘I’d better go.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll always remember the way you look now.’ He kissed me. ‘All my life.’

We pulled our clothes on quickly, not speaking. I was terribly afraid now that someone would catch us in a state of undress, though only minutes before I would not have cared if the combined teams of the Ladyfield Lawn Tennis Club and the Tideswell Tigers had crowded into the China House to cheer us on.

‘Goodbye, Roberta.’ Burgo lifted my hand to kiss it.

‘Goodbye.’

I watched him walk to the door and cross the little garden. I tried to tidy myself and the daybed. He must have met Dickie on the way. I did my best to enthuse about the new silk for the daybed to please Dickie but I don’t suppose I made much sense. I was trying to decide exactly what had happened, how it had happened and what the consequences would be. And I could not suppress a thrill of happiness. I wanted to grin with pleasure. Walking back through the garden I had forborne, with difficulty, to skip.

Dickie had politely pretended not to notice anything but had taken me into the cool, deserted drawing room and asked if I wouldn’t like a little rest after my heroic performance on court. Through the window I could see the back of Burgo’s head above the group that thronged about him on the lawn. When I insisted that I had to get back to Cutham Dickie had made me drink several cups of strong black coffee before conducting me to my car. Topsy septuagenarians were packing their cars with tennis equipment and driving unsteadily away with two wheels in Dickie’s penstemon border. I was astonished that the world managed to go on in its ordinary insipid way.

I had flown through the countryside on a super-powered cloud, survived dinner somehow, washed up and gone upstairs at the first possible moment so that I could be alone. Naturally after

drinking so much coffee I had lain awake for hours, reliving the excitement of being in Burgo's arms, the protesting voices of sanity and prudence drowned by the singing of my effervescing blood.

The following day the weather conspired with a serious hangover to rub something of the bloom from my joy. Continuous drizzle cast a depressing grey light through all the rooms. The walls and floors seemed to sweat with damp. What was there, exactly, to be joyful about? I had had too much to drink and had made love in Dickie's garden with his brother-in-law, a man I hardly knew and might never see again. Perhaps Burgo took it for granted that he would bed a provincial voter or two whenever he ventured out of the capital. Probably these fleeting intimacies were the perks of a politician's life, a compensation for having to be charming to old ladies and committee bores. It could hardly matter that I always voted Labour.

He might tell his secretary to send the usual *douceur* of an expensive bunch of flowers, and she would know that he had once again been successful. She would be either indifferent to his behaviour or disapproving of it, but she would certainly despise me. Perhaps, the next time they were alone, Burgo would boast of his conquest to Dickie who, being a tolerant man, would smile and shake his head and mentally adjust his view of me, to my detriment. By the time Jazzy telephoned me from the Isle of Wight late the same afternoon, my mood had sunk from euphoria to bitter reproach, mostly directed towards myself.

'Bobbie? I've been dying to talk to you! You're the only person I can tell ...' Jazzy's voice was tremulous. I pictured her face twisted with misery. 'You'll never guess ... the most glorious thing.' My mental picture changed – with difficulty. It had been months since she had been anything like happy. 'He's left her!'

I did not need to ask who he and her were. I had once glimpsed Teddy Bayliss's wife, Lydia, at a party. She had hard eyes and a chin you could have struck a match on. Jazzy and I had invented a character for her so bad that between suffocating babies and experimenting on animals she would have had no time for Teddy's sexual requirements or his dry-cleaning.

'When? How? What's happened?'

'He says he's not going to be dictated to by anyone. She said he had to spend more time at home with her and the children. He says the children do nothing but squabble and leave wet towels on the bathroom floor. And they play pop music and have scruffy monosyllabic friends. She's a terrible cook and is always giving him takeaways. And she refuses to take his shirts to the laundry.' We were almost right then, about some things. 'And he hates her mother.'

'Jazzy—Of course I'm not defending her, but surely there must be something more than that? I mean, isn't that just family life? It doesn't sound quite enough to justify ending a marriage.'

'I thought you'd be the *one* person who'd understand.' Jazzy sounded hurt. 'I know you're terribly anti having affairs with married men but I thought you said you'd always be on my side, whatever.'

'Oh, I am. I am! But, Jazz, you have to be so sure that you and Teddy will be happy together.'

'We *will* be. Teddy says that no one in his whole life has understood him as I do. He says it's uncanny how alike we are, how we feel the same about everything that's important, how we can communicate without words. Honestly, it's true. Don't you remember, it all began when we met at that ghastly ball and discovered we both hated Latin-American music but loved Gershwin. And then we found that our favourite film was *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and our favourite place to stay was Raffles Hotel. Then we went on talking practically the whole evening, agreeing about absolutely everything. It was amazing.'

Poor darling Jazzy. So beautiful and so trusting. When I had once suggested that Teddy had simply had his eye on getting her into bed she had been wounded by my misanthropy.

'Well, if you're quite sure ...'

'I'm utterly, totally, completely sure. As sure as anyone in the history of the world has ever been about anything. It's a synthingummy of minds and souls. And he says that making love to me is like eating pâté de foie gras to the sound of trumpets. Isn't that brilliant?'

‘Perhaps it was when Sydney Smith said it.’

‘Sydney who?’

‘Smith. A nineteenth-century cleric. He was describing heaven.’

‘Oh.’ A pause. ‘Of course Teddy’s so well read.’ It would have been unkind to say that the metaphor was so well known that it had become almost hackneyed. Jazzy had been to dozens of expensive schools all over the world and learned little in any of them. ‘And he says making love to Lydia is like waving an arm in a barn.’

I was repelled. ‘If you give a woman four children you can hardly complain if there’s some falling off from physical perfection.’

‘No. I agree. It *was* naughty of him. I’ve decided I’m not going to say mean things about her any more or even *think* them if I can help. I’m desperately sorry for her, actually, and I feel quite haunted by the idea that at this moment she’s going about her life unaware of the sword of Damocles—it that’s about to fall. And the children ... when I think of them ...’ For a moment the excitement went out of Jazzy’s voice.

‘What do you mean, “unaware”?’

‘Teddy decided the best thing would be to avoid a confrontation when things might be said that couldn’t be taken back. You know, to allow her to save face. He’s doing his best to make it as easy for her as possible, which I agree with, one hundred per cent. I couldn’t love him if he wasn’t a *good* person. He’s madly considerate of her feelings.’

‘Oh, *madly*,’ I said, with a sarcasm I instantly regretted. ‘Of course it’s a dreadful situation for everyone.’

‘*Dreadful*. So he’s left her a note. She’s been away all week with the children visiting her mother. That was what prompted the row about him not doing enough with the family. But his mother-in-law is a complete bitch and is foul to Teddy. Lydia’s getting back tomorrow.’

I imagined her arriving home exhausted after a long journey with squabbling children, planning what she would give them for supper, anticipating a hot bath and a glass of wine for herself after putting a load of dirty clothes into the washing machine. Pausing by the hall table to take Teddy’s letter from the pile that would have accumulated during a week’s absence. She would open it, expecting a reminder that the man was coming to service the boiler, only to discover that she was now a single parent and had become solely responsible for household maintenance.

‘It’s such *heaven* being alone with him,’ sighed Jasmine. ‘Knowing we don’t have to hurry into bed to make the most of a few measly hours. I feel as though I’ve been given pure oxygen to breathe. I’m in love with the world and with everything in it: the island, the village, the spaghetti bolognese we had for lunch. It isn’t a very good hotel but Teddy says we must economize now he’s got two women to support and naturally I don’t mind a bit. I’m even in love with the rather nasty cow-pat-green pillow-cases on the bed because we’re together at last and can *luxuriate* in each other.’

‘It’s marvellous to hear you so happy. How long do you expect to stay?’

‘Oh, it’s rather open-ended. Teddy’s taken the whole week off. I never want to see London again. I wish we could hire a gypsy caravan and let the horse take us wherever it wanted to.’

‘Mm, that does sound fun. But one of you’d need to know something about horses. Feeding, tacking up, grooming ...’

‘Oh, Bobbie, how typical of you to think of depressing, practical things.’

‘Sorry. So what happens now? When she’s finished snipping their wedding album into confetti and making a bonfire of his golf-clubs, what does she do next?’

‘Teddy’s going to ring her tomorrow to find out how she’s taken it. I’m glad he’s so thoughtful. It’s one of the things I love about him.’

A quip about Teddy’s extraordinary solicitude in abandoning his wife and children to abscond with a girl half his age darted into my mind but I suppressed it. ‘I hope it goes all right,’ I said. ‘And that he deserves you.’

‘I’m certainly going to do my best to deserve *him*. When I think of everything he’s given up for me, it’s really humbling. I’ve got to try and make it up to him somehow. I mean, sex isn’t everything, is it?’

‘Not for you, perhaps,’ I said cautiously. ‘I do think that for some men—’

‘Oh, darling Bobbie, you’re always so cynical. I *wish* Teddy had an identical twin so you could know what it was like to be adored by someone truly wonderful.’ I remembered Teddy’s pasty face and crooked teeth in his rat-like mouth and felt nauseated. ‘If I could I’d share him with you,’ Jazzy went on. ‘You’ve been the most marvellous friend to me through all the bad times and I’m so grateful.’ I immediately felt guilty. ‘Are things still awful at home? How’s your mother?’

‘Everything’s the same except I’ve met some people who live nearby who’ve become good friends and I don’t mind being here nearly so much.’

‘Not a nice, handsome, eligible man with a vast bank balance?’

‘No.’

‘Ah well, darling. It’ll happen one day. I’d better go and see what’s happened to Teddy. I want our first night together as a proper couple to be sublime. I left him having a drink in the bar. The poor sweetie’s had so much to worry him recently, he sometimes doesn’t know quite when to stop.’ This was the first time Teddy’s obvious drink problem had been openly referred to by Jazzy. ‘I’ll ring you very soon. Try to be happy, dearest Bobbie.’

‘You too.’

‘Oh, I shall be in paradise, never fear.’

Five minutes after Jazzy had hung up the telephone rang again. It was Sarah, my other ex-housemate.

‘Bobbie! Have you heard about Jazzy? She’s gone off with that swine Bayliss. I tremble for her. A pig of pigs. An emperor of hogs.’ Sarah was a bolder, more forthright person than I. She had been so outspoken about her dislike of Teddy that she and Jazzy had had a serious falling out from which their relationship had never quite recovered.

‘She called me from the Isle of Wight just now.’

‘How is the poor deluded girl?’

‘Still deluded. But deliriously happy.’

‘Silly fool!’

‘I’m afraid so. But I keep hoping against hope that perhaps the benign influence of Jazzy will make Teddy a little less repulsive.’

‘No chance. The man would have to have a complete personality refit to be tolerable. When I think of the tears she’s shed over that worm, the crises, the sleepless nights, the chronic headaches and colds, the times she couldn’t eat ... She’s like a walking bundle of sticks. God preserve us from married men.’

‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘But even if he were single I don’t think I’d like him.’

‘He’s an ignorant, talentless, priapic little runt.’ Sarah was clever and found most people irritatingly slow and feeble-minded but I knew she was genuinely fond of Jazzy. ‘But being married gives a man an excuse to behave badly with a convenient let-out clause. He can be as selfish as he likes and blame family commitments. A single man can hardly rush round at midnight, poke you senseless, then bugger off without so much as a snack at the local caff or a decent conversation. I mean, when did Stinker Bayliss last take Jazzy out for a good hot dinner? Of course he says it’s because he’s afraid they’ll be seen but I reckon he’s as mean as hell.’

‘Well, they’re making up for it now.’

‘I bet it’s the cheapest place he could get a booking.’

‘She did say it wasn’t a particularly good hotel,’ I admitted.

‘There you are. I hope at least she’ll tuck in now she’s got the chance and get some ballast to withstand the next let-down.’ Sarah was generously proportioned herself and scornful of delicate appetites.

‘Perhaps it really will be all right. Who could know Jazzy and not love her?’

‘Of course it isn’t going to be all right! Honestly, Bobbie, have you been at the absinthe? There’s nothing wrong with Jazzy. Except perhaps too few brain cells. But a skunk like Bayliss is incapable of loving anyone but himself. You know perfectly well there’s nothing ahead but disaster.’

Lying in bed that night, trying to read by a bulb so dim that even the moths ignored its puny rays and instead crawled over the pages of my book, I thought of Teddy. I remembered his satisfied pig-like eyes and the way he stared at my bust when Jazzy’s back was turned and wondered at the mysterious thing called love. And then, of course, I thought of Burgo who had hovered like a persistent phantom haunting my brain the entire day as I cooked, cleaned, fetched library books and ironed. His face had been on each of those forty-two napkins, swimming in the pea-pod soup, staring up from the cover of *Fear not, my Lovely* in place of the beetle-browed Lord Lucifer Twynge. I had rubbed Burgo’s reflection from every dusty inch of the dining table.

Each time the doorbell rang I anticipated the florist’s van and an insulting bunch of hybridized hothouse blooms to thank me for my readiness to accommodate his sexual needs. I had already decided to pass them on immediately to Mrs Treadgold. When another day passed without a bouquet to spurn or even the briefest note of thanks to rip to pieces I began to feel angry.

On the third day after the tennis party I opened the front door in response to a sustained imperative ring to find a strange man on the doorstep, flowerless but carrying a small black leather bag. He was lean and rangy with dark oiled hair swept straight back from a cliff-like brow and sharp aristocratic features.

‘Miss Norton?’ He handed me a card on which was written *Frederick Newmarch*, followed by a string of letters, among which I recognized FRCS. ‘Burgo Latimer asked me to call. I’ve come to see your mother.’ I opened my mouth but before I could think what I ought to say he was in the hall. He looked at me expectantly, impatience in his glittering grey eye. ‘Just lead the way, Miss Norton. I’m sorry to hurry you but I’m operating in London at twelve.’

‘Yes, of course.’ I walked rapidly down the corridor that led from the hall to the morning room with the sensation that Frederick Newmarch was snapping at my heels. ‘I hope ... You mustn’t mind if she isn’t co-operative—’

‘How old is your mother?’

‘Fifty-one. But she looks much—’

‘How long has she been unwell?’

‘Oh, I suppose about three months. She broke her hip in April—’

‘How’s her appetite?’

‘Poor, really, though she hasn’t lost any weight. If anything she’s put it on. But she does eat a lot of sweets.’

‘Bowels?’

‘A little constipated.’

‘Does she complain of pain?’

‘She says her arms and legs hurt sometimes.’

‘But not specifically the hip?’

I paused by the door of the morning room. ‘Not now, no. It seems to be a general all-over discomfort.’

‘Is this her room? You needn’t come in. I’ll introduce myself.’

I was doubtful about his reception but Frederick Newmarch was evidently a man of steel and I was disinclined to argue with him. ‘You mustn’t mind if she’s rather disagreeable. I think she’s depressed—’

‘Wait for me in the hall. I’ll be ten to fifteen minutes.’

I sat on the chair by the telephone, wondering at a different kind of world in which one asked enormous favours from demi-gods and presumably returned them in kind. Burgo had not forgotten me. I was aware of a feeling of exultation that I could hardly account for. When I heard Mr Newmarch’s approaching footsteps echoing authoritatively from the encaustic tiles I leaped to attention.

‘How did she—’ I began.

‘I’ve checked her over. I’ll get a nurse to come this afternoon and take bloods to confirm my diagnosis. But it seems pretty straightforward. Her heart’s slow and there’s severe myxoedema. She’s had the problem some time, I imagine. The hospital ought to have picked it up.’

‘Then it’s nothing to do with her hip?’

‘That seems to have healed all right although obviously I can’t say for certain without an X-ray.’ He looked at his watch. ‘I must run.’

‘What ought I to—’

‘They’ll put her on medication straight away and you should see a rapid improvement.’

‘Really? Oh, this is so kind of you. I can’t tell you how grateful—’

‘You’ve got my number. Ring my secretary if you’re worried about anything.’

He glared at the front door impeding his progress. I flung it open before he resorted to battering it down and called to his departing back, ‘Thank you so much for coming ...’

He jumped into his car and shot away. I opened the door of the morning room, expecting to have a book hurled at my head. My mother was lying back on her pillows, staring out of the window. She was a bad colour and, despite the jars of cream I rubbed in morning, noon and night, her skin was dry and flaky. Slowly she turned her head to look at me.

‘I wish you’d wash my hair, Roberta.’

‘Oh, certainly. With pleasure.’ I had been trying for weeks to persuade her to let me but she had always said she was too tired. ‘What did you think of Mr Newmarch?’

‘It’s exhausting to be pulled around.’ Her gooseberry eyes were reproachful. It may have been my imagination but they seemed brighter already, such is the power of a good doctor who can inspire confidence. ‘However, it was a relief to have a *gentleman* to consult. The working classes have such coarse responses. They don’t understand how one *feels*.’

‘He seems to think he knows what’s wrong.’

‘He was quite intelligent, I thought.’

‘I couldn’t tell. He didn’t waste many words on me. He’s amazingly bossy.’

‘Bossy, would you say? I’d call him ... masterful.’

As I bent to rearrange the bedclothes my attention was caught by the jacket of the book on the bedside table and I was immediately struck by the resemblance of Mr Frederick Newmarch to Lord Lucifer Twynge.

The following afternoon as I was boiling sugar and water for a crème caramel Oliver put a tousled head round the kitchen door.

‘Telephone for you.’

‘Damn! I can’t leave this. Ask them to ring back—No, wait a minute, it might be Jazzy. I’d better speak to her.’

‘It’s a bloke.’

I hesitated. Possibly it was Mr Newmarch, telephoning to know the result of the tests, in which case it would be ungrateful to put him to the trouble of calling back. ‘Will you come and watch this like a hawk and take it off the heat the minute it goes brown?’

Oliver shambled across the kitchen, yawning. Even as I handed him the wooden spoon I made a mental note that his dressing-gown could do with a wash.

‘Hello?’

‘Roberta.’

It did not occur to me to pretend I did not recognize Burgo’s voice. An odd sensation, something like pins and needles, spread to my extremities. ‘Oh, hello! I must tell you, he was wonderful! It was so good of you to remember.’

‘Who?’

‘Mr Newmarch. He came to see my mother yesterday and sent someone to do a blood test. They telephoned me with the results today. Usually one waits a week only to find they’ve lost them. I’m astonished at the power of the Word. She’s suffering from hypothyroidism. Apparently there’s something called thyroxin which will make her better. I’m picking some pills up from the surgery this evening.’

‘Good. He’s a strange man. A cross between Rudolf Rassendyll and Alice’s white rabbit. I bet he wakes regularly during the night just to see what time it is.’

‘I don’t know how you can speak so disrespectfully. To me he’s the eighth wonder of the world and I’m ready to subscribe to a bust in marble. Who’s Rudolf Rassendyll?’

‘Don’t you remember *The Prisoner of Zenda*? He was the gallant hero.’

‘Oh yes. But it *was* kind of you to send him.’

‘It’s nice to be the recipient of so much gratitude, but that’s not why I rang. I’ve been touring the North since I last saw you, making speeches and playing bingo with our senior citizens. I got back to London last night. I want to see you.’

‘Well ...’ I tried to hang on to my determination to finish the affair before it had properly begun but from the moment I heard his voice the conviction had begun to weaken. ‘I don’t know. It would be lovely to see you but—’

‘Come on, then. I’m in the call-box down the road. I’ll find a suitable bush by the gate at the bottom of your drive and try to make myself invisible.’

My blood began to seethe as violently as the caramel. ‘You’re in Cutham Down?’

‘Didn’t I just say so?’

‘Yes, but ...’

‘Hurry up.’

There was a buzzing sound. He had put down the receiver. I tore off my apron, dragged my fingers through my hair in front of the hall mirror and let myself out of the front door. I ran through the wood, which was quicker than following the curves of the drive, and then slowed as I drew near the gate. It would not do to arrive actually panting. I looked around but could see no one. For a moment I wondered if it might have been a cruel joke. Then a hand grabbed my arm and drew me into a stout laurel.

‘You nearly made me scr—’ The rest of what I had to say was lost as he kissed me long and hard.

‘That’s better,’ he said as he let go at last. ‘I’ve been longing for that. Not only that, of course.’ He looked at my face. ‘Just as I remembered it. Come here.’ He held me tightly against him and then began to kiss me again, more gently. ‘Oh dear! I was afraid it wouldn’t be enough. Cold shower urgently required.’ Obediently, the rain, which had held off for the last hour, began to fall and at once became a downpour, buffeting the leaves and releasing the scent of earth and mildew. ‘But I told myself it would be better than nothing.’ He kissed the top of my head as drops trickled down my face and tried to shelter me beneath his coat. ‘And it is. We’ve got ten minutes before I have to drive back to London. This afternoon’s meeting was cancelled so I seized the moment and leaped on a train. Simon’s parked discreetly up the road. He’s driving me straight back to town so I can be in the House by eight.’

‘You don’t mean you came all the way here just to ... just to ...?’

‘Just to kiss you? Yes. Even *my* impatient ardour is deterred by the thought of making love in this benighted wood. Besides, there isn’t time. Tell me, my love ... are you my love?’

He looked at me intently.

I was, at that moment, incapable of lying. 'Yes. For good or ill, and I suppose it must be for ill.'  
'Don't!' He held me tightly. 'I won't let anything hurt you. Trust me.'

So I did.

'I admit the man has talent,' said Kit. 'Despite my natural antipathy, I have to hand it to him. He knew you'd need a romantic gesture rather than a postcard and a box of chocolates.'

'You needn't tell me I was a gullible fool,' I said. 'I know it.'

'I didn't mean that. The thing is, you were already in love with him. He just had to break down your resistance. So there you were. At the beginning of an incandescent love affair. The die was cast.'

'Yes. Before then we were just playing. Although it was heady with romance, everything that occurred before that declaration in the laurels meant comparatively little. Afterwards it seemed to me that everything important – that is to say, my ideas about myself and other people, my presumptions about the future – was substantially changed. And pain was ever present, heightening the pleasure, a sort of fixative of experience.'

'You mean you felt guilty?'

'I'm ashamed to admit that for some time, several weeks, I didn't feel guilty at all. Anna seemed a hardly real figure in Burgo's life. He rarely mentioned her name. She seemed to have nothing at all to do with me. I assumed they had some sort of understanding. That's if I thought about her at all. At first I was so overwhelmed by feelings of ... well, let's call it infatuation, that nothing else mattered. The pain came from excessive excitement. An overdose of adrenaline. Because we couldn't see each other often, the affair had to be carried on in my head. I must have been impossibly vague and unreachable. I drifted through the days that followed, cooking, cleaning, carrying trays in a dream, waiting for him to call, imagining what it would be like to see him again. Every minute of every hour I thought about him. When I got back to the house I found a ruined saucepan and a kitchen full of smoke. Oliver had left the bath running. He'd been so busy trying to mop up the bathroom floor with anything he could lay his hands on, including every clean towel in the linen cupboard and quite a few of the hated napkins I'd just ironed, he'd forgotten about the caramel. I didn't feel so much as a flicker of annoyance. America and Russia could have gone to war, Africa and India have starved, Sussex might have been submerged by a tidal wave and I wouldn't have given a damn. I only thought about Burgo. You see, I had never been in love before.'

'And once you'd had a taste of it, it went straight to your head like wine-cup.'

'I must be a sadly repressed sort of person.'

'I think you're perfectly adorable.'

I peered through the streaming window at banks of trees hanging over the road. Now the lower slopes of the mountains were clothed with green and looked more friendly, like parts of Italy. 'We must be near Kilmuree.'

'Four miles. I hope you brought an umbrella.'

'It never occurred to me. I was so desperate to get out of the house without the press spotting me that I've probably brought all the wrong things.'

'How did you manage it?'

'A friend helped me. Oddly enough, she came to interview me for a newspaper.'

'That sounds intriguing. You've just got time to tell me.'

## FOURTEEN

Three days after Burgo's and my love affair became carrion for the nation to peck over for the juiciest bits, I was standing in the kitchen measuring spoons of Bengers into a pan of warm milk for my mother. She had given up eating proper food, complaining that everything made her feel sick, and existed on invalidish things like Slippery Elm and eggnog with brandy. And of course sweets by the bagful. I suppose she was trying to sweeten a life that had become sour. The current craving was for coffee fondants.

'Just a minute,' said Kit. 'I'm sorry to interrupt when you've just got going but I thought your mother had been restored to health months ago by the great Frederick Newmarch.'

'Oh, yes. I'd forgotten I hadn't told you about all that. The pills cured her hypothyroidism remarkably quickly. Her skin improved, her hair grew back, her voice lightened. Physically she looked better than I'd seen her for a long time. I planned to go back to London in September. Sarah said I could have my old room and my boss had agreed to have me back. And Burgo and I would be able to see more of each other, though we'd managed to meet most weeks in Sussex and occasionally I'd been able to get up to London for half a day. Of course, it was never enough. And that, I suppose, fanned the flames of passion.' I paused, wincing inwardly at this cold analysis of our love. But I had to try to detach myself. 'Anyway, I was telling you about my mother. Though she'd stopped grumbling about aches and pains, she refused to get dressed and wouldn't leave her room. And she wouldn't give up that beastly commode, though I knew she was capable of walking to the lavatory.'

'Burgo got Frederick Newmarch to call again and *he* said that there was nothing wrong with her as far as he could see but he thought she was seriously depressed. He advised a complete change, perhaps a holiday abroad. My father wouldn't take her. He only likes visiting war graves or battlefields: not the thing for lifting depression. So I went to the local travel agent for brochures about cheap places to go in France, my heart absolutely in my boots because I didn't want to be away from Burgo. Then my mother put paid to all that by deciding to get out of bed and go upstairs.'

'It was the first time for nearly five months that she'd been outside her own room. It was a crazy thing to do. I was on my way to the Fisherman's Reel – the little pub where Burgo and I used to meet – my father was in London and Mrs Treadgold, who was supposed to be looking after her, was in the kitchen, listening to *The Archers*. Oliver was still in bed. Was it a coincidence that my mother chose one of the few moments when there was no one around to see or hear her? Anyway she managed, despite being as weak as water after lying so long in bed, to drag herself up to the top of the stairs and then fell down the entire flight, breaking an arm and a leg.'

'You think she did it deliberately?'

'I don't know. There was no reason for her to go upstairs. I was afraid that she'd meant to kill herself. I felt I hadn't been nearly nice enough. Of course the entire process began all over again. Two weeks in hospital, National Health this time, and heavens, did she complain! Then home, encased in plaster, to be looked after. She seemed to cheer up a bit then. If it hadn't been for Burgo it would have been me who was suicidal.'

'I embarked on a new policy of calm endurance and tried even harder to please. I was so sorry for her. My father was cold to her, unsympathetic, whereas I was loved by this marvellous man ... Anyway, the fractures mended, though it took ages. Another four months. By January she was more or less better. Just when I was thinking it might be possible to go back to London, she upset a pot of tea all over herself. She was burned from her neck to her waist. Back to hospital. Luckily, though the scalded area was large, it wasn't deep. She was home after a week. But the burn didn't heal. I think she picked off the new skin during the night.'

'Oh dear, you poor girl. Was it because she didn't want you to go away?'

'If I'd believed that it might have been easier in many ways. I'd have felt needed. No, she's always preferred Oliver. Though when he stopped being a gentle confiding little boy she withdrew from him too. I was always too independent and bossy. I know I am. I love making something good out of something hopeless. Once I grew old enough to be effective what affection she had for me waned almost completely. And now I was trying to make her well when she didn't want to be. What's more she saw all my attempts to make the house and garden more attractive as criticism. We were both to be pitied in the circumstances. I think she just enjoys lying in bed, being waited on, reading escapist novels and eating sweets, not having to go out into a world that holds no pleasure for her. I was simply a means to an end. All she needs is a more or less willing slave.'

'So you stayed.'

'I was afraid if I left she'd do something worse to herself. I don't know what I thought was going to happen in the future. That she might become bored with being an invalid. Or that Burgo might force the issue by deciding to divorce his wife so he could marry me. Yes, I suppose that's what I hoped. That he would take matters out of my hands and into his own. I was becoming increasingly dependent on him. He had become my happiness, my salvation. But, of course, that didn't happen. The Conservative Party stormed into power under the leadership of Margot Holland; she selected him to be her youngest minister and his face was splashed all over the newspapers. Someone saw the opportunity to make some cash. It sounds awfully squalid, doesn't it?'

'As far as I'm concerned, nothing that was associated with you could be squalid.'

'That's the kindest thing anyone's ever said to me.'

'I mean it. Don't cry, Bobbie. You don't want to mess up your face when you're about to meet these new people. Tell me about the journalist who found you this Irish job.'

'What a knight errant you are!' I sniffed. 'Fancy a man understanding the importance of mascara. All right, where was I? I remember, mixing Bengers for my mother with tears running down my face. Eating coffee fondants.'

'Go on.'

I wondered as I stirred and chewed and wept if I could outdo my mother in misery now. I might as well join the library myself and put in a regular order on my own behalf at the sweet shop.

Since the arrival of droves of reporters we had locked all the external doors and closed the shutters of the downstairs rooms. Brough had removed the pull from the bell and we had unplugged the telephone. My father complained bitterly about being compelled to live under a pall of darkness and was absent from breakfast until after dinner. Fortunately the morning room was always so gloomy and my mother's concentration on the written word so complete that she hardly noticed. Oliver was asleep during most of the day anyway so it made no difference to him. The only person who was actually having a good time as a result of my persecution by the Fourth Estate was Brough. He had never ceased to regret the end of the Second World War and was now in his element. He patrolled the grounds night and day with his shotgun, an expression of manic ferocity animating his usually sullen features.

Entombed in a dismal silence that was broken only by foolhardy reporters hammering on the windows and doors and rattling the letterbox until routed by Brough, I thought I might well be going mad. My sole outlook on the world was through one of the kitchen windows which opened on to the woodshed, coal bunker and dustbin area. It seemed safe to leave this window unshuttered.

The coffee fondant was actually rather disgusting but I found my hand reaching automatically towards the bag for another when someone sprang up in front of me on the other side of the window. I yelled with shock and was about to turn and run when something familiar about her made me pause.

'Bobbie! It's me! Harriet Byng!' said the girl, putting her face close to the glass.

I undid the bolts of the back door. 'Quick! Come in!'

Harriet squealed as she saw Brough advancing, squinting down the barrel of his gun, his eyes inflamed with killer fury. After I had persuaded him to go and have a cup of tea and a biscuit to calm himself, I closed and rebolted the door and then examined my unexpected visitor.

I had met Harriet Byng at the wedding of her elder sister. Ophelia and I had been friends for some years. We had never been particularly close but we moved in the same circles in London and we liked the same kind of things. Ophelia was beautiful with huge blue eyes and silvery-blond hair and had exquisite taste. I found her particular brand of hedonism and extreme single-mindedness intriguing. She could be entertaining or appallingly difficult but she was never dull. Other people complained that Ophelia was selfish and heartless but they had been proved wrong when she had succumbed to the charms of a good-looking but comparatively poor police inspector. I had been asked to the wedding a month ago and there met Harriet, one of Ophelia's three younger sisters. Harriet and I had had a long and interesting conversation about – among other things – the ideal lunatic asylum, the novels of Louise de Vilmorin and our favourite things to eat.

Harriet was quite unlike Ophelia, in looks as well as character. Her hair was long and straight and a rich dark brown. Her eyes were dark too and bright with intelligence. Her skin was pale and it was fascinating to watch the colour in her face come and go for Harriet was shy and blushed like a child. I thought her beauty bewitching, of a different order from anyone else's. Her ingenuous sweetness was not the least of her attractions and I was amused to observe that a tall, distinguished-looking older man had her under his eye most of the time. This turned out to be Rupert Wolvespurges, the artistic director of the English Opera House, and Harriet confided that they were in love.

'Oh, Bobbie!' Harriet hugged me tightly. 'How are you, you poor dear thing?'

These were the first words of sympathy that had been addressed to me since the scandalized world had been apprised of my affair with Burgo and they reduced me to a storm of sobbing. Harriet steered me to a chair and put on the kettle, then sat down next to me, holding my hand in hers until I had got over the worst.

'Gosh, I'm sorry,' I said. 'I don't suppose you've got a hanky? Mine are all upstairs.'

Harriet hadn't so I used the drying-up cloth which was anyway a more suitable size for the deluge that had been provoked by the sound of a friendly voice.

'It's all too silly,' I said. 'I don't know why I'm being such a baby.'

'I do,' said Harriet. 'It's really terrifying having those people harrying you, like hounds after a poor darling fox. You get the feeling they're going to rip you to pieces if they catch you. And they make up the most ridiculous stories about you and suddenly you find yourself wondering if they might be true. You get frightened that any minute you're going to go raving mad. After a while, though, you get used to it.' I remembered then that Harriet's father had only the year before been arrested for murder – wrongly, as it turned out. But for weeks stories and photographs of Harriet's remarkably handsome and interesting family had filled the gossip columns and one could scarcely pick up a magazine or newspaper without seeing one or all of their faces as they went into the fishmonger's or came out of a cinema. 'Honestly, though it's hard to believe, the reporters doorstepped us for so long that we actually got quite friendly with them. Some of them are perfectly nice people. It just takes a bit of getting used to.'

'I'm sure you're right. I've got to pull myself together. I haven't been sleeping and ... It must have been so much worse for you with your father in prison.'

'That *was* truly awful.' Harriet shook her head as she thought about it, as though to rid herself of the memory. 'But, darling Bobbie, never mind the press for a minute. You can keep them outside and in the end they'll get fed up and it'll be yesterday's news. But what about you? Have you been able to see him?'

'No. If you mean Burgo.'

She squeezed my hand. 'You love him terribly?'

'Yes. Yes, I do.'

‘And will he ... is he going to leave his wife?’

‘If he leaves her he’s finished as a politician. Margot Holland can’t have a disgraced minister in tow. As the first woman Prime Minister she’s got to have higher standards, work harder and do everything much better than any man. She supports Burgo all the way, naturally: she wouldn’t have appointed him Minister for Culture if she didn’t think he’d do a brilliant job. He’s only thirty-five and she’s promoted him over the heads of several older and more likely candidates. Of course it’s made him enemies.’

‘People are envious of him, you mean?’

‘Well, on the face of it he seems to have everything: brains, career, rich wife, willing mistress. The anti-Burgo faction is also largely anti-Holland, though that’s more or less kept under wraps, of course. The scandal’s given ammunition to those Conservatives who feel their manhood’s threatened by having a female boss. As well as to the Labour Party, of course. The only chance Burgo’s got of holding out against those who are baying for his blood is to be repentant and to persuade his wife to put on a public show of reconciliation with him. After that it depends on the tide of popular opinion. But plenty of politicians have had affairs and survived, provided they showed proper contrition and behaved themselves ever after.’

Harriet got up to make the tea. Keeping her back to me, she asked, ‘Is that what he’s going to do?’

‘He’s telephoned every day since the news broke. Each time he says he loves me and that he’s going to give everything up for me.’

Harriet turned round. ‘Oh, thank goodness! That’s all right, then.’

I shook my head. ‘He hasn’t said it doesn’t matter to him. That he doesn’t *mind* giving it all up for me. I can hear in his voice what a wrench it is. He’s always wanted this. He’s terrifically ambitious; he wants to be able to change things. One of the things I love about him is his energy and the fact that it’s channelled into real achievement. He doesn’t care about status symbols, possessions, houses, cars, cellars filled with rare vintages. He doesn’t care about winning. What thrills him is informing people, changing their opinions about things he thinks are important. Managing to get a bill read about reforming the laws on assisted suicide or doing something to help ex-prisoners buoys him up for days at a time.’

‘I must admit it’s not how I imagined politicians to be.’ Harriet found some cups in the cupboard. ‘I mean, they aren’t usually very attractive people morally – or even physically. I saw Burgo on television yesterday. He looked pretty cracking.’

I had seen the piece of newsreel myself, of Burgo coming out of 10 Downing Street, looking stern, acknowledging the cameras with a nod and the coldest of smiles, walking quickly away. I had turned the set off after a few seconds because the pain of longing had been so intense.

I offered the coffee fondants to Harriet. ‘Do have one. Or several. They’re horribly sickly but I can’t seem to manage proper food. It all tastes like ashes. Burgo’s having to choose between two things he terribly wants and he thinks he’ll choose me because I’m *just* about more important to him.’

‘There you are then. You couldn’t reasonably expect him not to care at all.’

‘No, not that. But don’t you see, if he left that world of power and influence and excitement, and we bought a semi in suburbia – neither of us has a bean, his wife has all the money – and he got a job in the Civil Service or presenting programmes on television, do you think I’d go on mattering that infinitesimal but crucial fraction more? We’d be bound to quarrel sometimes and perhaps the love-making would come to seem less exciting and I’d have to ask myself whether I was *still* more important than the job he’d always wanted, which was his for a few weeks and which he gave up for my sake. If I made a stupid remark or failed to sympathize properly, if I got tired and snappy, jealous, perhaps – after all, he’s had one clandestine affair so what’s to stop him having another? – every sigh, every depressed look, every word that suggested he was becoming disillusioned would throw me into a blind panic. I lack the confidence to be sure I can be all in all to someone else.’

‘You have to admire Wallis Simpson.’

‘Ah, but he never wanted to be king. That’s the difference.’

Harriet sipped her tea thoughtfully. ‘I probably ought to urge you not to be a coward and to take on the challenge. But I’m so short of confidence myself I’m sure I’d feel just the same. People can’t be everything to each other and they ought not to expect it. Actually, to be truthful, there isn’t anything that matters to me even a thousandth part as much as Rupert, but then I’m not ambitious. And I’ve been crazy about him since I was old enough to spit.’

‘You mean, you’re childhood sweethearts? How romantic.’

‘Not exactly. He says I was fat, grubby and toothless. But I’ve worshipped *him* all my life. Anyway, to revert to the jobs thing, although I enjoy my job it isn’t what I really want to do for ever.’ She grew pink. ‘My secret desire is to be a poet. But if I had to choose between losing Rupert and never writing another poem, there’d be no contest. I suppose that means I’m not sufficiently serious about poetry. It’s disillusioning.’ Her eye fell on the fondants. I pushed the bag across. ‘Rather more-ish, aren’t they?’

‘When are you getting married?’

Harriet blushed again. ‘After he’s finished directing *Lucia di Lammermoor*. But that’s enough about me. It’s you that matters now.’

‘It’s kind of you to come.’ I was struck by a sudden thought. ‘But why did you? Not that I’m not delighted to see a friendly face. But it’s a long way to travel to console someone you’ve met only once before.’

Harriet turned a darker shade. ‘Ah well, the truth is that I’m one of those inebriate vultures at your gate. I’m a reporter on the *Brixton Mercury*. I used to be the dogsbody but I’ve risen to deputy sub-editor – only because Rupert pulled strings. Oh, don’t look like that.’ I must have inadvertently assumed a look of distaste. ‘Of course I’m not going to write a story about you. Or nothing that you don’t dictate to me word for word. But my boss Mr Podmore asked me if I knew you. He thinks I’m an ex-deb, which is quite untrue and that I know everyone with a double-barrelled surname. When I said that actually I did, he sent me out to get an exclusive interview. And I thought you might like a chance to put your own view to the world, via the *BM*. Of course our circulation’s tiny but sometimes the national newspapers take things from the local ones. But if not, then I’ll just say you were out. I promise you can trust me. I thought I might be able to help. I hope you’re not cross?’

She looked so anxious that I couldn’t help smiling. ‘Of course I’m not cross. And I do trust you. You’ve already helped tremendously just by listening. But I don’t know what I can tell the world that won’t injure Burgo.’

‘I could write a little piece about what a nice, sensitive, decent person you are. It seems to me that Lady Anna’s getting all the favourable coverage at the moment.’

I had seen a wedding photograph of Burgo and Anna in one of the newspapers. She had looked quite different from my idea of her. When I had thought about her, which I did as little as I could possibly help, I had imagined someone tall, tanned and made-up; hard, perhaps even brassy. As a bride she had looked small, pale, elegant, her dress longsleeved and high-necked, her only ornament a wreath of flowers that held the veil in place over her dark hair, which was swept back from her face. She was smiling into the camera and she looked so happy that I had immediately felt an acute sense of shame. I had reminded myself that the photograph was ten years old and that Anna and Burgo hadn’t been lovers for some time. Or so he had said. For the first time I had wondered whether Burgo had intentionally misled me.

‘Well, she *is* the innocent party. But if you make me out to be a vulnerable ingénue who spends her free time knitting blankets for earthquake victims and leading the hymn-singing at Sunday school it reflects badly on him, doesn’t it? It’s in his interest to have everyone believing I’m a wicked jade who cozens other women’s gullible husbands into behaving badly.’

Harriet looked at me with solemn eyes. 'And you're prepared to let people think that of you? You really have got it bad.'

'I have. Also my pride revolts at the idea of attempting to justify myself. Why should I care what they say if it isn't true? I *do* care, of course. It stings like anything. But I'm going to fight against minding because it's pathetic to be upset by the disapproval of strangers who don't know anything about me.'

'OK, so you don't want me to do an article from your point of view. But if you don't mean to let Burgo give up his career for you, what *are* you going to do?'

'I'd like to get away, right away. Not only from the press. Every night at ten o'clock I plug in the telephone and Burgo rings me from a call-box and we have these dreadful conversations. At first hearing his voice is a huge relief. Then the misery starts. It's like seeing his shirt-tails and the soles of his shoes forever whisking round a corner. Never his face. Ever since we became lovers I've had this feeling that I was hanging on to tiny scraps of him. But I had a foolish hope that one day the crusts would become a feast. Now it's much worse, of course. We have to be extremely circumspect. Apparently newspapers tap telephone lines routinely. I suppose you knew that.'

'Not tuppenny-ha'penny papers like the *Brixton Mercury*. Only dailies with large circulations and big bank accounts.'

'He says how sorry he is. I say how sorry I am. He asks if I'm OK. I ask him how he is. We try to reassure each other that everything will be all right. He says how much he loves me, how important I am to him. He says he can't be happy without me. I tell him that he matters more to me than anyone has ever done. And that I never want to hurt him. He tells me to stay calm and be patient, that it will blow over and we'll be able to be together. I say I want to do what will be best for him. He gets agitated at that. I'm too weak to tell him that it's over, to refuse to have anything more to do with him. I know that would be the best thing. But I can't do it. I need to be able to detach myself a bit so I can be strong. I thought of going to stay with a girlfriend who lives in Rome. But I'm really too miserable to make a good guest. And there's a limit to how long you can park yourself on someone when you haven't any money. I need to work. Somewhere like Benghazi or Ecuador where they won't have heard of me.'

'I wonder ...' Harriet said thoughtfully. 'Perhaps it's crazy, but I may know just the place. It's not as far away as South America, but does that matter? I was reading *The Times* on the train coming down, hoping to pick up tips on journalistic style, and I happened to see an ad in the personal columns that rather took my fancy: a request for a housekeeper. It had such a strange list of requirements – something about poetry and sausages – it sounded romantic and interesting. What a pity I left the paper on the train.'

'I've got a copy of *The Times* here.' I drew it out from behind the bread-bin. 'I was going to cut out the bits about Burgo and me before my father saw them. He gets furious about the holes in the pages but at least I don't have to face him knowing he's read all that stuff about me being an insatiable scrofulous whore.'

Harriet scanned the personal columns. 'Here we are. Listen to this. *Housekeeper wanted, County Galway, Ireland. No previous experience necessary. Applicants must be clean, beardless, love poetry and animals, be able to cook sausages and possess a philosophical temperament.* Isn't it a peculiar list?'

'It seems rather haughty these days to question other people's washing habits,' I said. 'Still, it's no good standing on one's dignity when one's in a hole. And what about the beard? I believe there *are* women who have phobias about men with beards. Would many men apply for a job as housekeeper, do you think?'

'I wondered if it might be a pig farm. The sausages, I mean. I like sausages but I wouldn't want to eat them *all* the time. But the poetry sounded promising, I thought.'

I found myself indulging in a brief fantasy. I imagined a neat little house with an elderly couple or more likely a widow. An invalid, possibly, who wanted someone to read poetry to her. Rather

particular and old-fashioned, viz. the prejudice against bearded men, but liking plain food. She had a poodle, perhaps, or a Pekinese which had to be taken for walks.

‘I’ve never been to Ireland,’ I said. ‘But it might just be the answer to a prayer.’

‘Now I see,’ said Kit. ‘Harriet sounds like a trouper.’

‘I rang the number straight away. A woman answered.’

‘What did she sound like?’

‘Faint voice, slight Irish accent, younger than I expected. She asked me a few questions: could I drive? Did I mind living in an isolated place? Could I milk a cow?’

‘Can you? Milk a cow, I mean?’

‘No, but it can’t be that difficult.’

‘Mm. I wonder.’

‘Anyway, she said I was the first person to answer the advertisement though she had put it into all the papers she could think of. Their last housekeeper had left suddenly, after a terrible row. They were absolutely desperate. Could I come at once?’

‘Commendable honesty,’ said Kit.

‘I was encouraged to find that my future employer puts truth above self-interest. Also that she was not a fractious invalid. But *discouraged* that no one else had even considered the job. Anyway, we agreed I’d be there as soon as public transport allowed. Harriet and I pored over train tables, then she went out to the call-box to book the cheapest available berth on the Swansea to Cork ferry.’

‘Why not cross from Holyhead to Dún Laoghaire? Wouldn’t it have been quicker?’

‘We’d made the call to Galway from the house so in case anyone was tapping the line we thought it might be safer to take a slightly more circuitous route.’

‘Luckily for me.’

‘I’m the one who ought to be grateful. And I am.’

‘Well, that’s better than nothing, I suppose. Go on.’

‘There’s nothing much left to tell. I got Brough to drive me to Blackheath station the next morning. I was lying on the back seat, covered by a rug. The reporters banged on the windows when we got to the gates to get Brough to stop but he just put his foot down. I heard something like a scream as we accelerated away. I suppose if he’d caused serious injury it would’ve been in the papers.’

‘How did your parents take your abrupt departure?’

‘After the first burst of temper, my father seemed surprisingly amenable to my going. I gave him the telephone numbers of a couple of nursing agencies I’d been in touch with before the scandal broke, in the forlorn hope that I’d be able to get back to London. I expected him to kick up about the expense but he suddenly became astonishingly reasonable. He just said I’d better go and pack and he’d see to the business of finding a nurse. The sooner I went, he said, the sooner the lower classes would stop boozing and fornicating at his gates and littering the grounds with beer cans and crisp packets.’

‘Fornicating? The press? Really?’

‘No, of course not. He accuses everyone of alcoholism and lechery. When, in fact, he’s the one the cap fits.’

‘And your mother? What did she say?’

‘She wanted to know who was going to fetch her library books. I assured her that I had made it clear to the agencies that the provision of reading matter was an essential part of the job, on a par with trays and baths. I had to order fresh supplies of nougat and toffee eclairs before I went. I hope Oliver will remember to collect them.’

‘I suppose their indifference was wounding but it made it easier for you to go.’

‘I didn’t mind. I was relieved there wasn’t a fuss. The only person who’s going to miss me is Oliver. When I told him I was going away he said Cutham would be insupportable and – you mustn’t think badly of him, it’s just that he’s exceptionally soft-hearted and affectionate – he wept.’

‘I don’t think the worse of a man for crying. I occasionally do myself.’

‘Do you?’ I smiled. This admission did much more to endear Kit to me than all his compliments. ‘Anyway, I pointed out that he’d already spent seven years at Cutham without me when I was living in London but he said it was different now he was used to me being about the place. Naturally I was pleased to discover that he’s so attached to me but it was an added complication. I do worry about him. He’s so easily depressed. I can tell him to get his manuscript ready to send to you, can’t I? That will cheer him up.’

‘Oh, yes.’ I thought I detected a note of resignation in Kit’s voice but I knew I was in a state bordering on the neurotic and apt to see disapproval where there was none.

‘So what did the Minister for Culture say when he heard you were emigrating to the wilds of Ireland?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call him that. It sounds so ... as though you disapprove of him.’

‘I told you. I’m jealous. If I had a girl like you sighing her heart out for me ...’

‘Oh, don’t! It makes me sound like a feeble victim. You’ve met me at my lowest point, that’s all.’ Despite my best intentions I felt my eyes fill. I was in that state where tears are so close to the surface that almost everything makes one cry. I could easily have wept to see a petal drop from a rose or a robin disappointed of a crumb. ‘He doesn’t know. I didn’t plug in the telephone that last night at Cutham. I knew if he begged me not to I wouldn’t have the strength to go away. I sat in the kitchen and tried to make a sensible list of things to pack and not to look at my watch. Oh, it was so *hard* when it got to ten o’clock.’ I turned my head away from Kit to stare out of the window. I couldn’t see a thing. ‘I’m ashamed to be so watery.’

‘My dear Bobbie, there isn’t a man or woman alive who hasn’t wept for love. Unless they’re intolerably unfeeling and soulless, without an ounce of poetry in them.’

‘I do like poetry but only when I read it to myself, by myself.’ I attempted a smile. ‘I hope my employer isn’t a prolific amateur versifier looking for a captive audience.’

‘She might be a reclusive genius. An Emily Dickinson.’

‘She might, of course. What do you give for my chances?’

‘Not much. Instead I’ll give you the telephone number of where I’ll be staying for the next few days. This is Kilmuree.’

A scattering of houses quickly became solid rows, which bordered each side of a tree-lined street that plummeted down a steep hill. As it was nearly half past seven the shops – all of which seemed to be the kind that sold kettles, mousetraps and nails – were closed and the small town was deserted.

I wrote down the number as Kit dictated it. ‘You can’t imagine how grateful I am. You’ve been so good to me and I feel so comforted knowing there’s rescue at hand if the rhyme schemes are really hopeless.’

‘You can express your gratitude with a kiss then. Quick, before we get to the bus station.’

It was the least I could do. To compensate for it being positioned chastely on his cheek I put some fervour into it. But when he turned his head towards me as though to kiss me on the lips, I said, ‘Do look out! There aren’t many lamp-posts as it is.’ I pointed to a tired-looking building set back from the main street which had an apron of tarmac pierced by elder seedlings. ‘Do you think that could be it? Where it says “Bus éireann”. Drop me here, would you? It’ll save me having to explain who you are.’

‘All right.’ Kit drew in to the kerb. ‘What a wrench this is! Can it really be less than twenty-four hours since we met?’ He put his hand on my arm. His expression was serious. ‘Can’t I persuade you to give up this farcical scheme with the cows and the sausages and throw in your lot with me? On strictly celibate terms. I promise I won’t attempt to poach Mr Latimer’s preserve.’

Outside the rain gathered intensity and ricocheted in miniature fountains from the pavements before running in torrents down the hill. I felt a reluctance to get out of the little car, of which I had become strangely fond. For the last few miles I had been haunted by the spectre of supercilious

strangers demanding a slavish application to uncongenial tasks. For a moment I was tempted to tell Kit to drive on fast, no matter what the consequences.

He put a hand on my arm, 'You really do need someone to look after you.'

These words checked my impulse to flee. I shook my head. 'I have to get on good terms with myself again by my own efforts. But thanks for the offer. Goodbye, Kit. I shan't forget how good you've been to me. I do hope we meet again.' I opened the door.

'You bet,' he said in his ordinary, cheerful voice. 'I'll get your cases out of the boot.'

'Don't. You'll get soaked. It's teeming.'

Kit insisted. I saw with regret the shoulders of his jacket become instantly dark with rain and his hair stick to his forehead. I seized the cases and ran.

## **FIFTEEN**

The bus station was deserted apart from a friendly dog and a sleeping tramp. The ticket counter was shuttered. I put down my suitcases and sat on the cleanest bit of the bench that ran down one side of the waiting room. I saw Kit's car go past the door on its way to Westport and a disagreeable shiver of loneliness ran over me like a cold draught. The dog and I exchanged sniffs and words with mild enthusiasm. It was a large dog with a coat of long brown ringlets, like an apprentice perm. As five minutes became ten, I grew increasingly fond of the dog and less fond of the tramp who muttered in his sleep, broke wind several times and scratched his stomach with a grimy fist. I began to wish that I had thrown in my lot with Kit and faced the inevitable complications of such a course. When, three-quarters of an hour later, my thoughts were too wretched to be borne and the bench too hard for comfort, I rose and began to pace. This provoked the dog to bark. The tramp opened his eyes and sat up.

'Blood and wounds! Will you shut it now, you little devil, before I knock your dratted head off your body!' he commanded. He screwed his knuckles into his eyes then stared at me. 'Would your name be Miss Norton, by any chance? For Curraghcourt?'

'Yes. I'm Bobbie Norton.'

The tramp revealed a jumble of teeth. 'That's good! You're very welcome, miss! Timsy O'Leary is my name.' He pulled off a ragged cap to reveal a shock of mousy hair standing up above a seam of dirt made by the band of his headgear. 'I was sent to fetch you to the house.' He looked at the clock on the wall. 'Is that the time? The old one'll be cross as briars with you being so late.'

It would not do to fall out at the beginning of our relationship so I restrained my natural feeling of annoyance. 'Is this your dog? She seems ... intelligent.'

'No-ho. She belongs to Miss Constance. Sure you might scrape all Ireland with a fine-toothed comb and you'll not find a better dog.' He bent down, supporting himself with his hands on his knees. 'Come here, Maria darling. Come to your uncle Timsy.' Maria barked defiantly in his face and ran from the waiting room. 'Well then, Miss Norton. We'd better be making tracks. The car's outside.'

We followed the dog into the street. I perceived from the unsteadiness of his gait and the smell of alcohol on his breath that Timsy O'Leary had been drinking. Or could this be part of the stage Irishman impersonation Kit had described? Was Timsy O'Leary actually sober and wearing clean underclothes beneath the beggar's outfit? Perhaps he had a consuming interest in Florentine Mannerist painters? I picked up my suitcases and followed him.

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